

The Eco-Improvisatory-Theatre of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Narrative

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Abstract

Illustrating how Merleau-Ponty's enigmatic phenomenology lends itself beautifully to both theatrical and ecological analysis, this essay examines how his work heralds a call to engage with our world on an embodied, improvisatory level. Exploratory improvisation and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology mitigate notions of distance into a causal relationship towards (re)engaging wholeness, by inviting the sensuous intimacies of interaction: with ourselves, with each other, with earth.... in distance, in proximity. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology must be embodied and experienced with a consciousness, an alertness and perceptive awareness of the *act* of engagement. The call to *action* by Merleau-Ponty begets an improvisatory eco-theatre; however it is not a move towards environmental activism. This paper illustrates how improvisation is a means to experientially make clear this delineation, which is crucial to overcome the dichotomies of separation and otherness that have been so entrenched in the Western world. Re-engaging our sensitivity of improvising as tool for survival, in a world where our sensitivities are all too often socially-placated and dulled is where the work of Merleau-Ponty and where theatre can be an *active* tool for re-imagining a future, our future. Merleau-Ponty's eco-theatre is holistic, is inclusive and is most definitely a form of *activism* (or act-of-vision): a phenomenology that, properly and fully grasped, can be embodied through a 'theatrical' practice, specifically through exploratory improvisation.

The Premise

In these times of unprecedented ecological/social crises...

As an eARThist, an Applied Theatre practitioner, a person and a mother, I find myself immersed in the multi-dimensional exploratory quagmire of unfolding layers of social and ecological 'responsibility.' Seeking ways for myself and others to approach these complex ambiguities and decipher approaches from which to *act* and/or *react*, I found and continue to find myself asking: how does one or can one (firstly) come to gain an *embodied* understanding of our interconnectedness as a people, as a planet? What emerges from this question is a desire to merge the corroborating scientific discoveries that support a holistic approach to relating with and to our world. I am unearthing – or re-earthing -- ways to blend the ancient sensorial-based storied knowledge of an earthly reciprocity, with the expressive 'theatre' of exploratory

improvisation. I recognize the element of action and connection, immediacy and responsiveness inherent in all of these ‘separate’ fields. Guided by a desire to find an intersection between theory and praxis and seeking a language that can support such an inter-relational, interdisciplinary approach, I turn to the work of French philosopher and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty localizes the body with its perceptive abilities as humanity’s main participatory *act* in the intersubjective ‘Flesh’ of the world, of earth. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological project, properly and fully grasped, can be embodied through a ‘theatrical’ practice, specifically through exploratory improvisation.

As Stanton Garner (1994) observes, Merleau-Ponty’s seminal work of 1945 is ideally suited to theatre studies: “That the *Phenomenology of Perception*, along with many of his other writings, are characterized by a striking number of theatrical metaphors suggests the specific relevance of these questions to the staging of embodiment we call “theater” (p. 25). Merleau-Ponty outlines a non-linear equation for the human body/being. Being=Flesh=actor in the organic world with ‘others’=being in the theatre of the world=temporal acts and temporality=improvisatory drama. Corroboratively, theatre scholar Alice Rayner (2002) claims that, “Within the space of theater, performance is the intersection of a complicated web of temporality, reality and the imaginary” (p. 67). Merleau-Ponty can justly be characterized as an improvisatory theatrical phenomenologist, his work ‘setting the stage’ by continuously grounding the sensing body as earth’s interlocutor.

The Ecological Act

Our world today seems to be demanding enactment of philosopher and cultural ecologist David Abram’s (2005) elucidatory statement, “If we wish to awaken an ethical dimension between ourselves and the rest of the earth, then our phenomenological descriptions must open, ultimately, onto other, more performative and participatory modes of discourse” (p. 23). The overlap between phenomenology, science, ecology, theatre, somatics is *unearthed* or, more accurately, *re-earthed* or re-storied through an embodied praxis of engaged and exploratory improvisation.

Merleau-Ponty writes about the primacy of our sensual interplay with and within our world, examining the paradox of objectivity and subjectivity in a space where we are both seer and seen, both sensible and sentient, both viewer and viewed. Merleau-Ponty languagesⁱ the above paradox into a felt understanding, a *co-formed* – as opposed to a strictly performed – relationship of meaning. His enigmatic phenomenology lends itself beautifully to both theatrical and ecological analysis. The word ‘theatre’ stems from the Ancient Greek word ‘*theatron*,’ which means “the seeing place” or “the viewing place.” Particular emphasis is embedded in the usage of the term on the locality of reciprocity between viewer, seer, and audience: the location or housing of such events. The Greek etymology of the word *ecology* finds at its root the idea of house. The *theatron* spoke – and continues to speak – to the house of the theatre, lending itself to an expanded ecological interpretation: metaphorically, materially and phenomenologically. Drama scholar Baz Kershaw (2008) states “Theatre and performance in all their manifestations always involve the interrelational interdependence of ‘organisms-in-environments,” and states that Theatre Ecology “is the ways theatres behave as ecosystems. Or: the ecologies of theatre are investigations of theatre ecosystems” (p. 16). Merleau-Ponty suggests that our world is made of actors in the flesh, bound together in the theatre of life, expressively existing within an

ecological house. This ecological container is rooted in and for somatic experiencing and expresses the imagining world or the world (re)imagining itself in a spectacle of relational reciprocity. “It is true that the act of relating is nothing if divorced from the spectacle of the world in which relations are found” (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. xⁱⁱ). The spectacle of the world is the plurality of thinking subjects and their cadenced expressions in various array and display. Merleau-Ponty languages into text the spectacle of the unwritten theatre. Theatre is a phenomenological relationship between space and place. In a word, environments ecological or theatrical can be imagined not only as spaces but as active players in complex systems of transformation. Theatre scholar Richard Schechner (2000) remarks that “Neither ecological nor performance environments are passive” (p. x).

Merleau-Ponty as Interlocutor

Merleau-Ponty has been heralded as “the greatest of the French phenomenologists” (O’Connor, 1973, p. 372). He offers a synthesis of the complexities that make up the nature of our human *being*. Merleau-Ponty contended, “the first philosophical act would appear to be to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world” (1958, p. 66). He elaborated, extended and integrated phenomenology, as it had been known up to this point, seeking to elucidate “an awareness of perception as radical participation” (Abram, 1990, p. 10). Merleau-Ponty declares that the phenomenological world is “inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people’s in my own” (1958, p. xxii), exploring phenomenology “at its fundamental level: the embodied subject’s opening, through perception upon the world, others, and itself” (Garner, 1994, p. 28).

Practices of (B)being *within* our World

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology offers a Western, philosophical language, corroboratory to the long-held, enacted and embodied Indigenous/Ancient notions of reciprocal, kincentric (Salmon, 2000) living (predating Western thought), informed by sense-based relationships with (the) enveloping earth. These long-held knowings shared by the First Peoples are contained in and through story: many passed orally, some visually, some textually, all performatively. Not insinuating cultural appropriation on the part of Merleau-Ponty, rather, noting one of the first recorded Western philosophical symmetries in worldview, Merleau-Ponty, through a Western lens, equally places us living within a storied landscape, and offers a narrative to support this intercorporeal relationship. He elucidates our “own” continuous negotiating of our perceptual storying within the structured framework of a fluid Flesh – the invisible linking, the connective tissue of lived and living experience within an animate world – as sensuous theatrical evocations.

The Flesh as Theatrical Holism

The Flesh-as-system on a biospheric, whole earth level – “the order of the world is the universal flesh (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 137) – operates with a depth that “*engenders* perception, [and] is

the announcement of our immersion in a world that not only preexists our vision but prolongs itself beyond our vision (...)” (Abram, 1990 p. 5). All of these systems, lived and intellectual constructs, revolve around concentric/kincentric looping feedback based on the assimilation of experience. This is improvisation, this is theatre, and this is ecology. An eco-improvisatory theatre is a living feedback loop, a reciprocal unfolding between performer/audience, audience/performer. Decisions, based on experience, are mutually staged in the moment. On a spring walk, ravens see me and I am seen by pine siskins, by lambs, by frogs. My appearance is registered, evidently alters their movements, stops and starts their calls, triggers adjustments in proximity and mutual decisions on how to proceed. We perform and audience each other, together. Our improvisation is an unfolding process of reciprocal identification and identity with and within our world: embodying an ecological temporality, phenomenologically. The Flesh is the non-mechanist mechanism of a global intersubjectivity, an embodied act of the “flesh as expression” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 145). This act of expression is that which is done or performed by ‘ourselves,’ and equally by ‘others.’ Both acts of expression form an inextricable whole. “Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside of myself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 474). The Flesh is not abstract; it is life.

Merleau-Ponty posits our bodies as temporal vessels of consciousness, embedded and encoded matrices of experience – biologically, genetically, psychologically, cognitively, experientially, improvisationally – independently dependent: somatically acting within our world, our theatron, our stage. Sensing the ground beneath our feet. Being enveloped by sky of passing lilac-hued clouds. Inhaling the pungency of decaying leaves. Churning to the hum of distant thunder. Lungs filling with crisp air of morning. Rising with the full moon. Patterning to the return of salmon. Observing the migrating Trumpeter. Timing with monthly menstruations. Ebbing and flowing with tides. We share and create the Biosphere of experience.

Eco-Improvisatory Theatre: *Phenomenologically*

A theatre of eco-improvisatory exploration invites people to become present to what is going on in this very moment. Being alive in a world that is dying and re-being...continuously, moment to moment. The axis of such exploration is fostering an environment of engaged, reflective action, arising as a dynamic, potent and enabling energy. Simply put: the practice of phenomenology. Our improvisations are the expression of our earth presence. An earthly exhibitionism, if you will.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) invites us to enter in the relationship of our attunement with world, with ourselves, with other, with an acute awareness of earth’s majesty and with awe:

When I find again the actual world such as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or my acts. But this does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things. (p. 123)

Illustrating the symbiotic nature of the synesthesia of experience, Merleau-Ponty fuses the ‘dehiscence’ of the body in a house for both noun and verb. Toucher and touching. Seer and

seeing. Sinking of sole into sand. Browning of skin with sun. The taste of rock-encrusted salt. Pollen dusting brow. The weeping of saline tears. Neither is competing the one with the other. However, each makes the other complete. The completion is the body itself, which allows for an “overlapping” of the subjective into the objective, through the experience of improvised living. Merleau-Ponty (1968) shows how the experiencing through the senses is an embodied process that can be amplified through exploration:

Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship. [...] Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another (VI, p. 133). There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable. (p. 134)

Merleau-Ponty returns here to the body as an experiential, feedback-looping ecosystem based on a co-dependent “by principle” kinship between itself, an intricate somatic/kineshetic system made up of sub-systems, and (the) enveloping earth. The tangible element is the relationship between elements of being, creating a tactile cartographic relief.

Body of/as/with Being

By grounding his phenomenological lens in a body-centered perspective, Merleau-Ponty empowers an expressive holism, based on interaction and union. Referring to the body as the ‘body-subject’ with a body-schema (expressly more so in his earlier writings), Merleau-Ponty engenders the hyphen as the threader of all experience. The phenomenon of phenomenology is thus the process of becoming self-through-body and world-through-body. “He who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*” (1968, p. 134-5). The hyphen represents the ‘*of*’. Merleau-Ponty (1958) reports that if the body “is an expressive unity which we can learn to know only by actively taking it up, this structure will be passed on to the sensible world. The theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception” (p. 239). He continues by elaborating that,

We have relearned to feel our body; we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, and as it were, the subject of perception. (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 239)

Setting the Stage

Theatre is the art of perception in parallax. In a world where we are equally both viewer and viewed, performer and thereby performed, we gain a further understanding, albeit in the entrenchment and investigation of enigma, of the cultural manifestation suggested by Merleau-Ponty that “the world is still the vague theatre of all experiences” (1958, p. 400). Merleau-Ponty applies a socio-aesthetic and interpretative consciousness to what is often referred to as the ‘theatre of life.’ Shakespeare dons his phenomenological cap when he suggests that “*All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players...*” (*As You Like It*, Act II, sc. 7). The term ‘theatre’ has largely been used in single quotes throughout this paper because, in the phenomenological sense, it can be argued that ‘theatre’ is the movement of life, and ‘the theatre’ is the Flesh in which all is enacted. Consequently, “dramatic representation affords phenomenological analysis the opportunity to confront a peculiarly rich, complex subjectivity” (Garner, 1994, p. 7). Merleau-Ponty uses the Flesh as an improvisational metaphor and the ‘theatre’ is the ecological home of metaphor.

Aesthetic dimensionality and cadenced metaphor lace the words and perspectives of Merleau-Ponty. He draws analogies to expressions of dynamic creativity, placing emphasis on artistic examples found in visual, literary, musical works. His references to (the) theatre are more implicit in nature, yet imbedded throughout his writings, offering a validity to both the intrinsic value and inextricable link that an exploratory and experiential ‘theatre’ has to offer in understanding his exposé of our being dynamically relational. Philosopher Michel Foucault’s observation, that “This is philosophy not as thought, but as theatre...” (Haas, 2003, p. 73) certainly applies here. Merleau-Ponty does not set the theatre apart from his theories: theatrical and performative metaphors imbue his language throughout. The imbeddedness of his theatrical languaging is highlighted in the following examples: “Aesthetic expression confers on what it expresses an existence in itself, [...] plucks the signs themselves—the person of the actor...” (1958, p. 212) and “The normal man and the actor do not mistake imaginary situations for reality, but extricate their real bodies from the living situation to make them breathe, speak and, if need be, weep in the realm of imagination” (1958, p. 120) and finally he returns to actions being “validated by being performed” (1958, p. xxiii). The theatricalized language that he offers as supportive evidence to his phenomenology is captivatingly improvisatory and shape shifting in nature. Merleau-Ponty observes that the changing horizons and perspectives of our landscapes (both cognitively and physically) and our relations to them are never fixed: they are triggered, processed, enacted, reflected upon and responded to *with* the same flux with which they exist in their present being-ness. The flux of our planetary interchange, intersubjectivity, intercorporeity and our ever-changing situatedness within this Flesh, this matrix, this Biosphere, is made available by Merleau-Ponty, by adopting a non-static language. However, his language is unequivocally contained within a framework/a system that is self-organizing in nature, yielding to the primary tenets of theatrical improvisation as both an art form/practice and as an analogy for life on earth.

Improvisation as a process and a practice is synonymous with phenomenology. Wendelin Küpers (2011) explains, “phenomenology, embodied experiences, interrelations, connectedness, transactions, and entanglements are all constitutive of reality and thus of creative practicing as a development of entwined mediating of being and becoming” (p. 111). Creativity therefore becomes an inter-practice, and improvisation the activity of inter-relational creativity. Creative improvisation is the methodology of being in relationship with self and world. “Creative

improvisational inter-practice involves constant organizing, dis-organizing, and re-organizing and moving between subjective and objective realms” (Küpers, 2011, p. 115).

The Nexus of Spontaneity

Merleau-Ponty (1958) suggests, “Our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a nexus of living meanings” and, further, that works of art “are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact” (p. 175). Bodies are living works of art and works of art are living bodies, expressions made possible in and through direct sensory contact with our world. “My body is the seat or rather the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression” (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 273). Merleau-Ponty (1958) implies that life is a tactile/perceptual and perpetual body-based improvisation. It is an art-full process whereby our interactions with soil, seeds, sky and self allow for a return to earth, uninhibited by a set trajectory but available for exploration through an intentionality of purpose which is always imbued by an earthly aesthetic eloquence. “If we therefore say that the body expresses existence at every moment, this is in the sense in which a word expresses thought” (p. 192). Merleau-Ponty offers a foundation not for ‘art imitating life,’ rather for ‘art being the improvisation of life.’

Ecologist and ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan refers to life on earth as “the Great Improvisation” (Lane, 2011, p. 43), and such an outlook is echoed by Merleau-Ponty (1958): “the world-structure, with its two stages of sedimentation and spontaneity is at the core of consciousness” (p. 150). He articulates spontaneous improvisation as being an essential, and already present, component of life, of being-within-Being/Biosphere. “Improvisation is the evolving movement of life. We don’t need to learn to improvise for the movement of life is who we are” (von Emmel, 2001, p. 57). Merleau-Ponty offers a challenge to his reader, or more accurately arouses his reader to move *from page to stage*. The writings of Merleau-Ponty beckon embodied *action* to be synthesized into a *felt* understanding, an understanding of existence. Existence at its most primordial level. An understanding of life through living. Of being through body. Of the body through embodiment. Embodiment through action. In one of his final working notes in *The Visible and the Invisible* he clearly articulates his vision of the need for enactment: “Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 197). This Being is exemplified in the act and art of improvisation.

Recognizing the act and art of improvisation and prioritizing it with stressed importance – valuing it as being our functional tool, our *modus operandi*, our exploratory expressive modality – is validated by and through our corporeally tiered bodies. Being nexuses of living meanings with no set trajectory (but with an experienced past) we become what Wendelin Küpers (2011) describes as “action-inviting objects” and “activity-expressing subjects” (p. 106). Our actioning of this contextualized nexus is, and has always been, improvised. Improvisation is not a loosey-goosey, fool-hardy, anything-goes modality; it is finding freedom within ‘limits’ and negotiating within ‘constructions’...it is finding specialization within form. Improvisation is the art of necessity, the act of survival. It is “re-evolutionary (dis)-organising” (Küpers, 2011, p. 118). It is the essence of our ‘theatre’ and our theatres. “The sensing body is not a programmed machine but an active and open form, continually improvising its relation to things and the world” (Abram, 1997, p. 49). Improvisation is the Flesh made visible through an evolving temporal theatre. “Improvisation is acceptance, in a single breath, of both transience and eternity” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 21), consequently embodying *all* experience.

(In)Visibility

Improvisation and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology engages (in)visibility. Through every flame sparked from pitch, every chorus of crickets that croons in tandem with evening tea, from the morning dew which supple skin, to the zephyrs that nuzzle the divots of vertebrae. The terms *visible* and *invisible*, examined independently the one from the other, are sensorily exclusive, and subsequently and ultimately do not find a place in the phenomenological landscape. Exploratory improvisation and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology mitigate the notion of distance into a causal relationship towards (re)engaging wholeness, by inviting the sensuous intimacies of interaction: with ourselves, with each other, with earth....in distance, in proximity. There exists no exclusionary principles, no exclusives. There exists *feeling* and an inherent re-awakening to (perhaps suppressed) *knowing*, accompanied by an animate interpretation of (in)visible: interconnection, interdependence, 'interbeing' (Hahn). Spontaneity lives here. In the network, in the dance of flux, in the self-organizing system of symbiotic survival. We do not see it. We feel it. We are it...Visibly invisible. Inextricably. The Flesh. The Biosphere. Earth. Body.

EmBODYment

Merleau-Ponty is calling on us to bring the outlet of experience and expression *home*. Home to the body, through the *art* and *act* of individual and group participatory exchange. Through theatrical improvisation, the connections that bind us become visible. An embodied Merleau-Pontian phenomenological praxis allows opportunities for humanity to re-weave our eco-cultural web by examining, questioning, mirroring, and reflecting our societal structures and ecological threads by engaging in the natural and ever-present movements and flux exhibited by our planet earth.

Abram (1991) reminds us that "the Gaian [interconnected] understanding of the world [...] entails an embodied, participatory epistemology" (p. 13) and that "a genuine ecological philosophy must simultaneously be a poetics" (2005, p. 25). There is an important semantic link here, in that the actual *Poetics* written by Aristotle is thought to be the first-ever treatise on dramatic theory. Theatrical improvisation is a participatory epistemology; thus one is able to view improvisation as being 'naturally' corroboratory with a phenomenological earth-as-amphitheatre analogy. The theatre of phenomenology is an ecology. Garner (1994) posits, "The phenomenological tradition offers a way of *reembodying* the discourse of theater" (p. 26). Improvisation as *act* of embodiment is a subjective force of interbeing wherein our semi-permeable corporeal understanding is played out on a living stage:

When I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world. The ontological world and body which we find at the core of the subject are not the world or body as idea, but on the one hand the world itself contracted into a comprehensive grasp, and on the other the body itself as a knowing-body" (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 475).

Merleau-Ponty focuses on the ontological being of a knowing-body, empowering it as the communicative interlocutor within a dynamic ecology. Referring to the body as 'knowing' indicates that from the very beginning, the body is imbued with knowledge. The body is therefore a temporal vessel, shaping past, present and future through interaction. The temporality of the living body is the nexus of its subjectivity.

Is a Split Possible?

Knowledge is the act of knowing. Through the act of knowing, we exist simultaneously as knower and known in a world where in the truest sense, dichotomies are in *actuality*, perhaps, impossible. How is it possible for an *act* to be dichotomous in a world where objectivity is contained with subjectivity, and vice versa? Where do these alleged dichotomies actually lie? As Merleau-Ponty shows a dichotomous relationship within (the) Flesh in its deepest sense is a fallacy. How could such a split even be a possibility? The question brings us around to intentionality and in this case, the answer comes down to a choice either in a personal or a culturally imposed sense, a denial of what is, what exists, what lives, of Life, of Being, of Body. However, using Merleau-Ponty's language of facticity, one can recognize that a dualistic break in our senses has occurred. Ecologist Neil Evernden addresses this split by saying:

In a very real sense there can only *be* environment in a society that holds certain assumptions, and there can only be an environmental crisis in a society that believes in environment....The environment exists because it was made visible by the act of making it separate. It exists because we have excised it from the context of our lives (As qtd. in Langer, 1990, p. 118).

Evernden addresses what Merleau-Ponty describes as acts that attempt to remove co-dependent elements from the woven matrix of phenomenon. The nature of our existence rules out the possibility of there being a chasm between the 'two' determinants, objective and subjective. They are inextricable. As a result of this imposed intellectualized dichotomy, our relationship with our world has shifted from a reciprocal one to a Storehouse and Sewer mentality, with humanity positioned in the middle of, and existing as the chasm. However, if we suppose that we are inextricably a part of the living matrix of earth, and our thoughts, our decisions, and our actions are all, as Merleau-Ponty exposes part of the world expressing itself, then all of this dichotomizing might be recognized as being a 'natural' and necessary step in our evolutionary journey. The dichotomizing might be the very examination that allows for a fuller recognition of what it might look like if we were truly to be separate: our bodies from earth/Gaian body; with earth evidencing that indeed this is an impossibility. Our intimately ingrained and mutually felt understanding of connection is proven in every drought and food shortage, in every drop of acid rain and weathering re-patterning. In every breath inhaled and exhaled, exhaled and then inhaled. Our actions are a reflexivity of the Flesh embodied, the visible unfolding into a greater visibility, and the invisible being understood in a timely felt sense of the resonance of (in)visibility. We are engaged in a process...a process where Life is learning to live, learning through itself. Together we entered into a chasm, and our engaged reflexivity is engendering a new immediacy to the improvisation with the Flesh. We are moving, more deeply, more ecologically into what cultural anthropologist Harvey Sarles calls "body-as-expression in interaction" (Abram, 2008, p. 96). Our interactions within dichotomy

are synthesizing a new sense of integration. Merleau-Ponty captures this move: “We are proceeding toward the center, we are seeking to comprehend how there is a center, what the unity consists of, we are not saying that it is a result; and if we make the thought appear upon an infrastructure of vision, this is only in virtue of the uncontested evidence that one must see or feel in some way in order to think, that every thought known to us occurs to a flesh” (1968, p. 145-6).

Testing our Limits

Viewing the world through a strict objective lens may not be solely a personal, societal or cultural choice, but indeed might be Being recognizing its inherent properties – testing through industrial and technological improvisations the limits of the Flesh. Improvisation happens within limits, with ties that bind us. Improvisation is the Flesh. We cannot fly the kite, and experience that freedom, without holding on to the kite string. The Flesh is the kite string; the kite: the metaphor for a life full of freedom-still-contained. As bodies we are currently journeying through the process of Flesh synthesis to antithesis to thesis-(Flesh)-to thesis to antithesis to synthesis Flesh. This is not a linear journey, even though depicted as such. Our causality is forever looping back into itself, out of which a whole new Flesh, presently responsive emerges...continuously. “We belong to the same system of being for itself and being for another; we are moments of the same syntax, we count in the same world, we belong to the same Being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 83). Our syntax is our story and our improvisations are our syntax. We are, as beings, a language of life.

Merleau-Ponty articulates the need to move beyond anthropocentrism. We are bigger bodies than our own. Merleau-Ponty demands our recognition of the nature of our existence, without determinants in relation to possible and potential trajectories that Life can and has taken. Merleau-Ponty observes that “attention to life is the awareness we experience of ‘nascent movement’ in our bodies” (1958, p. 90-1). Based in body and story, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can be understood through the art and act of theatrical body storying. The art of embodied improvisation is an ecological act that fosters a birthing of a new felt resonance of all-encompassing reciprocity, threading meaning and relevance through the immediacy of experience.

Temporally Storying Paradox

Merleau-Ponty (1958) speaks to the potency of reflection in the ‘other’, where through another body, through the ‘self’-coupling of the visible and sensible, we are able to perceive the enigmatic improvisation that governs the intertwining dance of form within subjectivity:

Through the other body, I see that, in its coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives, adding to the world that I see the treasure necessary for what the other body sees. For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with the whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turns gives everything it receives; the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, of making itself the outside of its inside

and the inside of its outside. And henceforth, movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and to themselves, return toward their source and, in the patient and silent labor of desire, begin the paradox of expression. (p. 144)

The paradox of expression, here detailed by Merleau-Ponty is the art by which we get “back from the other player a version of oneself” (Schechner, 2000, p. 72). Through the other body we stage a commerce of earthly reflexivity. Bodies are reflections of sameness and difference. The act of mirroring is the theatrical trope of perception, of communication, where ‘we float in Being with another life’ and other lives. Being biospheric breathing bodies bound by and in (in)visibility is the nature by which we discover homogeneity in improvised spatial and temporal form. Our expressions towards each other find ground in a familiarity that moves beyond dates and times, spaces and places towards a nuanced storying of landscape.

Our various interpretations, stagings, and improvisations around our being-Being or our Being-being do not negate the potency of each telling, re-telling, each embodying, re-embodying, and through which purview or worldview they are shared. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty (1958) illustrates, they enhance the *fleshing* out of its relevance to the immediacy of our times:

The fusion of soul and body in the act, the sublimation of biological into personal existence, and of the natural into the cultural world is made both possible and precarious by the temporal structure of our experience. Every present grasps, by stages, through its horizon of immediate past and near future, the totality of possible time; thus does it overcome the dispersal of instants, and manage to endow our past itself with its definitive meaning, re-integrating into personal existence even the past of all pasts which the stereotyped patterns of our organic behaviour seem to suggest as being at the origin of our volitional being. (p. 97-98)

Merleau-Ponty credits our experience as being precarious in that it rests on the intersecting lines of past, present and future at *all* times. Somatic holism is both our assimilation of temporality and our commitment to the present forever becoming the past. Experience is crafted by our volition in expressive exchange with the volition of others. It is now known that our gonads, ovaries and DNA hold every being that ever has or will exist (Seed, 2007, p. 13). Merleau-Ponty intuited this by indicating above that our bodies house ‘the totality of possible time.’

The *Present* Sensorial Script

Merleau-Ponty (1968) offers a deeply eco-phenomenological narrative that serves as a theoretical bridging between story, somatics, science and temporality. He infuses the power of reflection as our very ability to become responsive catalysts in and through our world:

My access to a universal mind is reflection, far from finally discovering what I always was, is motivated by the intertwining of my life with the other lives, of my body with the visible things, by the intersection of my perceptual field with that of others, by the blending in my duration with the other durations. If I pretend to find, through reflection, in the universal mind the premise that had

always backed up my experience, I can do so only by forgetting this non-knowing of the beginning which is not nothing, and which is not the reflective truth either, and which one must be accounted for. I was able to appeal from the world and the others to myself and take the route of reflection, only because first I was outside of myself, in the world, among the others, and constantly this experience feeds my reflection. (p. 49)

The 'non-knowing of the beginning' is what human beings use as the basis of story, of theatre, of improvising life. We know or remember neither our own personal beginning, our birth and we are ultimately aware that we will not know our end, our death. It is through the 'universal mind' of engaged reflection that experience manifests, book-ended by unknowns. The text, the script, the story between the bookends is the sensorial reflective process of feedback loops in continuous exchange and negotiation with past and future creating a present.

We live in a visible/invisible-storied world/earth/cosmos/theatre. The richness of such expression colours our every landscape: in pigments and shapes, in vibrancy and language, in nuance and architecture, as 'nature' and 'environment.' There is no on- or off- stage. There is an ecological-theatron where the curtain call stands as a temporality of improvised living; and the theatre's 'house' is recognized as all encompassing. Our bodies are our scripts: kinesthetically improvising dynamism of possible sensibilities. Somatics scholar Don Johnson, has argued for narrative research methodologies as a means to create research texts that validate the visceral embodiment of embedded lived experience:

I use the word "stories" instead of "belief systems" or "philosophies of life". When in the manner of an archaeologist going through a dig, you sift through the baroque layers of logic and abstract theories about the world, you eventually come to a very human story about an individual or a community struggling to make sense of the complexities of everyday life...Reconnecting those abstract stories to the original lived stories is a crucial element in making room for a pluralistic world which not only tolerates but actually relishes many versions of reality (As qtd. in von Emmel, 2001, p. 20).

Johnson captures how our perpetual and perceptual interfacing with/in our surroundings become the source of our wanting to grasp a resonant understanding of life, of creation...and the desire to want "to make sense of [it]." We are capable of both bringing life forth and extinguishing life. We are human. With this capability, comes our quest for discovering the 'truth' of humanity, of what it means to be of this world, to be human; it is our doing so, our process of discovery, that we capture through story and storying. "Theater emphasizes the variables of embodiedness in the stories it chooses to tell, since these stories are grounded in the physical insertion of character in environment and in the often competing operations of perception, habitation, and inter-subjectivity" (Garner, 1994, p. 51). Phenomenology thereby is the language of theatre, and theatre the language of phenomenology. Both are improvisatory in nature, and both follow a living narrative. Merleau-Ponty languages the reigniting of be(com)ing through conscious and active reflection. "To remember is not to bring into the focus of consciousness a self-subsistent picture of the past; it is to thrust deeply into the horizon of the past and take apart step by step the interlocked perspectives until the experiences which it epitomizes are as if relived in their temporal setting" (1958, p. 26). Temporality features prominently in Merleau-Ponty's writings, and its interplay with expression adds layers of

dimensionality to the positivity and possibility of aesthetic-arts-in/as-Flesh. Improvisational artist Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990) suggests that:

There are two notions linked here: creativity extended into moments of time; creativity extended into the lives of more people. Neither spectators, nor victims, we can be directly involved in the making of ourselves and our world. There are no prescriptive solutions, no grand designs for grand problems. Life's solutions lie in the minute particulars, involving more and more individual people daring to create their own life and art, daring to listen to the voice within their deepest, original nature, and deeper still, the voice within the Earth. (p. 183)

Creativity is an order of temporality, and temporality and the pressing concerns of our age are fuelling and being fuelled by creativity so vast it is again being recognized as the definition of our evolutionary and improvisatory being. We are living creative bodies: story making, storytelling, and story-experiencing our lives through kincentric circles of animate, expression. The aesthetics of such interaction is rippled temporally. The art is the present, where we *draw* from the past in order to *paint* and *cast* a possible future:

Aesthetic expression confers on what it expresses an existence in itself, installs it in nature as a thing perceived and accessible to all. [...] No one will deny that here the process of expression brings the meaning into being or makes it effective, and does not merely translate it. [...] The new sense-giving intention knows itself only by donning already available meanings, the outcomes of previous acts of expression (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 212-13).

Expression is the vehicle of accessibility to 'nature', and being that 'nature' is expressive, it is in turn the means of symbiotic communication between self, selves and other forming an earthly whole. The palette of expressive perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, is equally accessible to all beings endowed with a birth on earth. The Flesh frames the intertwining aesthetics, in the sense-giving and sense-making process of living, which is dimensionally 'accessible to all.' "We are saying that time is someone, or that temporal dimensions, in so far as they perpetually overlap, bear each other out and ever confine themselves to making explicit what was implied in each, being collectively expressive of that one single explosion or thrust which is subjectivity itself" (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 490). That one single explosion, the first temporal creative expressive act is the "primordial flaring forth" of the universe (Swimme & Berry, 1994, p. 16), the Big Bang: the primordial catalyst of our inter-disciplinary phenomenological-ecological-improvisatory-theatrical story that each and every one of us embodies and lives through.

Verbing Possibility

Abram suggests that Merleau-Ponty "sought a new language" (1990, p. 10) that could ground and connect various fields into an inter-disciplinary dialogue in relation to perceptual engagement. I extend Abram's thinking even further by pointing to the explicitness in Merleau-Ponty's words for a move into action through 'verbing' experience. "The momentum of existence towards others, towards the future, toward the world can be restored as a river unfreezes" (1958, p. 191). Merleau-Ponty invokes a doing-being: embodying theory into praxis. He did not manage to get to that 'stage'. Merleau-Ponty did however grant the field of

philosophy a new language. His unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*, as it stands has to be called his final synthesis, wherein his final two Working Notes, dated March 1961, he outlines:

My plan: I The visible
II Nature
III Logos (1968, p. 274)

His plan for action, he declares “must be presented without any compromise with *humanism*, nor moreover with *naturalism*, nor finally with *theology*---Precisely what needs to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures--” (1968, p.274). Merleau-Ponty languages the need for reinvigorating our embodied intertwinement. Had he lived longer, he surely would have been at the forefront of cross-disciplinary engagement, pioneering collaborative understandings between the various branches of the sciences and humanities. As he had already “disclosed this perceptual interchange between body and world as the very foundation of truth in history, in political thought and action, in art, and in science” (Abram, 1990, p. 9), it is quite likely he would have subsequently ushered in the eco-critical/eco-creative, post-humanistic methodological lens.

Merleau-Ponty stories us with possibility. His focus on the earthly textures of perception, sensibility, interaction, communication and expression make for a sensuous telling beginning with ‘Once upon a time...’ However, for Merleau-Ponty the beginning is not concretized and the ending is still and will always likely remain unknown. It is herein that lays the improvisation. Temporality and expression are the central characters. Intentionality is the director, and the Flesh the stage.

Finally, as it is indivisible in the present, history is equally so in its sequences. Considered in the light of its fundamental dimensions, all periods of history appear as manifestations of a single existence, or as episodes in a single drama---without our knowing whether it has an ending. (Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 278-9)

Though we are historically dramatizing ourselves into the future, according to Merleau-Ponty, our story is most potent in the present. Our intertwinement of past, present and future dimensions are all and have been dependent on improvisation.

Living Art: An Ecological Act

Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology must truly be embodied and experienced with a consciousness, an alertness and perceptive awareness of the *act* of engagement. It is this awareness that will enact and make theatre-within-a-theatre arouse a felt understanding for a needed move away from dichotomies and dualism, and towards accountability...and our responsible role in the Flesh. The call to *action* by Merleau-Ponty begets an improvisatory eco-theatre; however it is not a move towards environmental *activism*. This delineation is crucial to overcome the dichotomies that have entrenched separation and otherness. Merleau-Ponty’s eco-theatre is holistic, is inclusive and is most definitely a form of *activism* (or act-of-vision) but it does not posit or align itself with notions of an, or the, environment. Philosopher Monika

Langer (1990) reminds us, “The very notion of 'environment' results from, reflects, and reinforces a fundamental rupture with nature and an implicit denial of relationships in favor of things” (p. 119). Merleau-Ponty is not an environmentalist and those who label themselves as such will not be able to properly assimilate his work. His work benefits the reinvigorating of primordial interrelationships. Re-engaging our sensitivity of improvising as tool for survival, in a world where our sensitivities are all too often socially-placated and dulled is where the work of Merleau-Ponty and where theatre can be an *active* tool for re-imagining a future, our future. “A living art immediately subject to social change, theater possesses a unique capacity to generate new stories that can root us in a sustainable future” (May, 2005, p. 97). Phenomenology invokes a non-linear causality, and through the sensitive evidence of our perceptual interfacing with earth, we become endowed with the capabilities to re-imagine a future. Merleau-Ponty languages a script for an improvisatory eco-theatre and a future of reciprocal living.

ⁱlanguages is being intentionally used as a verb

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