

The Space of the Painting

For Merleau-Ponty, space describes the way in which a human may exist as both *for-itself* (a subject that experiences) and *in-itself* (an object that is experienced). Orientation describes the moment when the subject takes up this possibility. This moment is not consciously experienced in the bodily activity of the subject. To unveil its founding, Merleau-Ponty considers two experiments conducted by George Stratton in the 1890s.

In these experiments the subject's activities trace out modulations of what Merleau-Ponty terms the "virtual body" and the "spectacle" given by his fields of perception. A perceptual field is a "...system of appearances whose orientation varies over the course of experience, even when there is no change in the constellation of *stimuli*." Each perceptual field (vision, touch, hearing, taste, smell) is implicated with the others, so that the entire spectacle arrives distinct from the physical stimuli that motivated their founding (257, *PoP*). The virtual body is "...my body as a system of possible actions, a virtual body whose phenomenal 'place' is defined by its task and by its situation. My body wherever it has something to do." (260, *PoP*). "Virtual body" communicates the sense of a body as the subject of a meaningful environment that suggests actions. The cylindrical tin vessel 25 degrees to my right 19 inches from my retina resting on a surface 32 inches from the floor offers itself immediately not in these terms, but as a cup I can sip water from. Its phenomenal place is the space of the subject when the spectacle and the body gear together, coordinating the activities and constitution of one another.

In the first experiment, a subject wears spectacles that invert retinal images, rendering visual perceptions of his physical space upside down. Confronting an inverted landscape, the subject experiences disequilibrium with his perceptual world. Wearing the spectacles for a week, the subject explores his environment, encountering situations demanding pragmatic action (washing hands, getting out of bed, cooking meals). During this time, the first perceptual development occurs as the landscape feels upright, but his body feels abnormally positioned. With more time (by the second or third day) his body senses itself in alignment with the landscape. He successfully executes gestures and actions without confusion, as his visual perceptions calibrate with his other bodily perceptions (255, *PoP*).

In this experiment, the location of stimuli has not changed (only intersected by a device), yet the subject is no longer oriented in his world. At first, the visual field is chaotic for the subject while his body and its other perceptual fields are meaningfully present. The virtual body can anticipate activity, but cannot find purchase to execute that activity; it has no place. Then, the visual field is recognized while the body and its other perceptual fields are foreign. The subject cannot project his virtual body. Finally, all of the perceptual fields and his body align. His virtual body projects its actions into its spectacle and he finds purchase in the world with his actual body.

In the second experiment, a subject visually perceives his room through a 45-degree mirror, and does not allow his eyes to wander away from the mirror. Oblique perceptions of the room and his body dislocate the subject's sense of self from these perceptions. The man in the mirror is not the subject, nor is the room in the mirror the room he is actually occupying. In time, passively, the subject re-inhabits the reflection of his body, achieving equilibrium between his reflected and actual bodies (259, *PoP*).

At first, the subject's visual field is not oriented with his body's other perceptual fields. His virtual body does not encounter a spectacle that invites its activity, as it has no place. Soon, perceptual fields adjust to the virtual body's expectations, and the spectacle assumes an orientation in which the subject projects a virtual body and operates with an actual body. He has returned to himself.

The terms "virtual body" and "spectacle" do not intend to delimit perceptual experience, but serve to reflectively sketch the experience of orientation. The experiments protract perceptual experience, allowing us to reflectively cast our gaze on an experience that generally happens unreflectively, without the subject being consciously aware of it. The protraction allows themes of the subject's perceptual experience to emerge. However, even in these protracted experiences, orientation still occurred primordially, not as the sequential development of conscious and bodily activity in a determinate world. In the first experiment, the body's intentions and the world's solicitations shifted, as the body and world haltingly reached for each, brushing together and apart, until finally meshing in the moment of orientation. The spontaneity of orientation in the second experiment reveals a mystery: did the body get a hold of the world, or did the world get a hold of the body? In each we find that neither the body nor the world is sufficient to establish orientation. It is only in the mutual relation of body and world that orientation is possible.

Consideration of a painting allows reflection on the experience of orientation in a space in which the body is passive – the imagined space of painting. Let's consider two paintings on a piece of plywood, seen in both color and reduced to grey tones on the following pages. The painting is not reductively encountered as a flat surface of wood with acrylic pigment. Rather, the paint gathers itself into shapes that alternatively fly off and sink into the field of plywood. The pictorial address of the painting solicits wandering through an imagined space.

In the painting on the left, a light grey rectangle foregrounds shapes from a continuous plane of plywood to establish a frame. A thickened rectangular volume hovers obliquely in front of the grey rectangle. A pale yellow circle hangs below the purple plane and absorbs and is absorbed by the rectangle's corner. Two white lines, anchored at the far edge of the rectangular volume, intersect the circle, one disappears beneath it while the other extends across it. The weight of the circle, oriented by the lines, induces downward tension. The orientation of the lines flush with the end of the purple volume introduces further ambiguity to the circle; it is either fused flush with to the grey rectangle, or it hovers in front of it, and may orbit obliquely about the purple volume.

A darker yellow circle crests a dark grey rectangle set in the corner of the larger, light grey rectangle. The dark rectangle draws the dark circle to the frame's surface as a planar object, behind the oblique purple volume. The dark tone of the circle and the smaller rectangle displace a region of the larger rectangle, suggesting they each lay above the larger rectangle. Two white lines crossing the face of the dark circle are held in tension across the frame by its edges. The extension of these lines and the tonal weight of the dark circle in the upper quadrant suggest it is accelerating upwards. At the same time, the anchor point fixed in the circle at the horizon of the dark rectangle and the crossing white lines arrests any movement of the circle. Orienting these elements around this anchor point recalls them towards the surface of the frame.

A light green plane extends obliquely from the narrow, fore-most face of the purple volume. It locates the purple volume relative to the dark grey rectangle where a white line cuts across its edge. The purple volume seems to fold back past the grey rectangle, towards the surface of the frame.

While these elements motivate varying perceptions of depth co-planar or oblique to the painting surface, certain orbital tendencies act across the composition, gathering these elements together. The varying depth of the circles motivates an oblique torsion about the vertical axis of the volume. Simultaneously, the circles motivate a transverse orbit about the face of the purple plane, parallel to the surface of the frame. These movements across the painting (at once parallel, at once oblique to the plane's surface) motivate perceptions of the entire painting as either oblique or parallel.

In the painting on the right, two narrow dark rectangles create a loose frame. An oblique white plane anchors in the upright rectangle. These three shapes create a theatre through which the other shapes float. The rectangles orient a space parallel to the painting surface. The plane opens this space obliquely, allowing the shapes to float behind, above, and through this space.

A white and orange line tied to a blue circle traverses this space. From a dark rectangular volume, it crosses the oblique plane. The white plane makes a segment of the orange-white line absent, motivating the sense that is behind the white plane. The blue circle at its end sediments into the bottom dark rectangle; in its light-hued blue it almost disappears under the rectangle, calling the white-orange line forward to the depth of the rectangles. In line above this blue circle is another blue circle that seems to be both behind the oblique plane and sitting on top of it, about to tip over the side. The absence of some of this circle suggests a thickness in the oblique plane. It is unclear whether this circle belongs to the parallel plane of the frame, or the oblique space of the white plane.

Between these circles, and to the right of the oblique plane, a white blob and a small orange circle hover, entangled by a blue rectangle and a dark shape. Oriented by the nearby edge of the oblique plane and the blue line that runs parallel, these shapes seem to hover obliquely in front of the plane.

Considered in sequence with the blue circles, these shapes seem to orbit about a loose anchor point somewhere near the center of the painting. We can imagine the blue circle at the top of the composition falling to the right, as the orange circle cascades past the white blob, just as the blue circle flies to the left at the end of its white-orange line. Perceptions of such an orbit (running parallel to the painting surface) circumvent the oblique space made by the white plane. At the same time, it is the depth created by the white plane that loosens the shapes to float free of the painting surface.

Orientation in the painting is relative and mutable. In wandering through the imagined space, focusing on particular regions or shapes, the orientation of elements was seen to change. The diversity of orientations meant that a conscious synthesis of orientations was impossible. The only comprehensive orientation possible was through vision unconsciously immersed in the painting space. It was possible to suddenly slip in or out of oblique or parallel orientations through the space of the painting. Considered in this way, the painting may be understood as a

representation of bodily orientation. Through its pictorial address, the painting sketches the pre-reflective, active experience of bodily orientation that arises neither from synthetic consciousness nor from a determinate world, but through the subject's bodily engagement with the world.