MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND JEAN-LUC NANCY: A SHARED CONCERN ABOUT RETROSPECTION AT THE ART MUSEUM

A thesis submitted to Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

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August, 2011
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Gina Zavota, for her guidance, patience, constructive criticism and support throughout this project. I appreciate the time and effort Gina put in to help me get through this process. I am also thankful for her teaching abilities and the vast range of philosophical knowledge she provided for me. I hope to inherit her skills of teaching difficult material in a very clear way. I am also thankful for Dr. Jeffrey Wattles, Dr. David Odell-Scott and Dr. Kumar Navjotika for offering me helpful feedback and advice with regard to my thesis topic. I am especially grateful for Dahlia Guzman. Dahlia was always available to offer helpful advice during the time I spent to write this, and I am glad to have asked her for it. Dahlia is a fantastic listener and a wonderful friend. I appreciate the support she has provided for me. I send thanks to Zac Purdue, Mary Riley, April Contway, Christine Cleary and Elaine Blum for their wonderful amount of support and friendship. I am grateful for my family and friends, for their love, support and willingness to allow me the needed space to fulfill this project. Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to Dr. Benjamin Cordry. As a second year student at Lorain County Community College, I knew I was curious about philosophy; however, I did not know how long my curiosity would last. After I experienced Dr. Cordry teach an Introduction to Ethics course, I knew philosophy would continue to play a significant role in my life. His style of teaching combined well crafted lectures with a great sense of humor. He gave life and energy to philosophy. I am forever indebted to him.
INTRODUCTION

Throughout his prolific and unfortunately short philosophical career, Maurice Merleau-Ponty was very interested in the production of art. He was fascinated by the work of artists such as Cézanne, Klee, Matisse, da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Rodin, among others. Artists such as these, according to Merleau-Ponty, have provided interesting insights with regard to the interrogation of vision, touch, depth, color, light, shadow, and so on. In “Eye and Mind”, for example, he writes, “The painter, whatever he is, while he is painting practices a magical theory of vision…(It makes no difference if he does not paint from “nature”; he paints, in any case, because he has seen, because the world has at least once emblazoned in him the ciphers of the visible” (EM166). Indeed, his work on the vision of the painter is certainly worth tending to, as many have. However, I seek to focus on what Merleau-Ponty had to say about museums, which is a topic he wrote very little on.

Merleau-Ponty does provide a very brief critique of Art Museums in his essay, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”. Although there are only a few pages of insight, I find them thought provoking, particularly because they are so negative. This came to me as a surprise because Merleau-Ponty was very interested in the history of art. He writes, “…painting exists first of all in each painter who works, and it is there in a pure state, whereas the Museum compromises it with the somber pleasures of
retrospection” (ILVS 62). Here, Merleau-Ponty expresses a difference between the artists at work versus the presentation of work at the museum. The work of an artist evokes the pure state of painting, whereas the museum makes art appear as something only to look back on. This difference between work and its presentation attracted me to learn more about Merleau-Ponty’s take on Art Museums.

After reading this essay several times, I believe he was not entirely expressing a negative attitude on museums. Instead, I believe he was concerned that museum visitors, particularly non-artists, would encounter artworks as though they were all meant to end up there. In this way, furthermore, art becomes a thing of the past because it has reached its endpoint at the museum.

Merleau-Ponty does not want visitors to encounter art this way. Instead, he asserts that visitors should encounter art at the museum in a different way. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “One should go to the Museum as the painters go there, in the sober joy of work; and not as we go there, with a somewhat spurious reverence” (ILVS 62). Therefore, with this short but crucial statement, Merleau-Ponty explains a problem and a desired solution. He explains a problem with retrospection at the museum, and then asserts that non-artists should go to the museum in the sober joy of work. But while Merleau-Ponty explains a problem and a desired solution, he does not provide us with a way for non-artists to view artworks at the museum, in the sober joy of work. Now this is where Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy becomes important.

After reading his book, The Inoperative Community, I desired to include Jean-Luc Nancy in this project. Although he does not explain Art Museums in this text, he does
criticize retrospection in a way that connects with Merleau-Ponty. Referring to the concept of community, Nancy asserts that human beings should become suspicious of retrospection because it provokes people to look back on past communities as though they represented a perfect ideal. In other words, retrospection often makes the past better than it actually was. As a result, people feel as though something integral about the concept of community has been lost in relation to present communal practices. In this retrospective recognition of loss, people continuously attempt to retrieve a perfect ideal from the past back to the present. However, Nancy asserts that community has never actualized its essence. Instead, it is because community lacks a perfect ideal that provides the possibility for community. According to Ian James, in his book, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy*, for Nancy:

> …community is not and never has been possible on the basis of an intimate and totalized sharing of an essence or identity, which might be lost, ruptured, or dispersed and that we might long to regain. Rather community is possible, in the first instance and on a primordial level, only as a kind of rupturing or dispersion, which is itself constitutive of the sharing or communication proper to the being-in-common of the communal…In this sense the loss of intimacy, immanence, or plenitude is not something which “happens” to community in a move from archaic to modern forms of collective social organization; rather, this loss of intimacy has always already happened, and it is only on this basis that something like community can occur… (James 176).

Nancy makes this point himself when he asserts, “What this community has “lost”—the immanence and the intimacy of a communion—is lost only in the sense that such a “loss” is constitutive of “community” itself” (*IC* 12). Through Nancy’s suspicion of retrospection, as the loss of a shared essence or perfect ideal, I believe he resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s problem with retrospection. Merleau-Ponty and Nancy both deal with
retrospection with regard to the notion of loss. Merleau-Ponty is concerned with retrospection because it loses the artist at work. Nancy is concerned with retrospection because it assumes the loss of a perfect ideal.

In Nancy’s book, *The Muses*, a collection of essays on aesthetics, he introduces the notion of art as a vestige, which I believe helps solve Merleau-Ponty’s problem. The vestige is exemplified as a set of footprints which show a human form was passing through. However, it does not show who made the footprints. Nancy connects the vestige with the notion that art is continuously passing through. Art does not reach an end, but rather, it keeps on going because artists continue to create more artworks. Nancy’s notion of the vestige invites viewers to take an active part in the art works. When we view artworks, we should put ourselves in the shoes of the artist, so to speak. We should follow the footprints of what the artists have left behind. In this way, we can encounter artworks as though we were repeating the prospective touch of the artist. Therefore, if museum visitors, particularly non-artists, view art as a collection of footprints to follow, then this will encourage art to be viewed in the sober joy of work.

In chapter one, I begin by summarizing the ideas conveyed in Merleau-Ponty’s essay, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”. Then, I introduce and expand the notion of retrospection at the Art Museum. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty did not explicitly explain components of retrospection in his philosophy; however, I will introduce my own to help establish what retrospection means with regard to the museum. Subsequently, I introduce the difference, according to Merleau-Ponty, between artists and non-artists encountering art at the museum. On the one hand, artists work prospectively, which
means they look forward to the desired completion of a painting. On the other hand, non-artists encounter art at the museum as a collection of relinquished efforts. Museums present artworks because artists have eventually stopped touching the media prospectively. These differences, between artist at work and presented work, are important for recognizing the problem Merleau-Ponty had with retrospection, particularly with non-artists experiencing art at the museum.

In chapter two, I analyze Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the true milieu of art. It is my contention that, although Merleau-Ponty was very interested in the artist at work, I believe he also considered the museum as a significant contribution to the true milieu of art. In other words, the true milieu of art, for Merleau-Ponty, is both inside and outside the museum. This is significant for my project because it provides the possibility for non-artists to view art the way artists do; in the sober joy of work, rather than with a somewhat spurious reverence.

In chapter three, I will examine how Nancy connects with Merleau-Ponty’s concern for retrospection in a different way. Nancy is concerned that retrospection leads people to reflect on the loss of a perfect ideal. Then, I will move on to discuss his critique of Hegel’s definition of art, taken from Hegel. According to Hegel, art is the sensible presentation of the Idea. However, for Nancy, at the moment an artist makes something sensible, the Idea necessarily withdraws. Sense and idea are contradictory. So rather than thinking of art as the sensible presentation of the Idea, Nancy introduces the notion of art as a vestige. The vestige of art provides a way to think of art as a collection of footprints. This encourages an understanding that art has not lost a perfect ideal. It
also shows how the cumulative tradition of art is not progressing, but rather, it is always in passage. The museum, therefore, presents art passing through rather than the accumulating progress of art.

In the last chapter, I plan to use Nancy’s notion of the vestige of art as a way for museum visitors, particularly non-artists, to view art in the sober joy of work.
CHAPTER I

MERLEAU-PONTY ON RETROSPECTION AT THE ART MUSEUM

We visit the art museum to encounter art works. Many of us are drawn in with a curiosity to spend time studying artistic creations from the past. Or maybe we are just looking for something to do while spending time with others. Regardless of the reason, we go to be entertained by the many contributions of artistic creation.

In this section, I will explore what Merleau-Ponty means when he states that the museum presents a retrospective consciousness. I will begin by describing the main factor involved in relation to retrospection at the museum: the artist parting ways with the effort. Then, I will analyze what retrospection means for the museum. Although the components of retrospection do not explicitly come from Merleau-Ponty’s words, I am going to analyze Merleau-Ponty’s idea of retrospection more thoroughly. My main goal is to explain how retrospection affects art once the artist parts ways with their creation.

MAIN THEMES IN “INDIRECT LANGUAGE AND THE VOICES OF SILENCE”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, during the middle period of his philosophy career (early to mid 1950s), spent some time thinking and writing about the Art Museum. His aesthetic essay, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” includes interesting
reflections about art museums. The essay was published in 1952 in the famous *Les Temps Modernes*, and in 1960, it was published as the lead essay in Merleau-Ponty’s collection of essays entitled *Signs*. The essay was also edited to be issued as the third chapter to an incomplete and abandoned book called *The Prose of the World*. Interestingly, this essay was Merleau-Ponty’s final submission into *Les Temps Modernes*. My fascination with the essay is strictly focused on his analysis of Art Museums.

The essay begins with an examination of Saussure’s structural linguistics. Structural linguistics is a school of thought primarily focused on the understanding of language as a collective structure. Structural linguistics recognizes the importance of divergence in order for words to be integrated into meaningful language. For example, the word “wet” would not be clearly understood without its negation, “dry”. Both words are opposites yet they depend on each other in order to function properly in a language. Ferdinand de Saussure, generally known as the father of structural linguistics, highly emphasized this in his posthumous 1916 course lecture notes called *Course in General Linguistics*. For Saussure, language functions through the activity of divergence.

Saussure’s linguistics involves a differentiation between the sound image, as “signifier”, and the thought/concept as “signified”. For example, if I see a cat, point and shriek, “Cat!” my friend, sitting across from me, would respond to the effect of “Yes. This is our new cat. We just bought her yesterday.” The audible word expressed, C-A-T, is the signifier and the conceptual recognition of the word is the signified. Most importantly, however, according to Saussure, the relationship between the signifier

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1 (Johnson) p.77.
(C-A-T) and the signified (concept) is arbitrary. Therefore, with language, there is no necessary connection between signifier and signified.

Indeed, because signs are differentiated from each other, a meaning may be acquired. Merleau-Ponty proceeds to discuss how language would never be fulfilled if someone had to think of every possible word before saying it. Rather, we must eliminate a large portion of word options, and then, choose from a select few. For example, if I ask my friend, “What day of the week is today?” My friend would then eliminate many responses down to seven options, and then answer, “Wednesday.”

Merleau-Ponty also examines the aesthetic ideas of the French writer André Malraux. Malraux, according to Merleau-Ponty, differentiated classical art as creations that were directed to objective faith or beauty, and modern art as a turn to subjectivism. Merleau-Ponty, however, believed Malraux’ analysis was “on tenuous grounds”. According to Merleau-Ponty, “…if “objective” painting is itself a creation, the fact that modern painting seeks to be a creation no longer provides any reasons for interpreting it as a passage to the subjective and a ceremony glorifying the individual” (ILVS 50). For Merleau-Ponty, defining classical art as the attainment of creation and modern art as the search for creation does not suffice to establish a turn toward subjectivism. Merleau-Ponty is also critical of Malraux with regard to history. This will be examined later on in this chapter.

Merleau-Ponty’s primary aim, in this essay, was to connect Saussure’s ideas on language to painting. With respect to Saussure’s linguistics, he wrote, “If this account is true, the writer’s act of expression is not very different from the painter’s” (ILVS 45).
The artist cannot think of every possible choice before painting. Surely, there are choice options; but if an artist pondered over every possible option, then it would be difficult for the artist to get any work done. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty wanted to draw a similarity between the activity of language and the activity of creating a work of art. Painting “…presents itself as an abortive effort to say something which still remains to be said” (ILVS 79). Whether one speaks, writes, or paints, human beings are always left with more to articulate. Artistic expression, in other words, always slips away from a full and complete articulation. Indeed, the notion that we cannot arrive at a complete articulation does not designate artistic expression as meaningless. Expression is always in development and meaning manifests from each attempt to express.

**RETROSPECTION AT THE MUSEUM**

Every museum has a collection of works that attract viewers to come. Viewers go to the museum to see art that could not be seen anywhere else. New acquisitions, for example, are exciting for museums because they attract viewers to visit. Potential viewers, who seek to find a reason to go to a museum, learn about particular works that may attract a visit. Often, people inquire about what a museum contains before visiting. Surely, it would be difficult to explain the entire collection of art. As a result, museums usually promote their more popular art works. Look up information about Art Museums on the internet, for example. At the Toledo Art Museum, they promote paintings by Edward Hopper, Vincent Van Gogh, an impressive collection of religious art, and so on. Without works such as these, a trip to the Toledo Museum of Art would not be quite as special. Hence, because these works are hung on their walls, they create an experience of
a museum that differentiates from experiencing art at other museums. For viewers, furthermore, the museum is an experience of a plurality of art. One may experience art collections from Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, Italy, The United States, etc. This aspect of the Museum is beneficial for individuals who want to learn about art from multiple areas of the world.

The museum presents evidence from the artist’s touch applied to a medium. The artist must touch something in order for the museum to present it. The touch may be the painters application of paint onto canvas, a photographer’s touch of the button to snap a photo, the sculptor chiseling away at a sculpture, the cameraman’s touch of the record button, and so on. The effort for the work of art to come necessitates some kind of touch; however, viewers at the museum usually do not witness the touch as it takes place. Rather, we observe the results of the touch. The Art Museum is an institution that presents what is left behind from the many applications of touch.

According to Merleau-Ponty, “…the Museum…brings to painting a consciousness of itself which is always retrospective” (ILVS 59). Although he only noted painting here, this quote could work with any form of art. The Museum brings to art a consciousness of itself which is always retrospective. The art museum is an institution for the preservation and presentation of art; its main goal is to allow viewers a chance to observe art.

Before thinking about specific factors of retrospection at the Art Museum it is important to ask: what is retrospection? In the essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, Merleau-Ponty wrote: “…the business of history is to discover, behind
“Parliament under the *ancien régime*” or “the French Revolution,” what they really signify in the dynamics of human relations and what modulation of these relations they represent…” (ILVS 61). Retrospection seeks to understand the signification of historic events. Retrospection means reviewing past events in the present; it is a conscious ability human beings have to analyze the past and acquire a current understanding of it. Indeed, retrospection is significant because it allows individuals to recognize artistic history. Retrospection certainly does not only exist at the Art Museum. The newspaper, for example, presents a retrospection of news stories going on during a particular day or week. Readers interact retrospectively in order to express facts and opinions on events. This is not to say that retrospection is enabled because the events of the past have been expressed and no longer present problems in the present. Sometimes, Art Museums will present current works of art. Works may be presented at the museum no matter how long ago they were left behind by the artist. All the museum needs are efforts that were, at some time, relinquished by the artist(s). This means that the artist has left something behind: evidence of touch. In so doing, the museum, by merely presenting works of art to viewers, enables retrospection to take place.

**EXPERIENCING THE ART MUSEUM FOR ARTISTS AND NON-ARTISTS**

Merleau-Ponty asserts a difference between the way artists and non-artists encounter artworks at the museum. He writes, “One should go to the Museum as the painters go there, in the sober joy of work, and not as we go there, with a somewhat spurious reverence” (ILVS 62). According to Merleau-Ponty, retrospection, at the museum, is the recognition of the history of art which viewers look back on.
Retrospection enables viewers to observe a collection of relinquished efforts. Artworks are collected, preserved, and presented at the museum for viewers to observe them today. Although the museum enables all sorts of people to interact with art, there is a difference, Merleau-Ponty asserts, between the way artists and non-artists interact with art. Indeed, retrospection stimulates human beings to appreciate art in many different ways. On the one hand, non-artists visit the museum to appreciate and recognize artworks that have been left behind. On the other hand, artists observe artworks as potential inspiration to create new works.

Experiencing the Art Museum is wonderful because museums are not open only to artists. It would be hard to imagine a successful museum that only presented works of art to visiting artists. Museums primarily present art to individuals, who do not paint, sculpt, make movies, snap photographs, and so on. People often simply want to experience the history of art. The museum allows this experience to happen. The museum is a success because it presents artworks for anyone to observe.

When I walk inside a room at the museum, and encounter paintings by twentieth century surrealists (Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, etc), as a non-artist, who entered the room with a desire to observe art, I do not recognize retrospection as potential inspiration for producing a painting, sculpture, photograph, film, and so on. Instead, I observe the works of art to learn something about the history of art. I want to visit the museum to find works of art that interest me, stimulate my thoughts, and enable me to appreciate why going to the Museum is a beneficial experience. The museum provides a retrospection of artistic creation, and as a result, I desire to experience and appreciate it.
Therefore, the Museum, to a non-artist like me, is an educational experience. After the visit, I hope to have enjoyed the presentation of art, and as a result, I carry on with the activities of my life. I do not go home from the museum to begin painting; rather, I go home with the positive feeling that I have experienced a collection of art that interested me.

The artist visits the museum with similar intentions as the non-artist: to experience the history of art. The artist acknowledges the collection of art as potential inspiration for future works; thus, it is a consciousness of looking backward in order to move forward. Indeed, in order for a painter to even begin to paint, they must necessarily be educated by a history of art. The artist may learn how to paint because they have experienced paintings before. Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), for example, was one particular painter who influenced the Post-Impressionist artist Maurice Utrillo. Pissarro was an Impressionist painter who enjoyed painting rural landscapes of France. Many of his paintings present a peaceful view of rural villages, boating docks, and inner city views. Maurice Utrillo (1883-1955), having been born over fifty years after Pissarro was, experienced Pissarro’s paintings at some point during his life. He may have witnessed Pissarro’s work at a museum or an art studio; in either case, Utrillo experienced a number of works left behind (Pissarro and a number of other artists). Therefore, Utrillo learned new techniques of painting and sought to exercise his experiences toward his own works to come. In this way, referring to Merleau-Ponty’s quotation, Utrillo encountered artworks in the sober joy of work.
Once Utrillo began to paint his landscapes of the streets of Montmartre, France, however, it is necessary that he encountered art in terms of looking backward and looking forward. Utrillo inherited the many techniques he learned from other artists, and as a result, he sought to use them to construct new images. Utrillo’s techniques manifest from the history of art. He used the techniques of others to influence his own works. Utrillo was impacted by retrospection to stimulate a prospective vision of looking forward: creating new works. So even during all of Utrillo’s fascination with a painter such as Pissarro, in order for the former to paint, he must have separated himself from the perspective of retrospection. Artists would never get anything done if they were always looking backward. Therefore, the artist looks backward to be motivated to look forward. The artist, in other words, encounters retrospection to produce a prospective effort.

For Utrillo’s work to be presented at the museum, it is necessary for him to have parted ways with it. Utrillo no longer stares at the painting with a brush and color palette in his hand; it has been relinquished. The relinquished effort enables the museum to present the work, retrospectively. Retrospection, as a looking backward, means the individual recognizes the history of art as something that has happened. The non-artist, who observes a painting by Maurice Utrillo, does not examine the art and think about how to use its influence to create a new work. The non-artist, in other words, recognizes art as an artifact of the past. The artist, on the other hand, recognizes art as the potential to stimulate future work. Consequently, although the Art Museum presents a retrospection of art, it is appreciated in different ways.

THE ARTIST’S PROSPECTIVE EFFORT
According to Merleau-Ponty, “By transforming efforts into “works,” the Museum makes a history of painting possible” (ILVS 62). Any work of art at the museum must be preceded by the effort of the artist. The work is the relinquished effort presented to viewers. Merleau-Ponty discusses the effort of the artist in his aesthetic essays, particularly in “Cézanne’s Doubt”. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Expressing what exists is an endless task” (CD 15). Cézanne is an example of a painter who made efforts to express what exists. He labored for long periods of time wondering how he would use his next brush stroke on the canvas. Indeed, there were multiple options for Cézanne to take while painting. The painter seeks to act out on the best choice possible. He may have chosen to use a blue color with a thicker brush or a red color with a thinner paintbrush. The artist picks and chooses to apply what will create a desired image.

As the choices continue to manifest, a painting begins to take form. The act of artistic expression is always in development. Even an artist’s conception of future works is something that goes through many different modifications which lead to its execution as a form. Merleau-Ponty writes, “There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was something rather than nothing to be said” (CD 19). The painter continues to choose and adapt to a number of possible choices while working. Therefore, the painter’s labor is a prospective activity, of looking forward in order to construct an image. A painter’s work shows that something was articulated rather than nothing. Moreover, what a painter articulates is not fully signified because there is always something more to paint. The creation of art encourages further development rather than the idea of something being
fully articulated. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “Painting [involves] a flickering signification, which is not articulated, which does not go so far as saying itself (and for all the more reason, does not say life)” (Institution and Passivity 50). The artistic effort is always an attempt to fully signify a desired end. However, instead of fully attaining the expression of a desired image, the artist works toward a satisfactory stopping point. The potential to work prospectively is always an option for the artist. However, once an effort has been relinquished, then the artist has pulled away from it.

Even when artists hesitate before applying another coat of paint onto the surface, they still work, prospectively. Painters may second guess what they are doing and analyze what they have applied to the canvas thus far. The reasons for doing so are to make sure the prospective vision remains adequate to continue on working. So while the artist may pause and look backward, it is only in order to continue looking forward to the next brushstroke.

Merleau-Ponty also discusses counterfeit art. He uses an example of someone counterfeiting a painting that would be considered “a Vermeer”. A counterfeiter attempts to reproduce the original work of an artist. Merleau-Ponty makes an interesting point about counterfeiting a Vermeer painting:

…such counterfeiting is impossible: one cannot spontaneously paint like Vermeer after centuries of other painting have gone by and the meaning of the problem of painting itself has changed. But the fact that a painting has been copied in secret by one of our contemporaries qualifies him as a counterfeiter only to the extent that it prevents him from truly reproducing the style of Vermeer (ILVS 61).

The artist, like Vermeer, is attached to a particular time and place. Johan Vermeer lived from 1632-1675. If someone decided to counterfeit one of his paintings,
they could not sufficiently do so because the problem of painting, as Merleau-Ponty put it, has changed over the years. Vermeer lived during a time when his style of painting was able to be produced. To be more precise, Vermeer was the only artist who was ever able to create “a Vermeer” painting because he was the only one who lived his own life. Although an artist may create a work that resonates with many of Vermeer’s techniques, only Vermeer himself can create a Vermeer. Therefore, counterfeiting is impossible because no one can live the life of an artist.

Merleau-Ponty understands the painter as:

…a certain speech in the discourse of painting which echoes from the past and future to the exact degree that it does not look for them, and because he is linked to all other attempts to the exact degree that he busies himself resolutely with his world (ILVS 62).

The painter’s gesture to paint echoes those who have painted previously. Painting is an act that can be traced back many centuries. Painting is also a gesture that looks forward; it is in continuous development in the quest to express what exists. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty wrote, “History looks toward the past only because the painter first looked toward the work to come; there is a fraternity of painters in death only because they live the same problem” (ILVS 62). The fraternity of painters inherits a history of painting while looking toward the work to come. In other words, painters look backward in order to continue looking forward.

THE RELINQUISHED EFFORT

At some point during the creative process, the idea of not working overwhelms working. On the one hand, work is a prospective touch. On the other hand, withdrawing
from touch is either the hesitation to continue working or the relinquishing of work. Indeed, creation is a balance between touch and lack of touch. But during the artistic creation, the artist hesitates to touch not because they have given up on creation, but rather, they halt their work, momentarily, in order to think of the best way to continue working, the best way to touch the medium again.

The artist is always on the brink of committing themselves to no longer touching the canvas with paint, the chisel onto the stone, the flash button on the camera, and so on. Thus, there is a prospective goal to eventually pull away from touch. The artist who continues does so because of prospection; they see something about an effort that still needs to be done. There is a further brush stroke that needs to be applied, a further cracking of stone that needs to be applied, a further need to relocate in order to snap a photograph, and so on. The prospective refraining from touch, in other words, is still part of an artistic effort. Something remains to be articulated, and the artists hesitate and gather themselves in order to figure out the best way to continue on.

At some point, however, the effort is finally relinquished. The relinquishment occurs when the artist no longer desires to further touch the medium (the canvas, for example). Therefore, an artist no longer flirts with the effort, prospectively. What happens when the artist relinquishes from the effort? It is the end of prospective touch. Touching a medium gives rise to the possibility of touching more. Touching is always on the brink of letting go, of pulling away forever. The artist must embrace one or the other. As long as the artist keeps touching, the prospective effort continues. But once they pull away from the effort, never to return to prospectively touch it again, the effort becomes
the evidence of touch that has been left behind, relinquished. As a consequence, however, the work may become an object for retrospection, to the point where it touches the vision of viewers at the museum. In this way, retrospection becomes possible.

COMPONENTS OF RETROSPECTION AT THE ART MUSEUM

While Merleau-Ponty did not do so, I believe it would help to discuss the components of retrospection to heighten our understanding of what he is getting at. In my view, retrospection, as expressed by the museum, requires four things: the artist parting ways with the effort, a place for the effort to be observed (in our analysis, the museum), visitors to view the retired effort, and finally, other works of art that allow a history of painting to become possible at the museum.

Each work of art, at some necessary moment, was relinquished by the artist in order for the museum to present it. When I visit the Toledo Museum of Art, for example, and find a painting by Matisse hanging on a wall inside a room, my vision of this painting would not take place in the museum without Matisse’s relinquished effort. The Art Museum succeeds because of artistic relinquishment, whether it occurs as the artist’s satisfaction with the effort as complete or in the artist’s unsatisfied gesture of giving up on it. Therefore, the Art Museum exists as a result of separation between the medium and the artist’s touch.

Merleau-Ponty wrote: “…painting exists first of all in each painter who works, and it is there in a pure state, whereas the Museum compromises it with the somber pleasures of retrospection” (ILVS 62). What is the pure state that only the artist can encounter? It is the work to come, the effort in progress which will one day become the
completed work. A work is a relinquished effort. The goal of an artist’s effort is to eventually relinquish that effort. At the moment of this relinquishment, the artist surrenders the ability to touch the canvas prospectively. The relinquishment enables the museum to present the work retrospectively. In effect, a pure state (the prospective touch) is forfeited in favor of retrospection. Like a graveyard, people visit the Museum to look back on the history of art, that is, to encounter and reflect on what has been left behind. The notion of the museum as a graveyard will be discussed later on in this project.

Secondly, in order for retrospection to manifest, the relinquished efforts need a place to be presented. Certainly, retrospection may be something we encounter in many different places. In our case, however, we will strictly focus on the museum as retrospection. The Art Museum is a place human beings visit to encounter artworks. Moreover, the museum is a place that distributes knowledge. I have the ability to learn more about art beyond just staring at it. Artworks are often presented with additional information printed next to them. Some museums provide visitors with a set of headphones to listen to a historian speak about works of art. Museums also provide art historians to guide groups of visitors throughout the rooms, describing a number of artworks, so visitors can view art while also interacting with others who have studied the works for many years. Indeed, without place, it would be hard to imagine a retrospective presentation of art for people to interact with.

Thirdly, retrospection needs viewers. How would the museum be recognized as retrospective without viewers entering the museum to witness the works of art? The
museum needs people to look back on the artworks. The museum provides a history of art for those who visit. Without viewers, the museum serves no purpose.

Finally retrospection at the museum requires a plurality of art works. The museum is organized to present many different forms of art. This is why the Art Museum is a collection of art works rather than the presentation of a single art work. In this way, viewers may differentiate styles in relation to each other. Indeed, without the significance of plurality, there would be no sense of history.

The relinquished efforts and place (museum) set the table, so to speak, for retrospection, and the spectator enables retrospective consciousness to flourish. Retrospection, therefore, encourages human beings to recognize the history of art.

Retrospection celebrates relinquished efforts. There would be no museum without the artist leaving behind an effort. In a sense, the Art Museum wants the artist to leave behind the work rather than to continue working on it. If the artist always continued to work, then the museum would not have the ability to present. The museum celebrates the fact that, at some point, the artist finally pulled away from the prospective touch.

By retrospection, we attempt to understand the history and meaning of the work: what led the artist to develop the prospective effort, the ways in which it may have inspired new efforts, and so on. Retrospection also enables viewers to understand the significance of the work and the life of the artist who created it. Therefore, retrospection attempts to react against the artist’s silence by looking back, historically, and analyzing how the work came to be articulated as such. In the next chapter, I will explain how
Merleau-Ponty recognizes the role historicity plays in the Art Museum as retrospection. Then, I will analyze why Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the true milieu of art includes what is inside and outside the Art Museum.
CHAPTER II

MERLEAU-PONTY ON THE TRUE MILIEU OF ART

INTRODUCTION: ART HISTORICITIES

In his short passage about museums in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty briefly mentions two historicities with regard to art. Merleau-Ponty writes:

There are thus two historicities. [The linear] is ironic or even derisory, and made of misinterpretations, for each age struggles against the others as against aliens by imposing its concerns and perspectives upon them. This history is forgetfulness rather than memory; it is dismemberment, ignorance, externality. But the [cumulative] history, without which the first would be impossible, is constituted and reconstituted step by step by the interest which bears us toward that which is not us and by that life which the past, in a continuous exchange, brings to us and finds in us, and which it continues to lead in each painter who revives, recaptures, and renews the entire undertaking of painting in each new work (ILVS 60).

The two historicities Merleau-Ponty explains are the linear and the cumulative. I adopt these terms from Gary Brent Madison, in his book, The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness (p. 90). To better understand what Merleau-Ponty is getting at, I will first explain cumulative historicity, and then linear historicity. These terms will be used in connection with Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of painting.

Cumulative historicity is the entire history of painting. Therefore, when an artist paints, an entire tradition is necessarily recaptured. Cumulative historicity makes linear
While cumulative historicity *recaptures* the tradition of painting, linear historicity *transforms* it. With the notion of transformation, linear historicity can be associated with creativity and development. Creativity attempts to push art in new directions. Linear historicity manifests due to a forgetting of cumulative historicity. The artist gets caught up in his or her desire to create a work that has never been made before. Salvador Dali, for example, was caught up in his own desire to create surrealist paintings, sculptures, and films. He was attempting to create new art forms by using new techniques. Indeed, Dali was influenced by a number of painters; however, his drive to create manifested from an ignorance of cumulative historicity. By simply picking up his brush, and applying paint to a medium, Dali recaptured the entire tradition of painting. But Dali wanted to create something new; he wanted to *transform* painting, not merely recapture it. Therefore, in an attempt to point art into a new direction, Dali became forgetful of cumulative historicity, and as a result, embraced linear historicity. Indeed, linear historicity would not be possible without cumulative historicity because there needs to be a tradition before anyone can begin to transform it. Nevertheless, Dali was more concerned with developing something new rather than recapturing the old.

In regards to cumulative and linear historicity, Merleau-Ponty sums it up well in this passage:

…if expression recreates and transforms, the same was already true of times preceding ours and even of our perception of the world before painting, since that perception already marked things with the trace of human elaboration. The productions of the past, which are the data of our
time, themselves went beyond anterior productions towards a future which we are, and in this sense called for (among others) the metamorphosis which we impose upon them (ILVS 59).

Merleau-Ponty provides an interesting view of the historicities of art. Every gesture to paint recreates all the others which preceded it. Moreover, when an artist paints, there is an ignorance of the cumulative history of art because the artist is concerned with expressing something new that has never been presented before. This is linear historicity, and hence, the transition from recapturing to transforming artistic expression.

How does the idea of cumulative and linear historicity connect with the presentation of art at the museum? The historicities help provide an understanding of why the museum is not the only place where artworks become united. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “The unity of painting does not exist in the Museum alone; it exists in that single task which all painters are confronted with and which makes the situation such that one day they will be comparable in the Museum…” (ILVS 60). Therefore, although the museum unites the works into a collection of art for visitors to view, the efforts that manifested were not entirely isolated from each other before being brought together in the museum. Every work necessarily recaptures a historic tradition, which has provided the opportunity for artists to continue developing painting, sculpture, flash photographs, filmmaking, and so on. For André Malraux, however, cumulative historicity does not unite artists because they all recapture the tradition of art; rather, cumulative history manifests because each artwork opposes each other.
According to Malraux, while the gesture of painting opposes recapturing the history of an entire tradition, the museum brings the oppositions together to form a unity. For example, Eugéne Delacroix and Dominique Ingres were rival French Romantic painters during the mid nineteenth century. According to Malraux, both painters would be highly opposed to their work being presented alongside each other at the museum. In this way, the museum makes rivals into allies by uniting their works at the museum. Cumulative historicity, in other words, unites artists who opposed each other. However, according to Merleau-Ponty:

For him, reconciliation takes place only in death, and it is always in retrospect that one perceives the single problem to which rival paintings are responding and which makes them contemporaneous. But if the problem were really not already present and operative in the painters…what could the Museum of the future derive it from? (ILVS 60-61).

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Malraux for recognizing the museum as the place where artworks are brought together to form a unity. Merleau-Ponty insists that the gesture to paint is necessarily associated with the entire tradition of painting. This is a unity that transpires even before the works are presented at the museum. Indeed, the museum unites a collection of art within a particular place; however, we must rid ourselves of the idea that the museum is what gives art unity in the first place.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to write, “History looks toward the past only because the painter first looked toward the work to come; there is a fraternity of painters in death only because they live the same problem” (ILVS 62). Every painter works towards completing an effort. The gesture to paint, therefore, recaptures the notion that every artist has lived the same problem. In other words, every artist begins from a new canvas.
The process of creating a work is the same for each artist: to take a new canvas, touch the canvas with paint, and then relinquish from the canvas. Merleau-Ponty appears to suggest here that the museum fails to recognize the cumulative history of painting in terms of the work to come. He writes, “…our consciousness of painting as painting is based upon the Museum. But painting exists first of all in each painter who works, and it is there in a pure state, whereas the Museum compromises it with the somber pleasures of retrospection” (ILVS 62). Merleau-Ponty is suspicious of retrospection because it makes art appear as though it is only something to contemplate. He is against the notion that contemplation is what initially unites art. Therefore, when the museum presents art, we lose sight of the cumulative history of work that gives life to it. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is work that recaptures an entire tradition of painting, not contemplation. As a result, the museum, as retrospection, promotes the contemplation of art as the act that manifests unity. So retrospection substitutes contemplation for work, as the cumulative historicity of artistic expression.

In the following section, I plan to examine Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of this substitution. Merleau-Ponty expresses criticism of the museum as the place where work is transformed into contemplation; that is, he is concerned that the museum transforms an artist’s efforts of chance circumstances into works that were destined to end up there.

**MERLEAU-PONTY ON THE TRUE MILIEU OF ART**

As visitors to the Art Museum, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> The Museum gives us a thieves’ conscience. We occasionally sense that these works were not after all intended to end up between these morose walls, for the pleasure of Sunday strollers or Monday “intellectuals.” We
are well aware that something has been lost and that this self-communion with the dead is not the true *milieu* of art—that so many joys and sorrows, so much anger, and so many labors were not *destined* to reflect one day the Museum’s mournful light (ILVS 62).

This passage expresses the museum as a self-communion with the dead. The dead are the relinquished efforts that no longer encourage the artists to continue working on them. Merleau-Ponty then goes on to say “…this self-communion with the dead is not the true *milieu* of art…” (ILVS 62). According to Galen Johnson, in his book, *The Retrieval of the Beautiful: Thinking through Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics*, “Merleau-Ponty argued for an expressive theory of art [that]…focuses on the artist’s working rather than the works that appear in museums and galleries…” (Johnson 17). The true milieu of art is the artist at work, which happens *outside* the museum. But it is my contention that Merleau-Ponty also sought to include the encounter of artworks at the museum as the true milieu of art as well. Merleau-Ponty was not asserting that the true milieu of art is strictly outside the museum. Instead, he was saying that *if* we view art at the museum in this way, then we will not be encountering art in its true milieu. He mentions artists as those who *are* able to “…go to the Museum…in the sober joy of work” (ILVS 62). Then, he expresses a desire for non-artists to view art at the museum in the same way, when he writes, “One should go to the Museum as the painters go there…” (ILVS 62).

My argument is this: While Johnson believes Merleau-Ponty did not focus on an expressive theory of art *inside* the museum, I believe there is a way to use Merleau-Ponty to say the museum *is* a positive contribution to the milieu of art. He wants us to think of the museum in a different way. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty wants the true milieu of art to be both *outside and inside* the Art Museum.
To make this point clear, my plan is to examine Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetic essays (“Cézanne’s Doubt”, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, “Eye and Mind”). These essays provide insight into the idea that, for Merleau-Ponty, the milieu of art includes the encounter of artworks at the museum.

For Merleau-Ponty, the museum visitor has the ability to recognize that the collection was not entirely meant to end up there. He explains that the visitor encounters art at the museum with a “thieves’ conscience”. This means the viewer may be aware that art was taken out of its context and presented at the museum. The viewer may also recognize that the collection was not intended to merely please a select group of visitors, such as Sunday strollers or Monday intellectuals. Most importantly, however, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the viewer recognizes that something has been lost. The artworks are no longer joined with the artist working on them. Hence, what is lost is the painter’s prospective effort. What we view at the museum, therefore, is the painter’s relinquished effort. So while there remains something left behind, there is a loss of the artist at work.

Merleau-Ponty eloquently associates this loss with death. The museum presents the death of prospective efforts. Indeed, most often, works of art at the museum will never be returned to the artist to work on them again. Merleau-Ponty goes on to write, “…this self-communion with the dead is not the true milieu of art…” (ILVS 62.). The idea of the self-communion with the dead renders the museum as a graveyard. Viewers walk by artworks in contemplation of a life that once guided the work to be made. The life is the artist at work. As museum visitors, we do not witness the prospective touch as
it happens; rather, we witness a collection of *evidence* that suggests prospective touch happened.

One would suppose, then, that the true milieu of art is *not* the contemplation of artworks at the museum, but rather, it is the activity of work. Referring to artists, Merleau-Ponty writes, “Perhaps, finally, they have a truer and more vital feeling for the history of art when they carry it on in their work than when they make “art lovers” of themselves in order to contemplate it in the Museum” (ILVS 62). Again, this point alludes to the notion that the true milieu of art resides *outside* of the museum. He associates “art lovers” as those who only view artworks contemplatively. Further artworks would not be made if artists only looked back on art. Artists contribute to the history of art *because* they carry it on in their work. Being too much of an art lover, according to Merleau-Ponty, may encourage the artist *not* to work prospectively.

Each artwork provides evidence of artists who have recaptured the entire history of artworks. This idea alludes to cumulative historicity, discussed in the first chapter. The artist necessarily inherits an entire tradition of painting in order to contribute to it. Without this necessary contribution, the work would not be presented at the museum. Of course, we do not encounter the entire cumulative history of art at the museum; however, we view a sufficient amount of it for a visit. Furthermore, we are able to assume that there is more art to be experienced outside the museum. As Merleau-Ponty indicated, visitors may view art with a thieves’ conscience. We are aware that art was not made to end up at the museum. There is more art to be experienced outside the museum. Therefore, the museum presents a portion of the cumulative historicity of art.
The museum also presents evidence of the linear historicity of art. Each artist worked to create something new within the tradition of art. As viewers, we are able to encounter the development of art over the centuries. The viewer may visit a room with Greek pottery from the fifth century B.C.E., and then enter another room with American art from the nineteenth century. Both the Greek and American works contribute to the entire tradition of art while also showing how artistic techniques have been transformed over the years. Therefore, the museum presents evidence of a collection of art that has recaptured and transformed the tradition.

The missing link between “art lovers” and artists, according to Merleau-Ponty, is work. While the museum presents evidence of cumulative and linear historicities, the viewer does not become forgetful of cumulative historicity in an attempt to develop it. Merleau-Ponty recognizes the museum as a place that provides a history of painting. However, in so doing, the museum transforms the milieu of art, from the progress of work to the contemplation of work left behind. He writes, “The Museum adds a false prestige to the true value of the works by detaching them from the chance circumstances they arose from and making us believe that the artists hand was guided from the start by fate” (ILVS 62). Merleau-Ponty is critical of the museum because it presents artworks as though they were all intended to be presented there. He writes, “...so many joys and sorrows, so much anger, and so many labors were not destined to reflect one day the Museum’s mournful light” (ILVS 62). Here again, Merleau-Ponty refers to the museum as a graveyard; it is a place where visitors view artworks no longer being worked on.
Merleau-Ponty expresses the museum as the transformation from an artists’ chance circumstances to making viewers believe that the artists were guided to work by fate. Certainly, some artists are commissioned to create works that are intended to end up somewhere. However, Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that the museum makes viewers think every work was intended to end up there. Fate means that when an artist paints, all of her efforts are guided to be presented at the museum. In other words, fate attaches an effort to a cosmic force that guides it to the museum. In opposition to the notion that an artist’s prospective touch is guided to end up at the museum, Merleau-Ponty believes art manifests from chance circumstances. An artist may paint something out of anger, joy, social and political reasons, religious affinities, and so on. These are some of the chance circumstances Merleau-Ponty is talking about. Something attracts the artist to paint. If I am on vacation near the Blue Ridge Mountains, for example, the joy of viewing the mountains may serve as the set of circumstances which attract me to paint. My painting was not guided by a fate to be presented at a museum. Instead, I was merely responding to my circumstances. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty is critical of the museum because it transforms chance circumstances into a collection of works guided from the start by fate.

Merleau-Ponty asserts that the museum transforms the historicity of life into a historicity of death. The historicity of life is the notion of work. The historicity of death is art in retrospect. At the museum, art is no longer relevant as work. Instead, it becomes relevant as a thing of the past, as something to contemplate. Merleau-Ponty continues:

It is the historicity of death. And there is the historicity which lives in the painter at work when with a single gesture he links the tradition that he recaptures and the tradition that he founds...instead of reconciling them insofar as they are all finished and like so many futile gestures (ILVS 63).
For the viewer, the development of art appears to end when it is hung up on a wall at the museum. However, Merleau-Ponty recognizes artists as those who are able to keep art from remaining within a historicity of death. Artists, such as Cézanne, often visited the Louvre in search for an inspiration to work. The collection may motivate artists to try new techniques. For non-artist visitors, according to Merleau-Ponty, we are liable to view art at the museum as the historicity of death. As a result, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the museum because it presents art as something only to look back on.

While we, as visitors, may not view art to be influenced to create new works, we are able to contemplate the artist at work. This will be emphasized more in chapter four. When art is viewed at the museum, people desire to learn about what circumstances involved in the process of its creation. When I look at Käthe Kollwitz’s black and white art print, *Uprising*, for example, I think about the emotional connection Kollwitz had with social injustice during her time of living. The art print depicts a group of people, gathered together, and moving in a tirade toward the right side of the picture. The clothes of each individual are torn up, which indicate impoverished conditions. According to the description of the art print, presented at the Brooklyn Museum, it is a “...testament to the suffering of Berlin’s disenfranchised populations during the Weimar period and the rise of fascism.”\(^2\) As a result, when I learn about the history surrounding the work of art, I reflect on the passion Kollwitz had for the poverty-stricken people. The art print evokes a very emotional scene of social injustice that somehow influenced Kollwitz to create it.

Indeed, without circumstances, it would be difficult to imagine the artist making an effort to create a particular work.

In Merleau-Ponty’s 1938 essay, “Cézanne's Doubt”, he analyses a viewer’s desire to associate a work of art with the life of the artist. According to Merleau-Ponty, referring to Cézanne, although it is certain that an artist’s life “…does not explain his work, it is equally certain that the two are connected. The truth is that this work to be done called for this life” (CD 20). In the case of Kollwitz’ art print, Uprising, the life that Kollwitz was living enabled the work of art to be produced. Indeed, it is necessary for an artist to live a particular life in order for artistic attempts to manifest. However, the meaning of a work of art is not entirely tied to the life of the artist. Indeed, meaning manifests; however, it is never fully signified because there is always more to interrogate about an artwork. Merleau-Ponty reflects on the painter presenting a work for others to experience. Painting must involve the notion that other human beings will experience it. Merleau-Ponty writes:

It is not enough for a painter like Cézanne, an artist, or a philosopher, to create and express an idea; they must also awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others (CD 19).

As a result, the artwork is influenced by both the life of the artist and the many different interpretations people recognize about a work. Expression necessarily involves the participation of others. While the works are not all destined to end up at the museum, they are made to be encountered by others. This helps show that Merleau-Ponty recognizes the museum as a place that is significantly involved in the milieu of art. Furthermore, he writes, “The painter can do no more than construct an image; he must
wait for this image to come to life for other people” (CD 20). While the painter gives life to the constructed image, the museum presents the image to be brought to life for other people. The painting is evidence of the artist’s productivity. But the relinquished effort does not kill away the life of the work. Finally, in “Eye and Mind”, the last work Merleau-Ponty published before his death, he writes, “The “world’s instant” that Cézanne wanted to paint, an instant long since passed away, is still thrown at us by his paintings” (EM 169). Cézanne’s instant of painting is still shown to viewers. Indeed, the instant of Cézanne at work is forever passed away; however, viewers may witness what that instant has left behind. Therefore, although the artist no longer touches the canvas, it may touch those who view it at a museum.

In this way, the museum is not outside the milieu of art. Artworks are necessarily attached to work and the eventual contemplation of the work by others. Although the artist may no longer work prospectively to the painting, visitors may bring new life to the work when it is viewed and interpreted at the museum. As Merleau-Ponty writes, in his essay, “Eye and Mind”:

As for the history of art works, if they are great, the sense we give to them later on has issued from them. It is the work itself that has opened the field from which it appears in another light. It changes itself and becomes what follows; the interminable reinterpretations to which it is legitimately susceptible change it only in itself (EM 179).

Merleau-Ponty, therefore, recognizes the milieu of art as both inside and outside the museum. While artists leave behind a number of works, history interprets them in various ways over time. Works may take on a life of their own, so to speak. Merleau-Ponty writes, “History is retrospective, metamorphoses, and in this case painters do not
know what they are making” (Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France 1954-1955 p. 41). While the artist works, the viewers are able to contemplate its significance. The milieu of art concerns works shown in retrospect at the museum because viewers determine the importance of the work and the various interpretations of it as well.

Merleau-Ponty was aware that the interpretation of artworks changes over time. In other words, no one, not even the artist, can master an interpretation of a work. He writes, “…such a labor demands a long familiarity with history. We lack everything for its execution, both the competence and the place” (EM 179). In this recognition of interpreting artworks, which understands interpretation as something that cannot be fully signified, Merleau-Ponty continues:

…there is nothing wrong with letting a layman, speaking from his memory of a few paintings and books, tell us how painting enters into his reflections; how painting deposits in him a feeling of profound discordance, a feeling of mutation within the relations of man and Being (EM 179).

According to Merleau-Ponty, since mastering the history of art is impossible, anyone can contribute to it. So the museum is not a place for a select group of people, such as the Sunday strollers and Monday intellectuals. It is a place for anyone to encounter artistic expression in an attempt to understand it.

Certainly, Merleau-Ponty understands the actual expression of painting as something that occurs outside the museum. If artists become “art lovers,” by simply contemplating the history of art, then no works will be created. In other words, artists need to step outside the museum in order to continue transforming art through new
creations. But this does not entirely mean that the milieu of art remains outside the museum. Rather, artworks are created to be presented for others to encounter. Those who view the art, furthermore, continue modifying its interpretation. Therefore, retrospection continues the milieu of art; it does not kill it. While the artist no longer works on the works presented at the museum, I do not believe Merleau-Ponty viewed the museum as the historicity of death. Instead, I believe he was concerned that visitors, particularly non-artists, would encounter art at the museum as a communion with death, or rather, as the final resting place of art. He is worried that art will be viewed with complacency at the museum, as if walking through a graveyard to the remains of artistic expression. This view makes art irrelevant to visitors because it subordinates the history of art in continuous process to a history that is finished. Hence, visiting the museum would signify encountering artworks as a collection of remains for us to ponder. In other words, not only is the prospective touch of the artist lost but so is the future awareness of the continuous development of art.

Merleau-Ponty wants viewers to be aware that art is still alive and relevant today, even at the museum. We should not think of art as something to be confined inside, forever. Instead, we should be able to encounter art as an experience which enables us to recognize that art is still carrying on. In this way, art is a milieu inside and outside the museum walls.

Merleau-Ponty does not literally insist everyone to get out of the museum and start painting. Instead, he insists that art remain relevant for human beings today. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty recognizes a problem and a desired solution. First, he admits
that painters are able to visit the museum “…in the sober joy of work…” (ILVS 62). In other words, painters are able to recognize the milieu of art inside and outside the museum. Painters visit museums, contemplate the collection, and then express new forms of artistic expression through the activity of work. Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the non-artist viewer, however. His worry is that non-artists encounter art at the museum as though it were meant to end up there. He is concerned that viewers will encounter art at the museum as though walking through a retrospective graveyard. Merleau-Ponty wants the non-artist viewer to also encounter art in the sober joy of work. He explicitly refers to the non-artist when he writes, “One should go to the Museum as the painters go there, in the sober joy of work; and not as we go there, with a somewhat spurious reverence” (ILVS 62). Encountering art with a somewhat spurious reverence associates art with death; it recognizes an endpoint for art: the museum. This, however, encourages people to view art as a thing of the past. According to Merleau-Ponty, therefore, if visitors view art in the sober joy of work, then art will become relevant again; that is, it will become an activity that still lives because art continues to be made.

Jean-Luc Nancy shares a similar concern with retrospection, particularly with regard to the concept of community. But he also provides an interesting way to think about the concept of art. In Nancy’s collection of essays, The Muses, he introduces the notion of art as a vestige. After studying this essay, I believe the vestige provides Merleau-Ponty with a way for non-artists to view art in the sober joy of work. Therefore, we will now shift to examine the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy.
CHAPTER III

NANCY’S SUSPICION OF RETROSPECTION

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter analyzed the important idea that Merleau-Ponty sought to understand the true milieu of art being inside and outside the museum. As visitors to the museum, Merleau-Ponty writes, “We are well aware that something has been lost and that this self-communion with the dead is not the true milieu of art...” (ILVS 62). The artist at work is what is lost at the museum. We cannot go back in time to witness the artist working on a painting. But Merleau-Ponty does not want visitors to view art as a self-communion with the dead. Instead, there is still life to artworks, even at the museum. Although we cannot return to the artist at work, Merleau-Ponty has shown, particularly in “Cézanne’s Doubt” and “Eye and Mind,” that artworks are still provided with life through the experiences of others. Since artworks may awaken experiences in the consciousness of others, viewing them inside the museum contributes to the true milieu of art.

I believe Jean-Luc Nancy contributes to Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the museum as retrospection. Nancy takes Merleau-Ponty from retrospection, regarding the loss of the artist at work, to the viewers’ nostalgic loss of a perfect ideal. Furthermore, he provides an interesting idea about how to think about the meaning of art. Most importantly, however, Nancy’s philosophy can provide Merleau-Ponty with a way for
non-artists to view art at the museum in the sober joy of work, rather than with a somewhat spurious reverence (ILVS 62). This will be the focus for my final chapter.

The main layout for this chapter is first, to show how Nancy resonates with Merleau-Ponty on the notion that museums transform efforts of circumstance into works destined to end up there. Second, I plan to use Nancy to expand on the museum as retrospection. Third, I will introduce Nancy’s idea of art as a vestige.

**NANCY ON THE MUSEUM IN HEGEL’S “WORKS OF THE MUSE”**

The first thing to consider about the interesting similarity between Merleau-Ponty’s and Nancy’s aesthetic work is the idea that the Art Museum is liable to affirm itself as the fate of art. As we have examined in Merleau-Ponty’s writings, the museum is liable to make visitors believe the entire collection was made to end up there. In his collection of essays, *The Muses*, Jean-Luc Nancy touches on a similar idea. Referring to a quote by Hegel, Nancy explains the museum as the “friendly fate” of art. Nancy cites this quotation in the essay, “The Girl Who Succeeds the Muses”. Hegel writes:

> The works of the Muse now lack the power of the Spirit, for the Spirit has gained its certainty of itself from the crushing of gods and men. They have become what they are for us now—beautiful fruit already picked from the tree, which a friendly Fate has offered us, as a girl might set the fruit before us. There is neither the actual life in which they existed, nor the tree that bore them, nor the earth and elements which constituted their substance, nor the climate which gave them their peculiar character, nor the cycle of the changing seasons that governed the process of their growth. So Fate does not restore their world to us along with the works of antique Art, it gives not the spring and the summer of the ethical life in which they blossomed and ripened, but only the veiled recollection of that actual world (*The Muses* 45).[^3]

[^3]: This quotation is taken from *Phenomenology of Spirit* by G.W.F. Hegel, paragraph #753.
In this passage, from *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel reflects on the transition from classical art to romantic art. According to Ian James, in his book, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy*, “In the period of classical art spirit is manifest in the figures of the Greek gods” (James 208). Greek artworks represented the mythological gods. For Hegel, the Greeks combined the ideal with the sensuous. With regard to Hegel, James writes, “…art, as the unity of an ideal content and a sensuous form, is a dialectical resolution or conciliation of opposites: the Idea (God, universal morality, the sublime) on the one hand, and sensible, presentable form on the other” (James 207). For Hegel, since the Greeks combined the ideal with the sensuous, particularly in the form of statues, they presented perfect forms of art. According to James, there are two main aspects of Hegel’s understanding of art that influenced Nancy. First, “Hegel conceives of art as the unity of an ideal content and a sensuous form, that is, the presentation of universal spirit in an individualized and sensuously particularized configuration. Second, art, for Hegel, has a history” (James 207). We will return to Hegel’s first point later on in this chapter.

The period of classical art transitioned into romantic art. James writes:

The period of romantic art…is inaugurated by the Christian era, in which spirit, or God, has a concrete or incarnate form in the figure of Christ and a progressively more abstract spiritual depth in the respective figures of the Father and the Holy Ghost. Romantic art, then, seeks to embody a higher and more developed form of spirit than is found in its symbolic and classical precursors, yet at the same time loses the perfect correspondence between ideal content and sensuous form which was proper to classical art (James 208).

Romantic art, according to Jack Kaminsky’s book, *Hegel on Art: An Interpretation of Hegel’s Aesthetics*, “…emphasizes the divinity of individual man rather than a type, or
kind, which is so important for the classicist” (Kaminsky 88). Romantic art, therefore, sought to represent Christ as an embodied human being and as the divine.

Returning to Nancy, he writes about the difference between classical and romantic art. He says, “In religious terms, the moment preceding this moment is the religion of the divine that is simply present in the beautiful form, whereas the succeeding moment is the religion of the divine incarnate up to and including the death of the sensuous, perceptible manifestation” (The Muses 44). Furthermore, Nancy writes, “The preceding moment is the (technical) artistic moment of “form,” the succeeding moment is the no less artistic and technical moment of the form of the decomposition of merely formal presence” (The Muses 44). In this way, romantic art detached the spiritual life of the sensuous form, and as a result, created artworks as beginning “…its sublation into revealed religion” (The Muses 45).

With regard to Hegel’s passage on the Works of the Muse, he acknowledges that the museum does not present art in order for viewers to enter into the very life that gave birth to the works. The motivation for the museum to present the Works of the Muse, according to Hegel, is “…not in order to enter into their very life but only to possess an idea of them in our imagination” (PS paragraph #753). Therefore, visitors at the museum do not enter the life of the Works of the Muse, but rather, look back and contemplate the works. This idea promotes the notion of visitors viewing art as a self-communion with the dead, referring back to Merleau-Ponty. According to Nancy, Hegel’s passage expresses the idea that at the museum, the Works of the Muse “…are no longer presented except as “cadavers,” forever deprived of the divine life that animated them” (The Muses
46). For Nancy, however, “Entering into the museum, the works become properly "the works of the Muses’" ([The Muses] 46). Although art works at the museum are detached from the artists at work, this does not signify the museum as the presentation of the dead. Rather than letting a collection of art works disappear into history, the museum preserves the works for viewers to give new life to them.

Interestingly, Hegel illustrates the difference between the artist’s effort and the presented work as a tree that bears fruit. The tree is a metaphor for the artist, who is affected by the elements and, as a result, produces fruit. Without the earth and elements that encourage growth, fruit would not grow. When the circumstances of growth cause the tree to produce fruit, Hegel asserts that the girl takes the fruit and presents it to people. When she puts them into a basket, for example, she does not take the tree along with it. For the girl, the tree (artist) and the circumstances in which the fruit was grown no longer have much significance in relation to the fruit that has been grown. The fruit is the presented form. The painting is taken by the girl and, rather than allowing the fruit to wither away into the past, she assigns a fate to the fruit. The girl is the Art Museum. Hence, while the artist and the circumstances to create are no longer present, the sensible form that has been produced is preserved as the fate of the entire process. The girl presents art as though it were made to end up there. She assigns a fate to art at the expense of losing the significance of its circumstance.

Nancy associates the museum as the place “…that did not let what was surpassed pass away without also gathering up from it the element or the aspect of it that we still “enjoy,” or rather, by which we now properly take joy in this sensuous beauty as such”
The paintings that each artist created provide human beings with an offering of beauty and joy. Indeed, they may cause us to cry, become repulsed or be fearful. Museums enable visitors to experience a sense of history with regard to artistic expression. However, although the Museum preserves the fruits of the artist's labor, observers must be aware that not every artist created works with the intention that they would end up at a museum.

While Nancy does recognize the museum as detaching the notion of art at work, he does not regard the museum as a collection of cadavers. Artworks may enter into a new life through the experience of others. Therefore, Nancy agrees with Merleau-Ponty with the idea that visiting the museum should not be equated with walking through a graveyard.

In the next section, Nancy examines another problem with regard to retrospective consciousness: the notion of a lost ideal. This section will be used to expand Merleau-Ponty's analysis of retrospection in terms of losing the artist at work.

**NANCY ON THE RETROSPECTIVE NOSTALGIA OF A LOST ESSENCE**

While Merleau-Ponty explains retrospection with regard to the loss of the artist at work, Jean-Luc Nancy takes the analysis further. For Nancy, retrospection also leads people to assert the loss of a harmonious or ideal unity. In his book, *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy writes:

...we should become suspicious of the retrospective consciousness of the lost community and its identity (whether this consciousness conceives itself as effectively retrospective or whether, disregarding the realities of the past, it constructs images of this past for the sake of an ideal or a prospective vision). We should be suspicious of this consciousness first of
all because it seems to have accompanied the Western world from its very beginnings: at every moment in its history, the Occident has given itself over to the nostalgia for a more archaic community that has disappeared, and to deploring a loss of familiarity, fraternity, and conviviality (*IC* 10).

Indeed, Nancy is writing about the conception of community. Retrospective consciousness leads people to look back on the loss of a harmonious community. In other words, present community is not the way it used to be. Community used to be something harmonious, something that perfectly exemplified its essence. With this notion of retrospection, human beings attempt to regain or retrieve a lost essence. There are many examples of lost communities. As Nancy writes:

> The lost, or broken, community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways, by all kinds of paradigms: the natural family, the Athenian city, the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods—always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy (*IC* 9).

According to Nancy, community has never fully exemplified a harmonious unity. Rather, it is *because* community has always *lacked* a harmonious unity that provides the possibility for community to manifest. If community had exemplified a perfect model of unity, then community would be over. Community is possible because it lacks perfection. The problem with retrospection, therefore, is that it assumes there was once a perfect model that has been lost over the years. This idea connects with Nancy’s notion of the vestige of art, which will be analyzed later in this chapter.

While this project does not intend to analyze the concept of community, I believe Nancy’s suspicion of retrospection resonates with regard to the concept of art. Up to this
point, we have examined retrospection as looking back or contemplating the work left behind by a number of artists. To carry Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of retrospection further, Nancy shows that visitors at the museum become aware that something essential to the conception of art has been lost.

In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy shows that we should become suspicious of retrospection because it transforms the past into examples of a perfect ideal. He mentions many examples of community that have lead people to judge them as perfect ideal examples, such as the Roman Republic, the first Christian community, the Athenian city, and so on. Each example of community, according to Nancy, may certainly influence future communities; however, they do not represent a perfect ideal. In other words, according to Nancy, retrospective consciousness may attribute the past as something greater than it actually was. Indeed, history continues to be interpreted in many different ways. Nancy is not telling us to stop interpreting history; rather, he is telling us to stop associating the past with the capture of a perfect ideal that has been lost to us in the present.

A person who enjoys Vermeer paintings, for example, may visit a museum, point to a Vermeer painting, and assert, “That is what art should look like. To me, this painting defines the meaning of art.” For this viewer, art fully expresses itself in Vermeer’s work. However, everything else does not present the perfect form. Therefore, retrospection provokes this viewer to look back nostalgically at a perfect ideal that fails to be reproduced in contemporary works. The viewer desires the days of Vermeer, at work, to return. In this sense, although the museum preserves the essence of art, it remains there,
dead. In this way, the viewer visits the museum as a self-communion with the dead, as Merleau-Ponty wrote. If art had once exemplified a perfect presentation of its essence, then art was once complete. As a result, everything that follows must either imitate the ideal or contribute to the loss of the ideal. Nancy wants viewers to get rid of the notion that art had once captured its own essence. However, a question still remains. If art has never attained the presentation of its essence, then what have artworks presented instead?

To answer this question, we must primarily turn to Nancy’s book, *The Muses*.

Nancy concludes his collection of essays, *The Muses*, with an interesting essay called “The Vestige of Art”. This essay was presented at the Jeu de Paume, a Contemporary Art Museum in Paris, France. One of the discussions Nancy mentions in this essay is the debate concerning the question of art. The primary debate in contemporary art, according to Nancy, is whether or not today’s art should still be considered art. Many contemporary artworks and movements (Pop Art, Dada, Minimalism, etc.) have been judged with hostility and anger when they have been characterized as art. Human beings are often quick to judge Dada, for example, as a movement that makes no sufficient contribution to art. Many human beings assert that Dada is not art because it does not fit a supposed model of what art has always been. As a result, many who reject new movements and uses of new media would suggest the perfect presentation of art has been lost.

Nancy states that these debates are connected to the question concerning the essence of art. Some people are quick to reject contemporary art because it does not fit their understanding of art’s essence. What is that essence? Often, the response to this
question involves art works of the past, including paintings, sculptures, and so on. The development of new media angers those who feel art should only encompass a select number of media. However, new media are always being developed and always have been. As in the case of a perfect community, retrospective consciousness also occurs with regard to a perfect model of art. Nancy’s ideas help illuminate how retrospection often assumes there is a perfect essence of art that has been lost over time. However, Nancy claims, art has never perfectly presented its essence. Consequently, art continues on.

**NANCY’S CRITIQUE OF HEGEL’S DEFINITION OF ART**

Throughout *The Muses*, particularly in “The Vestige of Art”, Nancy examines the traditional Western definition of art, taken from Hegel: “...art is *the sensible presentation of the Idea*” (*The Muses* 88). This definition of art affirms its essence. Indeed, we can obviously understand the sensible presentation as the work itself (paintings, sculptures, photographs, and so on). But what does Hegel mean by the Idea? According to Nancy, “The Idea is the presentation to itself of being or the thing. It is thus its internal conformation and its visibility, or in other words, it is the thing itself as vision/envisioned...In this regard, art is the sensible visibility of this intelligible, that is, invisible, visibility” (*The Muses* 89). The Idea is the invisible made sensible.

According to Hegel, furthermore, “The idea must go outside itself in order to be itself” (*The Muses* 92). The Idea must be transformed into a sensible form in order for it to be affirmed as such. So the first point, regarding Hegel’s definition of art, is that the Idea must be transformed into something sensible. Hegel’s definition of art, therefore,
involves the relationship between the invisible and the visible. On the one hand, the Idea involves the invisible; it is the mental image that provokes the artist to paint or sculpt. When I imagine an open field of farm land during the autumn season, for example, I am interacting with the invisible. On the other hand, when I actually see an open field of farm land during the autumn season, I confront the visible. As a result, trying to express an idea on a canvas would be considered making the invisible visible. The invisible is transformed into the visible. This is the central point of Hegel’s definition of art.

Nancy then makes a second point, which he claims Hegel does not reach; namely that “...the Idea, in presenting itself, withdraws as Idea” (The Muses 92). Hegel’s definition of art relies on the presentation of the Idea. If the Idea is not presented into the sensible, according to Hegel, then there is no idea and there is no art. In other words, Art is the visible image of the invisible. The Idea is “invisible” and its sensible presentation is “visible”. According to Nancy, however, the Idea cannot be presented to the outside. The Idea is not what is made manifest to sense. Nancy writes, “...instead of finding itself again and returning to itself as the invisible ideality of the visible, the Idea effaces its ideality so as to be what it is— but what it “is,” by the same token, it is not and can no longer be” (The Muses 92). What it “is” (a sensible presentation) is something other than the Idea. The Idea cannot be made sensible, and cannot be sensed. In other words, the invisible cannot be visible because they both contradict each other.

Nancy believes Hegel’s definition of art is a theological one. He writes, “All this thinking is thus theological, turning obstinately around the great motif of “the visible image of the invisible God, which for Origen is the definition of Christ” (The Muses 89).
Then, after Nietzsche’s reflections on the death of God and nihilism, Nancy writes, people “...will be hasten to conclude: art is in perdition, because there is no longer any Idea to present, or because the artist no longer wants to do so (or else has lost the sense of the Idea)” (*The Muses* 90). As a result, people desire to rediscover a new way to think of the Idea.

Nancy does not resort to nihilism about the notion that there is no longer any Idea to present. In both definitions, art is fully signified. “If for Hegel art is finite because the Idea comes round to presenting itself in its proper element, in the philosophical concept, for the nihilist art finishes itself by presenting itself in its proper—and empty—concept” (*The Muses* 91). For Nancy, there is something else to resort to about art. Nancy writes, “In truth, the remarkable feature of many works today is not found in the lack of form or in deformity, in the disgusting or in the anything-whatsoever: it is, rather, in the quest, the desire, or the will for sense. People want to signify...” (*The Muses* 91).

Since art continues to be something people attempt to signify, Nancy introduces the notion of art as a vestige.

**THE VESTIGE OF ART**

According to Nancy, “In each of its gestures, art also sets in motion the question of its “being”: it quests after its own trace. Perhaps it always has with itself a relation of vestige—and of investigation” (*The Muses* 83). For Nancy, art has been nothing other than a vestige, that is, an accumulation of sensible forms that have never affirmed the essence of art. Each effort to produce something sensible lacks the perfect model of art’s
essence. Yet, it is because art lacks a concrete example from which all efforts derive, and which they all imitate, that art is able to continue rather than end.

Nancy traces the word “vestige” or “vestigial” to Aquinas: “...the vestige is an effect that represents only the causality of the cause, but not its form” (The Muses 95).

There are two examples of the vestige that Nancy takes from Aquinas: smoke and footprints. Smoke does not represent the form of fire. Rather, it designates a trace of this form. Smoke is evidence of the existence of a form, insofar as fire causes smoke. The second example is footprints in the snow. The footprints are evidence that a person once passed through; however, it does not express the form of the person. Footprints are the trace of a form: “human being”, for example. Referring back to the passage, smoke and footprints represent the causality of the cause (fire and a human being, respectively), but they do not represent the form itself. In the case of the footprint, the vestige is both the remains of a step as well as an evidence of a passage.

According to Nancy, art has always been a vestige. No effort to express something through a medium has ever successfully presented the perfect model of art. Instead, what it does present, speaking metaphorically, is a set of footprints. The footprints acknowledge a tracing back to the past as well as a passing through to the future. No painting, sculpture, photograph, and so on, has presented the essence of art. Every effort denotes the tracing of previous failed attempts at presenting a perfect model of art and a passage toward further attempts to do so. The vestige is the movement of art coming from a history that continues to move forward. The main idea is that art continues to move; it is not finished.
Nancy believes that art has always been a vestige. Each effort to present art is a stepping into the traces of another’s footprints. Artists are necessarily influenced by their predecessors, who were influenced by their predecessors, and so on. Each artwork leaves behind another footprint for others to step into, so to speak. Therefore, there has never been a perfect presentation of art that has been lost over time.

Nancy writes, “The vestigial is not an essence... it presents what is not “Idea”: motion, coming, passage, the going-on of coming-to-presence” (The Muses 98). The vestige is both the evidence of a step as well as a passage, and yet, it is always a coming-to-presence, always a step that is yet to be finished. Art will always lack a perfect presentation of its essence. But it is with this lack that continues to carry artistic expression forward.

I believe Merleau-Ponty’s art historicities can be equated to Nancy’s vestige of art. In the gesture of painting, artists recapture the entire tradition of painting (cumulative historicity). This gesture can be associated with stepping into the footprints of others. Moreover, the artist attempts to create something new, that is, to transform the tradition (linear historicity). The artist becomes ignorant of recapturing the tradition by trying to make new footprints. Cumulative and linear art historicities, therefore, connect with Nancy’s notion of art as a vestige. Artworks are a collection of footprints coming from somewhere and continuously moving forwards.

The last section of this chapter is entitled, “Art as the ‘Presentation of Presentation’”. Nancy does not view artworks as representational. Instead, he believes
artworks initiate the experience of sense. We will now move on to examine what this means.

ART AS THE ‘PRESENTATION OF PRESENTATION’

According to Alison Ross, in her book *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy: Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy*, Nancy:

posits as the key features of the artwork (1) that it is a sensuous surface that opens sense as such and (2) that it is structurally incomplete (e.g., the artwork is always open to further elaboration). These two features combined qualify art, in Nancy’s words, to give a ‘presentation of presentation.’ Put in other words, art could be described as presenting out of sensible relations the genesis or process of meaning (Ross 153).

According to Ross’ understanding of Nancy, the artwork is both sensuous and never fully complete. Ross explains the combination of (1) and (2) as the ‘presentation of presentation’. In his essay, “Why are there Several Arts and not Just One?” Nancy writes:

The presentation of presentation is not a representation: it does not relate presentation to a subject for which or in which it would take place. The presentation of presentation relates to itself. Patency is related to itself...not so as to initiate infinite reflexivity...but rather so as to make appear, to make heard, felt, and touched...That presentation should touch itself, which is to say as well, that it should remain suspended in its passage, in its coming and going” (*The Muses* 34).

Art presents sensible content, not the Idea. Moreover, sensation is necessarily temporal and active. The art work opens us up to sense it. When I view a painting at the museum, for example, my vision comes and goes throughout the entire image. I gaze at the bottom of the painting, at the top, to the left, to the right, and to the center. The painting opens me up to the attraction of sensation. In his book, *The Sense of the World*, Nancy says,
“Art is merely that which takes as its theme and place the opening [frayage] of sense as such along sensuous surfaces” (SW 135). When an artist paints, she is withdrawing from the Idea by immersing herself in sensation. Art is not the Idea made present to sense. On the contrary, art is the Idea that withdraws with the manifestation of sense.

Further on in the essay “Why are there Several Arts and not Just One?” Nancy writes, “By touching on presentation itself…one does not penetrate a secret; one touches on obviousness, and the obviousness is such that one cannot be done with it…” (The Muses 36). My sensation of the painting is never complete. I may sense the work over and over again until I am exhausted and move on to other works that also open me up to sense. This means that sense is never complete. The same goes for the artist. The work of art is never fully complete. One may always return to it and paint more. Even if the artist feels as though they have presented everything they planned to present, she may still return to work at it at a later time. Therefore, art is a never ending passage of the manifestation of sense.

According to Ian James, in his book The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy, the idea of “the presentation of presentation” means “…the figurative form of the artwork figures only itself, only the act of figuration, and in so doing presents itself as a singular existence, having no meaning or signification other than the presentation of its own figure or form” (James 219). As a result, when the artist gestures to paint, the Idea withdraws with the opening up of sensation. Every brush stroke is part of the continuous coming and going of sensation. The work of art does not
entail signification beyond what is sensible (the form). In other words, the work of art is not the affirmation of the Idea, but rather, it is the affirmation of a form to be sensed.

The terms “vestige” and “presentation of presentation” serve the same purpose for Nancy: to counter Hegel’s account of art as the Idea manifesting into the sensible form. The artist parts ways with the Idea, so to speak, after every gesture that is made to create sensible form. Consequently, “…the meaning of the work of art is both inseparable from its sensible form or presentation and necessarily in excess of any fixed signification” (James 220). Art, as “the presentation of presentation”, means that it is the manifestation of sense. Moreover, as Alison Ross puts it, “…art could be described as presenting out of sensible relations the genesis or process of meaning” (Ross 153). Meaning is generated from sensation. The process of deriving meaning from an artwork, in other words, does not go beyond the sensible form. Meaning always coincides with sense; it is never attached to a signification that goes beyond the sensible form.

To sum up this chapter in two main points, Nancy is against the idea that there was once a perfect presentation of art. Art continues on because it has not successfully presented a perfect model. Retrospection is problematic, therefore, because it leads to the notion that there exists a perfect essence of art. The second point is that Hegel defined art as the sensible presentation of the Idea. The Idea is internal (invisible), and the sensible presentation is external (visible). According to Hegel, the Idea cannot be as such unless it becomes sensible. If the Idea does not manifest into the sensible, then the Idea is not an Idea. Art requires the Idea to necessarily be carried through to the sensible. Nancy, however, recognized that the Idea withdraws whenever it becomes sensible. In *The
Muses, Nancy wrote, “…the Idea effaces its ideality so as to be what it is—but what it “is,” by the same token, it is not and can no longer be” (The Muses 92). The invisible cannot affirm itself as invisible through the visible. The Idea necessarily withdraws when it is transformed into the sensible.

In my final chapter, I plan to incorporate Nancy’s analysis of the vestige of art to Merleau-Ponty’s desire for non-artists to view artworks at the museum in the sober joy of work. While Merleau-Ponty is concerned that visitors will view art as a self-communion with the dead, I believe Nancy provides a way to view art at the museum differently, that is, as a set of footprints to follow. In this way, the museum may be viewed as contributing to the life of artworks, not the preservation of its remains. In other words, the vestige will provide a way for viewers at the museum to follow the artists’ footprints instead of walking through a graveyard.
CHAPTER IV

THE MUSEUM AS THE PASSAGE OF ART

INTRODUCTION: MERLEAU-PONTY’S PROBLEM AND DESIRED SOLUTION

In his essay, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, Maurice Merleau-Ponty briefly characterizes the Art Museum as both beneficial and detrimental to art. On the one hand, the museum is beneficial because it provides a history of art to be preserved and witnessed by viewers every day. On the other hand, the museum is detrimental because it may lead people to think every work is made to end up there. With the notion of art ending up at the museum, retrospection merely looks backward (recognizing the past). Merleau-Ponty, however, does not want visitors to interact with art only as something to look back on. Rather, he wants visitors to view art in terms of looking forward (to be future-oriented) as well.

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty describes a problem and a desired solution, particularly with regard to non-artists encountering art at the museum. He writes:

…our consciousness of painting as painting is based upon the Museum. But painting exists first of all in each painter who works, and it is there in a pure state, whereas the Museum compromises it with the somber pleasures of retrospection. One should go to the Museum as the painters go there, in the sober joy of work and not as we go there, with a somewhat spurious reverence. We occasionally sense that these works were not after all intended to end up between these morose walls, for the pleasure of Sunday strollers or Monday “intellectuals”. We are well aware that something has been lost and that this self-communion with the dead is not
the true milieu of art—that so many joys and sorrows, so much anger, and so many labors were not destined to reflect one day the Museum’s mournful light (ILVS 62).

Merleau-Ponty’s problem is that people only view art historically. Art, according to Merleau-Ponty, should not merely be something to look back on. Instead, Merleau-Ponty wants museum visitors to encounter artworks as bidirectional, which means looking backward and looking forward. The visitor should encounter art as though there were still more work to be done. The museum should not be considered to be art’s endpoint. If one interacts with art only as a history lesson, then the museum may be more accurately considered as a graveyard for artworks: a place where the past is preserved for those to look back on today. This leads people to believe that art has attained its final resting place at the museum. Encountering a collection of paintings would be similar to encountering a collection of headstones under which the dead reside. The museum becomes the place where dead efforts reside. Indeed, the collection serves to educate viewers about history; however, if art is only something to look back on, then it holds no relevance as a breathing, living activity.

This is the problem of retrospection with which Merleau-Ponty wrestled. Retrospection is a mere looking backward; it is a journey through a collection of artifacts from the past. But Merleau-Ponty believes the encounter with art can and should provoke visitors to looking forward as well, particularly when he says, “One should go to the Museum as the painters go there, in the sober joy of work; and not as we go there, with a somewhat spurious reverence” (Ibid.). While Merleau-Ponty recognizes artists as those who can go to the museum in the sober joy of work, he is concerned that non-artists
do not. He does believe there is a way for non-artists to experience art in the sober joy of work; however, he does not explain how we can do so. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty explains a problem and presents a desired solution, but he does not lay the groundwork for reaching the desired solution: visitors encountering art at the museum in the sober joy of work. This is where Nancy’s vestige of art comes in.

Nancy’s notion of the vestige of art provides a solution to Merleau-Ponty’s problem, which I will explain in this chapter. Although Nancy does not explicitly write about the museum, his philosophy can provide an understanding of how non-artists can encounter art in the sober joy of work. Instead of looking at artworks as one would look at a collection of gravestones at a graveyard, Nancy encourages us to follow the footprints of the artists. He does not want us to just enter the museum, but rather, he wants us to enter the works, so to speak. Nancy wants visitors to encounter the artworks in a way that invites us to repeat the gestures of the artist at work. In other words, we should take an active part in the artworks. I believe Nancy’s idea of the vestige of art encourages museum visitors to encounter art in the sober joy of work. Therefore, I believe Nancy provides the bridge to get from Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of a problem to the illumination of a solution.

Before providing the solution, however, I believe we should examine what Nancy means by the history of art as passage rather than progress. I believe this will help understand how visitors can encounter artworks at the museum as a set of footprints to follow.

NANCY ON ART AS PASSAGE, NOT PROGRESS
In Nancy’s essay, “The Vestige of Art,” he writes:

…you have asked me to speak today, in the Jeu de Paume, in a museum—that is, in this strange place where art only passes: it remains there as passed/past, and it is just passing through there, among the sites of life and presence that perhaps, doubtless most often, it will never again rejoin. (But perhaps the museum is “not a place, but a history,” as Jean-Louis Déotte has put it, an ordering that gives rise to the passage as such, to the passing rather than to the past—which is the business of the vestige (The Muses 81-82).

Although this is the only explicit mention of museums in the essay, Nancy affirms the museum as a passage. As he writes, passage is the business of the vestige; therefore, we may understand the museum as the vestige of art. In the previous chapter, we characterized the vestige as a set of footprints. We do not know who created the footprints; all we know is that there was a form (e.g. human being) that was coming from somewhere and passing through. According to Nancy, “…the vestige bears witness to a step, a walk, a dance, or a leap, to a succession, an élan, a repercussion, a coming-and-going, a transire. It is not a ruin, which is the eroded remains of a presence; it is just a touch right at the ground” (The Muses 97). In this way, artworks are a collection of footprints. Each artwork exemplifies another step taken in the passage of art. However, according to Nancy, the steps are not contributing to the attainment of a perfect ideal. In other words, while artists certainly do recapture and transform the artistic tradition, art does not progress, but rather, it is a continuous passage. With regard to recapturing and transforming the tradition, Braque and Picasso, for example, were influenced by a number of artists who worked before them. These artists include Cézanne, Matisse, and André Derain, as well as an influence in the geometric configuration of African
sculptures. Many of these influences provoked Braque and Picasso to create something new, which came to be known as Cubism. Braque and Picasso, therefore, transformed the tradition of art.

Transforming art (linear history) would not be possible without cumulative history. Again, linear history is the artists’ forgetfulness of cumulative history in response to a desire to create something new. According to Nancy, every artist recaptures the tradition of art because the process of creation always manifests in the same way. The artist begins with a blank canvas, picks up a paint brush, applies paint to the canvas, and then finally, the work is relinquished. As a result, the process begins again and again. In this sense, every artist is doing the same thing. This is what is meant by passage. There is nothing new in the process of creating art. Ever since art has been produced, it has been done this way every time. Indeed, this is what Nancy understands by cumulative history. Every artist recaptures the tradition of art because the process to do so is always the same. However, the problem with cumulative history, according to Nancy, is the notion of progress. People often think that the tradition of art continues to progress. However, this view is mistaken because the process of creating works is always the same. Certainly, an artist does progress in a particular effort. There is progress for the artist to start at a zero point, create a work, and then relinquish from it. But there is no progress with regard to cumulative history because the progress of a particular begins over and over again. When the painter relinquishes from a particular effort, at a later time, she will decide to undergo the process of creation again. Therefore, according to Nancy, artists do not contribute to an accumulating progress of art. This
would provoke the notion that artists are getting better at producing artworks; that is, they are accumulating toward a perfect ideal.

Transforming the tradition involves the circumstances of the artist. In this regard, art may be transformed because artists always respond to a particular happening, which is unrepeatable. The circumstances of Picasso to create the work, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, in 1907, were different in relation to *La Vie*, which was created in 1903. While Picasso’s techniques for developing his painting changed over the years, the actual process to create remains the same. Picasso continued providing more passages in the creation of art. He sought to lay down footprints. But his artworks do not contribute to the progress of art because the footprints remain flat; they do not encourage an incline to an entire tradition of artistic creation.

According to Nancy, “…art has a history, it is perhaps history in a radical sense, that is, not progress but passage, succession, appearance, disappearance, event” (*The Muses* 86-87). For Nancy, every particular work offers perfection, that is, a completion of art. However, this is “Not perfection as final goal and term toward which one advances, but the perfection of a single thing inasmuch as it is formed, inasmuch as it is completely conformed to its being…Thus it is a perfection that is always in progress, but which admits no progression from one entelechy to another” (*The Muses* 87). Nancy admits that an artist creating a painting is a particular work of perfection. The progress made is the particular work being created in the process of start to finish. In other words, it is progress only within the framework of the continuous process of creating a work. So

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4 Nancy takes the term, “entelechy,” from Aristotle. It means, “…a being completed in its end, perfect” (*The Muses* 87).
the process of creation leaves behind another passage of art, but not the progression of art in a cumulative sense.

In this way, Nancy describes art as always “another art” (The Muses 87) because each work responds differently to a set of circumstances. Van Gogh’s paintings responded to a set of circumstances differently than Matisse’s paintings, for example. While a particular work is made with the goal of completion, it eventually encourages the same painter, or even a different painter, to pick up a paintbrush and complete another work. In other words, art is not complete, insofar as it provokes others to create new works over and over again. Indeed, this is why the museum is able to present a plurality of artworks. Each artwork contributes to the passage of art. The passage completes itself only to provoke the artist to start over again. Therefore, art continuously completes itself when the artist relinquishes from the work, and then art continuously disappears from completion when another work begins.

In this way, artists view artworks in the sober joy of work because each work provokes artists to begin the process again. There is a joy in this activity. It is the joy of engaging in the process of creation. Consequently, I also believe that viewing art in this way provides a way for non-artists to encounter art at the museum in the sober joy of work as well. This will be the main focus of the next section.

REPLACING GRAVEYARDS WITH FOOTPRINTS

While artists contribute to creating the vestige of art, non-artists may certainly follow it, in the sober joy of work. Viewers may approach a collection of artworks as a set of footprints. As museum visitors, therefore, we should take part in those who have
contributed to leaving behind a set of footprints. Art is *passing through* the museum. We should not think of the museum as the place where all works *end up* because art continues to inspire others to create new works. The museum is not a historicity of death because it shows how particular works have inspired others to create. What Nancy is saying is that *because* art is always coming to presence, we should not suggest it eventually ends the moment it is presented at the museum. Art continues to be on the move, unsettled. If we understand art in this way, then we will be encouraged to view the museum as a place where the history of art passes through, not the place where we look back at art, as one would walk through a graveyard.

Regarding art as a vestige provides a way for visitors to encounter art in the sober joy of work *because* art is a history that continues to be made. We can connect with the works as we do with footprints from human beings passing by. The artworks present to the viewer the notion that they were created from the touch of a human being. We, as human beings, can therefore recognize artworks as footprints left behind by other human beings. We can see the way the artist worked on the painting. We can put ourselves in the shoes of the artist, so to speak. When I looked at Käthe Kollwitz’s black and white art print, *Uprising*, for example, I learned about the emotion and hardship Kollwitz had in relation to social injustices during her life. I learned about some of the circumstances which provoked her to create remarkable art prints depicting human beings struggling to cope with oppression. Indeed, I can make connections to Kollwitz’ creations because I am a human being viewing a set of footprints left from another human being. I can see the way she applied her touch to the prints. In this way, I am able to see myself working
on the print the way Kollwitz did. I can therefore take part in the work because it is a footprint left behind by a human being. For me, I can stare at the footprint and realize that I may learn to understand what is so significant about the footprint. I may therefore take part in the passage of art by following the artists lead.

As a non-artist viewing Kollwitz’ art print, I felt as though her footprint was welcoming me to follow it. Indeed, I did not look at her art print, and then go home to create a work myself. I simply wanted to enter into the work. In other words, I wanted to relive the action of the artist. Therefore, as a non-artist, I am certainly able to view artworks at the museum in the sober joy of work.

With regard to the vestige or passage of art, furthermore, as a viewer, I am able to see the way art has continued to be created in the same way. Since the museum provides a plurality of artworks, I may encounter them as a cumulative passage rather than the notion of cumulative progress. The process of creation, for every artist, is always the same; therefore, the passage of art remains flat. Furthermore, I may also encounter the way each work transformed the tradition. Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon recaptured the process of artistic creation, while also providing new techniques that were used during the process. Moreover, Picasso influenced later Cubist painters, such as Juan Gris, to begin the process of creation again. Indeed, the process of creation, from start to finish, is the passage of art. So there is a cumulative passage that provokes each artist to transform the tradition in different ways.

As a result, both artists and non-artists should continue to follow the footprints left behind because they contribute to understanding what it is like to be human. The
vestige provokes viewers to be more active rather than passive to the encounter of artworks. Moreover, the vestige encourages the viewer to recognize that the milieu of art is not confined to the museum. The milieu of art is both inside and outside the museum. When we follow the footprints of artists, we realize that the passage of art continues to be made outside the museum. Therefore, while non-artists may not walk out of the museum with an inspiration to paint, the vestige allows people to view art in the sober joy of work.

The idea of the vestige of art encourages visitors to get away from the notion of the museum as a communion with the dead. Art is not something to merely look back on; rather, it is something for artists and non-artists to take part in. Regarding art as a vestige invites us to encounter it with an active appreciation for following the footprints left behind by artists. Therefore, Nancy’s vestige provides a solution for Merleau-Ponty’s problem.

CONCLUSION

Merleau-Ponty and Nancy both realize that art is something to look back on. The museum is a wonderful way to experience the history of expression. However, both thinkers have expressed concern that the museum, as retrospection, makes art appear as something only to look back on. If retrospection only points backward, then visitors may think that the museum is the graveyard of art. It may cause people to think that art is dead and its remains are preserved at the museum. This view makes art a thing of the past. According to Merleau-Ponty and Nancy, however, our conception of retrospection should encourage us to encounter art as looking backward and forward; that is, to recognize the milieu of art as being both inside and outside the museum. The museum
should not only be recognized as the presentation of a history of art, but it should also stimulate viewers to put themselves in the shoes of the artists, so to speak, and follow their footsteps. Merleau-Ponty and Nancy are not telling viewers to literally bring their paintbrushes and paints to the museum to splatter paint over a Van Gogh painting; rather, they are telling viewers to take an active part in the works. Retrospection, in other words, does not have to render viewers passive with respect to artworks. Instead, it should encourage viewers to celebrate in the work of art, not the remains of art.

Nancy’s analysis of art provides a way to actualize Merleau-Ponty’s desire for visitors to view art in the sober joy of work. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty described artists as those who are able to interact with art in the sober joy of work, rather than with a spurious reverence. With Nancy’s idea of the vestige of art, we can focus on the museum visitor as one who may encounter art in the sober joy of work as well. When we go to the museum, we should see ourselves following footprints, not walking through a graveyard. Following footprints will allow us to view art at the museum in a more relevant way because art is something that continuously unfolds throughout the history of human beings. We may thus view art at the museum in the sober joy of work because the collection encourages us to follow the tracks left behind by an artist. Although we cannot see who left behind the artworks, we may certainly recognize that human beings touched them. In this way, we are touched by the works because they have contributed to what it is like to experience living as a human being. So we are encouraged to follow the endless passage.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


