

Painting and Relation, in Their Existential Significance

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Abstract: This paper places Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment and painting in dialogue with Martin Buber's account of the existential structure of relation. Drawing on the existential significance of both, I provide an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's argument in "Eye and Mind" that embodiment serves as a necessary condition to the very possibility of painting's existence, and highlight the key points of Buber's notion of the I-You relation as developed in *I and Thou*. Proceeding from the overlap between the two thinkers' accounts, namely the disavowal of the subject-object structure as the fundamental form of relation and reciprocity as constitutive of subjectivity, I argue that painting expresses the painter's relation to something in the world in a moment of encounter. I conclude with a brief consideration of the import for the spectator, particularly in how painting can illuminate a different mode of being in the world.

What is it that the painter expresses in painting? In "Eye and Mind," Maurice Merleau-Ponty develops an account of the art in which painting expresses and realizes the individual painter's relationship to the world, and thus reveals the human subject's unique position in it more generally. For Merleau-Ponty, this world is, crucially, a visible one. What the painter accomplishes is not divided from his existence as a visible being in a visible world—a fundamental existential structure he shares with all other human beings—but is in fact made possible by and founded upon that very intersection of subjectivity and visibility. Painting is the pure expression and exploration of this reality, interrogates and inverts, as it were, ordinary perception; the painter lives in a mode in which the world shows itself to him *as* visible, not merely as seen. This reciprocal relationship is meant in its deepest sense: it is interpretable and understandable as the encounter of the I-You, or standing in relation,

in Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. Buber's conception of subjectivity as primordially founded upon and sustained by a mode of being *other* than that of subject-object will illuminate Merleau-Ponty's own account, and will allow us to see that the moment of encounter is what the painter expresses in his work. Once actualized, the painting retains the potential to reveal to the spectator another possible mode of being.

Movement, reciprocity, embodiment, and visibility lie at the core of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of painting. "The eye is an instrument that moves itself, a means which invents its own ends; it is that which has been moved by some impact of the world, which it then restores to the visible through the traces of a hand" (Merleau-Ponty 127). This quotation implicitly conveys, what Merleau-Ponty elsewhere states explicitly, what painting is not. For the *impact* must precede the tracing, in fact, instigates or compels it. Thus a painting is not representation, mere image, mimesis, or a "projection" similar to the one (according to some philosophers) that things in the world project to our mind; and the act of painting is not a simple intellectual and technical exercise in copying the forms and contours of things *out there*, separate from me and self-enclosed, which I come to possess an idea of through my perceptual and cognitive faculties (Merleau-Ponty 133). Against the notions of Descartes, Merleau-Ponty aims to undermine the idea that the lines of this drawing or painting merely happen to 'look like' a tree, because they serve as a clue or hint, a way to trigger the image of a ('real') tree to pop into our minds (131). Paintings do not just "represent" objects. They bear a real relation of resemblance to the things of the world (Merleau-Ponty 131). Resemblance, as Merleau-Ponty uses it here, means more than representation: it suggests both a deep connection to that which the painting resembles *and* accords the painting itself the power of real presence. Not classified as a "mode or variant of thinking" i.e. of self-

sufficient intellectual mastery, painting, for Merleau-Ponty, is “a central operation contributing to the definition of our access to Being” (132). As the visible is integral to Being, in order to understand his conception of painting, we must consider the role and importance he ascribes to vision.

Embodiment is central to vision. “The visible world and the world of my motor projects are both total parts of the same Being” (Merleau-Ponty 124). The space of my agency and the world I see overlap, seemingly with no guarantee that this be the case—for what within the visible necessarily entails or secures that it can be moved or affected by me? In this would reside something almost miraculous, Merleau-Ponty suggests, if not for the fact that “vision is attached to movement,” in two fundamental ways: the eye only sees because it constantly moves; and bodily movement prefigures vision (124). Vision does not issue from the workings of a separate mind which merely ‘sits in’ and controls a mechanical body, as a Cartesian might have it. I see because my eyes are part of my body, *because* I am embodied. In a similar way, the mind is not responsible for movement as a conscious choice then executed in space, as if it thinks to fire neurons and contract or relax the required muscles (Merleau-Ponty 124). My hand reaches toward a cup, a book, or a flower, and it simply *happens*, without a decree or deliberation issuing from the depths of internality. Of course, we can deliberate on a certain gesture or action’s ethical and practical considerations, and perhaps the *manner* of doing it (to press softly or firmly, caress comfortingly or seductively), but movement’s ‘how,’ its fundamental coming about, is always steeped in our embodiment in a visible world. Movement is as if a response not simply to what I see, but the fact *that* I see at all—that there is a world to move in, with things to move towards. In this way, vision and movement come together in the body (124). With this in mind, we begin to grasp what it means for

Merleau-Ponty to say that “vision is caught or comes to be in things” (125). Yet the other side of this requires undermining the second aspect of the legacy of Cartesian mind/body dualism—the primacy of the traditional subject-object view of the world.

Reestablishing the centrality of embodiment already gives way to reimagining the human being’s position in the world and toward things in it by illuminating the paradox of see-er and seen. For once I no longer conceive of myself as a mind in possession of a body, I am a self *as* body and mind, inseparably, as one. I see things; I also see myself. Suddenly, I realize I am not ‘in here,’ and the world is ‘out there’—I am *part* of the world, “my body is a thing among things” and “the world is made of the very stuff of the body” (Merleau-Ponty 125). This point entails: 1) that as an embodied being, I am visible to others, and so am *seen* by the world, in addition to by myself; and 2) vision “must somehow come about” in things, that there vibrates a resonance of visibility and invisibility across the body and the world (Merleau-Ponty 125). All of this disallows us to recast the human being’s position as merely *sometimes* an object for others, and always a transparent subject for himself. For this dual cross-visibility marks a continuity with the world that resists the traditional classification into subject-object. I am not so self-contained and separated from the world that I can possess and discard it at will. I already overflow into it, reaching beyond the contours of my body with vision and with movement, and find that I understand myself not as master of the visual field, but only in relation to things in it. The bird which spots me from the window-sill is not a subject, and I its object. Rather we are held together in visibility and embodiment. Neither am I transparent to myself. For my body is not an object, but a “place the soul inhabits,” not only as its most intimate space, but as that with which the soul thinks and exists (Merleau-Ponty 136). For Merleau-Ponty, it is just this

consciousness of being at once see-er/seen and sensing/sensed that constitutes selfhood and establishes a relation of reciprocity with the world—an idea which we will return to shortly.

We are now in a position to understand Merleau-Ponty's quip that "[i]ndeed, we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint" (123). His remark points, firstly, to the almost startlingly obvious fact that the painter paints with his body: his hands hold the brushes and the palette, adjust the easel; the movements of his arms, wrists, and fingers (among other body parts) *produce* the marks on the canvas; he sits or stands, hunches over, moves closer to or farther away from the canvas. A disembodied cognitive existence does not birth a painting whole. Not to say, of course, that this is how most imagine it; but the exaggeration serves to throw into relief the crucial lack latent in the common idea that painting begins with a mental picture. This conception, depending on its inflection, erases or subdues the significance of painting being fundamentally *also* a physical act. The painter does not arrive to the canvas with a preformed image in his mind which he must find the material means to portray, a conception which would thereby render all models (the fruit of still-lives, the people of portraiture, the natural elements of landscapes) merely *references* rather than the partners of a living engagement. The painter's body moves through space. The work results from the interaction, struggle or cooperation as the case may be, between painter and canvas, and between painter and that which touches his eye. Painting is inseparably material. On the painter's end, it is inseparable from his embodiment.

This inseparability does not remain on the purely contingent level of requirement. It is not the case that it just so happens that we, as physical beings, need our bodies to paint. Rather, painting is inseparable from human embodiment because it is only due to our position as embodied *visible beings in a visible world* that we paint at all. The intersection of

subjectivity and visibility gives rise to a reciprocal relationship with the world:

Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them. Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence. Why shouldn't these correspondences in turn give rise to some tracing rendered visible again, in which the eyes of others could find an underlying motif to sustain their inspection of the world? Thus there appears a "visible" to the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first. Merleau-Ponty 125-126

Merleau-Ponty finds himself here at the limit of language. What his thought suggests, however, is a resonance between body and world. The world touches me, and I am receptive to it; I touch the world, and find *it* is receptive to me. Merleau-Ponty reestablishes the centrality of *betweenness*: Being is not only 'I act, I receive,' the crowning and entrenchment of the 'I' perspective (which would be the subject-dominating-object view of the world), but fundamentally also that which acts upon me, can open to me. The possibility of mutual openness and receptivity is constitutive of our being in the world.

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty specifically draws attention to the movement of this communication, as it were, with things in the world. The painter stands before a visible thing: it moves him; its impact and what it arouses in him is invisible. It is just this invisible in-betweenness that the painter then seeks to "restore to the visible through the traces of a hand," to render visible *again* the world's invisible trace in him. This will not be a copy of the thing, not its trivial likeness or imitation (if it has any likeness at all), for there is a change which occurs in the passage. The world, in a sense, passes through the painter; but neither is he just a filter through which the world expresses itself with the unique coloration of his

perspective. Perhaps we can draw an analogy, if limited, to a dialogue. The thing expresses itself to the painter. Feeling that expression awaken something in him, he holds that and mulls on it. He speaks back into the world *in* painting, not the thing itself nor a repetition of what the thing said to him, but precisely (what he can of)¹ this invisible interaction, in the language of the visual. Thus the painting contains and conveys the “carnal essence,” which is neither direct transcription nor mere modification of the thing’s first expression, but rather a kind of echo and incorporation of what is most fundamental of it into the painter’s experience of the world. In using the word “icon,” Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the painting is not a compilation of traces of the visible-invisible-visible movement, but is its realization, and has a real presence in itself. We can then understand “carnal formula” in relation to what Merleau-Ponty later calls the “system of equivalences, a Logos of lines, of lighting of colors [...]—a nonconceptual presentation of universal Being” (142). In this silent language of the visual the painter attempts to make sense of the ineffable confrontation with Being, the otherwise inexpressible relation to things in the world. All of this underlies what Merleau-Ponty means when he says, “It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings” (123). The intertwining of embodiment, subjectivity, and visibility renders possible the restoration of the invisible to the visible in painting.

It is at this juncture that we can turn to Martin Buber’s conception of relation and encounter. Merleau-Ponty’s account of reciprocity and the reconfiguration of the

traditional subject-object structure is unique in its details, but not its broad contours. In *I and Thou*, Buber reconceptualizes the role of just this structure, and seeks to reveal a human being’s originary existence in the world as fundamentally one of relation. For Buber, “The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude” (53). Essentially, a human being adopts one of two fundamental existential orientations towards a world: in the saying of I-You or of I-It, which Buber terms basic word pairs (53). This ‘speaking’ is not a literal verbalization but refers to the fundamentally existential *manner* in which it orients the human being. The alternation of the two characterizes human life.

Buber’s point is structural: each basic word pair “establish[es] a mode of existence” (53). In the case of I-It, this structural mode is precisely that of subject-object, where the “I” is the self-contained, knowing subject and the “It” is the classifiable, analyzable ‘object,’ whether that be an inanimate physical entity, an organism in nature, or another human being. This I knows, thinks, feels, imagines, perceives, and senses *something*; the I always mediates the object, breaks it down into its properties or parts so as to be processed instead of purely lived—the world of experience,² as opposed to encounter (Buber 55-56). In limiting ‘experience’ to the It-world, Buber emphasizes the activity-driven and goal-oriented character of so much of human life and interaction in and with the world: the It is an object of experience subordinated to the I, assimilated and absorbed by the I, into memory, perception, and mental or emotional life, never simply acknowledged. Because this I “appears as an ego³ and becomes

¹ This parenthetical is intended to qualify *what* he ‘speaks’: for I do not think Merleau-Ponty implies it is possible to ‘transcribe’ this invisible interaction, as if it is a simple matter of perfectly turning what is unseen into a visible graphic rendition. The painter does not serve as a scribe, but attempts to convey the realness of this relation to things in the world. His own individuality and subjectivity are indispensable in this relation.

² Buber uses “experience” to refer to any occurrence that has an object, whether that be an emotion, perception, sensation, etc. I always experience *something*, whereas in encounter, I do not “experience” the other, but *am* with them.

³ This usage bears no relation to the Freudian ego, as translator Walter Kaufmann explains in footnote 7 (111-112).

conscious of itself as a subject (*of* experience and use)” (Buber 111-112; italics mine), it derives knowledge or a ‘product’ from experience—there is always something it can say about what it has just experienced. The It-world “permits itself to be taken by you, but it does not give itself to you” (Buber 83). The I as ego exists adjacently to things, separate from them in such a way as to be able to possess or to scrutinize them, but they do not open themselves to the I, just as the ego of the I-It is only ever impartial, withdrawn from the *wholeness* of being (Buber 54).

The mode of the I-You, on the other hand, is relation. The I does not experience the You; the You encounters⁴ the I (Buber 55, 62). The You is unsubsumable, unbounded, and unanalyzable. Whereas the things of the It-world appear as if “constructed of their qualities” and possible to be broken down into parts and pieces (Buber 81), the I of relation encounters the You in its wholeness. This does not mean that, to use Buber’s example, I do not see the leaves, roots, and greenness of the tree before me, or forget the existence of its chemical processes. Rather, I no longer *pick out* an aspect on which to concentrate, no longer perceive it as an amalgamation of aspects. All its particularities are “included and inseparably fused” (Buber 58). This indivisible wholeness of the You mirrors and, Buber suggests, is only possible by the I’s “essential deed”: the entering into relationship with one’s “whole being.” “The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You” (Buber 62).

Thus we arrive at two of Buber’s key points: “Relation is reciprocity” (67); and

personhood is constituted by relation. Buber conceives of reciprocity as fundamental to the encounter because standing in relation occurs only when the I gives itself over entirely, withholds no part of its being, and is met by a You that opens itself in the same way. Neither partner can force the encounter to happen, and yet each depends upon the other’s entering into relation to be acknowledged as a whole being. The I cannot seek the You, for it cannot find, possess, or take hold of a You as it does an object, as a means rather than an end in itself (Buber 62). It is this very absence of an object that allows Buber to situate the emergence of personhood within the relation: “The I of the basic I-You appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity”—*not* as subject (112). For while an I never exists outside one of the two modes of existence, the I, in a primordial sense, *first* realizes its own existence as a distinct being in encountering a You: the I as person is irreducible, just as the You is. Only after the emergence of the I in this way does its detachment from the You, its removal from relation, and thus the mode of I-It become possible. Once split from the reciprocity of the You, the I becomes conscious of itself as subject, as “the carrier of sensations and the environment as their object” (Buber 73-74). We return to the basic word pairs’ fundamental difference: experience is ‘in’ the I as ego, while relation is *between* the I as person and the You of the world (Buber 56).

Singularity pertains to the encounter with a You.⁵ Buber distinguishes three different “spheres in which the world of relation arises”: with nature, with human beings, and with “spiritual beings,” which he conceives of as invoking the creation of art (56-57). It lies

⁴ Buber at times also uses (what Kaufmann translates as) “confrontation” or “confronts” to speak of what occurs in the I-You. However, I will consistently use “encounter” in order to emphasize the unforced or unexpected nature of the I-You relation, and to deemphasize connotations of conflict or aggression.

⁵ There is an explicitly theological dimension to the relation with the You Buber develops with the idea of the eternal You in the third part of *I and Thou*. For the purposes of this essay, I will bracket this part of his account, as the salient points remain applicable without it.

outside the scope of this essay to determine the merits and shortcomings of these distinctions, but, while each has its peculiarities, they share an essential structure that is of primary interest here.⁶ In an encounter, the “power of exclusiveness has seized me” (Buber 58). Not only does a being’s specific features fuse into a wholeness, but, in that moment, this being has primacy over all. It ceases to be a thing among things. “You has no borders” (Buber 55); it shapes the contours of the world. The You is “neighborless and seamless [...] Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in *his* light” (Buber 59). Other beings and material objects continue to exist; but so intensely and intimately does this being, having become my You, call upon me, that it compels me not merely to concentrate my whole attention, but to *give* my being in its entirety to this communion. This constitutes the foundation of reciprocity—“My You acts on me as I act on it” (Buber 67). Buber lists such seemingly evident examples as students teaching teachers and creative works forming their artists, but trite they are not (67). For underlying each, we find a mutual influence and affirmation of existence which extends from me to the structurally privileged being before me, and from this being to me.

The elements of exclusiveness and mutual acting-upon emerge as features of the structural basis of the encounter: the ideas of the present, presence, and actuality. Buber remarks that the You “appears in space” and “in time,” but unlike the It which is confined or caught up in the fabric of these dimensions (81). Rather, as noted, the You is spatially ‘unbounded,’ in that its presence and exclusiveness turns all else into a background. Even more essentially,

⁶ Buber himself does not seem to intend for his brief elaboration of each to establish a divide in *kind*, but rather to suggest the possible variations of how an encounter may be lived, which can be cross-referenced to illuminate what is singular about the relation with the You.

the You appears in time, but in that of a process that is fulfilled in itself—a process lived through not as a piece that is a part of a constant and organized sequence but in a ‘duration’ whose purely intensive dimension can be determined only by starting from the You. It appears simultaneously as acting on and as acted upon, as, in its reciprocity with the I, the beginning and end of the event. (Buber 81)

The You rounds the limits of the moment from the inside. For human beings, the encounter gives time its shape and tenor. Buber’s conception fundamentally opposes the notion of a linear time composed of and able to be broken down into infinitely small points. The present is not a brief dot on a calculable time line. ‘Present’ names what is most *real*, what is most intensely lived. It exists only *because* encounter and relation do (Buber 63). The presence of the You establishes the present (Buber 63). The two are not identical, but they are inseparable. For Buber, presence is not fleeting, nor simply standing still, “but what confronts us, waiting and enduring” (64). In this way, the You liberates the notion of the present from its sense of ephemerality. When I stand in relation, the eternal marks the present of this moment. “What is essential is lived in the present, objects in the past,” for they “consist in having been” (Buber 64). The It-world resides solely in the past, for an object never addresses me; the I as ego has already subsumed and processed it. It retains no presence, and thus no actuality.⁷ “Whoever stands in relation, participates in an actuality; that is, in a being that is neither merely a part of him nor merely outside him” (Buber 113). Actuality draws together the present, presence, and the essential act of

⁷ Kaufmann notes in the prologue: “Buber’s persistent association of *Wirklichkeit* with *wirken* can be carried over into English to some extent by using ‘actuality’ for the former (saving ‘reality’ for the rare instances when he uses *Realität*) and ‘act,’ in a variety of ways, for the verb” (45-46).

entering-into-relation: it is life as lived in the moment of encounter, when the I as ego does not subjugate or brush up against something in the world, but the I as person exists *with* what it encounters, not as idea or abstraction, but *in itself*—the You “confronts me bodily” (Buber 58).

Reciprocity as central to subjectivity emerges as the key points of overlap between Buber and Merleau-Ponty. There exists a reciprocity between human being and world, that involves a mutual acting upon such that it is both active and passive at once (touching/touched, seeing/seen for Merleau-Ponty; entering into relation as an action of choosing and being chosen for Buber [62]). This reciprocal relation constitutes subjectivity: for Buber, it specifically based in the I-You encounter; for Merleau-Ponty, the human being as embodied understands himself only in relation to things in the world. And although Buber does not explore embodiment itself, he underscores the I-You encounter as one of bodily confrontation. The notion is not physical, but is steeped in the idea of actuality, with its emphasis on presence. “What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself” (Buber 59). I encounter an *actual world*—the visible, sensible world, in the parlance of Merleau-Ponty—not a Cartesian or idealist world of images or appearances in the mind.

The import for the painter is this: what he restores to the visible in painting *is* the relation in the moment of encounter with the You. The relation is the invisible, for it is always what is *between* him and something in the world which in the encounter appears as wholly *other* than object. For, as Buber says, in this moment, I *have* nothing, but I stand in relation (55); the painter does not possess an object, mental or physical, but encounters and is encountered by that which he cannot subsume, which he must live in its wholeness and fullness. “Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er

does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens onto the world,” a line from Merleau-Ponty which echoes Buber (Merleau-Ponty 124): “All actuality is an activity in which I participate without being able to appropriate it” (Buber 113). In the moment when something has become a You, the question of mastery disappears. Art is neither a graphic rendering of space and objects, nor an overflow of ‘pure subjectivity’ into materiality. What the painter does is express this relation to the You in painting.⁸ No one line, color, figure, or contrast of the painting conveys this, and neither do any sets of compositional techniques or practices. It is not schematic. We cannot divide the relation into parts; in the same way, the painter does not perform a “translation” of it, as if the lived relation were a foreign tongue to be translated into the language of the visual. The painter does not translate. He *responds*. Merleau-Ponty’s “system of equivalences” as a “nonconceptual presentation of universal Being” then refers to just this language of the visual, as the mode through which we as human beings make sense of Being, and the way by which we can enter and access the realm of the You again. Relation resists any on-to-one correspondence; rather, the painting as a *whole*—its brushstrokes, its color, its vibrancy, its lightness or darkness,

⁸ To me it seems that both (1) the instigating moment and (2) the creation of the work can be I-You encounters. By (1), I refer to a moment before the painter begins a project, which afterwards compels him to paint, or to which he returns to in memory at a later date. That is, a moment of relation need not be immediately followed by painting, but painting always seeks to express a relation. By (2), I refer to each time a painter returns to work on a painting, as that duration itself being an encounter. The specificities of (2), and the connection between (1) and (2) would require further elaboration; however, I do not propose here a full structural account. My main point is to establish the painter’s work as expressing a relation to the something in the world in Buber’s sense, whether that be the painter’s meeting of Being in the visible akin to (1), or a combination of (1) and (2).

together—conveys relation. In painting, the way the world is seen reveals the way it is related to.

Thus embodiment, vision, and the painter's individuality are central to the creative act. Buber writes: "He listens to that which grows, to the way of Being in the world, not in order to be carried along by it but rather in order to actualize it in the manner in which it, needing him, wants to be actualized by him—with human spirit and human deed, with human life and human death" (109). Although Buber is referring more generally to the "free man," his description applies equally well to the painter. Buber accords a primary significance to our humanity. We as human beings hold a special relationship to Being, which we live particularly in the moments when something ceases to be part of the It-world. In the context of Merleau-Ponty's account, this is inseparable from our embodiment. We return to the idea that the painter paints *as* a human being, because embodied. What this means, specifically, is that "the painter's gaze asks them [light, lighting, shadows, reflections, color] what they do to suddenly cause something to be and to be this thing, what they do to compose this talisman of a world, to make us see the visible" (Merleau-Ponty 128). Merleau-Ponty in fact uses "vision" to mean more than basic perceptual seeing (which he calls "profane vision"), as this passage already attests to: for these 'objects' (light, etc.) exist only in the visual field, and they are not "ordinarily seen" (128). He extends this idea of the not-ordinarily-seen to include the invisible: "This voracious vision, reaching beyond the "visual givens," opens upon a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or the caesurae" (127). Thus the painter's vision, learned and not immediately given, remains sensitive to what is most fundamental about the human condition. If one of the deepest mysteries is *that* there is a world at all, the painter's interrogation of the visible, and particularly of those intangible aspects which

make the visible world a world for us (light, color, etc.), reflects at the same time an exploration of our very access to Being, in all its dimensions. These we never experience discretely, but find an opening to in encounter. The painter's particular individuality, as a person, informs *his* relation to the world, and how *he* will live each specific encounter with a You, and thus his painting will contain and convey this singularity.

What does this entail for the spectator? If vision is a way of seeing the world, meant in its profoundest sense as already a way of standing in relation, then to see a painting is to open onto a new mode of being. The painting itself, once actualized, becomes a part of the It-world: "That which confronts me is fulfilled through the encounter through which it enters into the world of things in order to remain incessantly effective, incessantly It—but also infinitely able to become again a You, enchanting and inspiring," Buber says specifically about artworks (66). Thus the painting does not necessarily remain an object, in the structural sense. I approach it, stand before it. Suddenly, it opens itself up to me and I am drawn into the world of the painter. "Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it" (Merleau-Ponty 126). It ceases to be a subject-object experience; it is, in one way, a revelation. It opens for me new possibilities. It gifts me the painter's particular vision. If this vision resonates with me, I take on this new mode of being in the world, which can increase my access to Being; and perhaps I find myself more in the existential orientation of the I-You, and thus more in encounter. None of this is to suggest, however, that the painting itself functions merely as a lens into this, the painter's, mode of being, that it rests solely as a means to be discarded once the end is attained. *Its* particularity and material existence remain important. For it, too, can become a You for me. The painting addresses me, makes a claim upon me; it seems that I stand in relation to the

meanings imbued in it. Perhaps it is just this encounter with the painting itself which renders available the second, deeper layer—the artist’s vision, the expression of his relation. Thus, for the spectator, a painting both brings to light a new way of seeing, and so a different way of being, and can be the You in a moment of encounter.

Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty’s account of painting in “Eye and Mind” aims to consider how art reveals and brings us closer to Being. He undermines the notion that art is artifice, copy, or imitation. The painter seeks to convey in his work nothing less than his way of seeing the world, which is to say: his way of being in the world. Painting expresses the moment of relation, when the painter encounters something as a You: ineffably, exclusively, in its wholeness, and as that which inflects time. If, as Buber holds, the I-You relation constitutes the foundation of personhood, in expressing this, painting returns us to the very roots of subjectivity—and so, for Merleau-Ponty, to our embodiment. Embodied being, the painter roves his eye over the world until something latches, and he is caught in a relation in which the world touches him, and he touches it. The world having traced itself invisibly in him, his own hands restore for us the unseen possibility of a real relation to Being in the language of the visual.

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