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Painting as an embodied act of framing: Toward a phenomenological aesthetics with Merleau-Ponty and Derrida

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Abstract

Contemporary painters employ a wide array of methods, materials, and references. In this paper, I put forward how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of painting, despite being developed in the context of modernist painting, can address the seemingly endless possibilities of contemporary painting. In particular, by further developing Merleau-Ponty’s insights into the role of embodiment in artistic working processes and by rereading Merleau-Ponty through Derrida’s questioning of the “frame,” I put forward an account of painting understood as an embodied act of framing. Derrida’s emphasis on undecidability, and the ambiguities pertaining to what becomes visible and invisible in the work of art, allow me to flesh out how Merleau-Ponty was always already attentive to some of the challenges posed by contemporary painting. I focus on two ways of framing at work in the painterly process, as exemplified by the non-traditional practices of contemporary artists Katharina Grosse and Amy Sillman: the material act of proposing a frame and painting as a critical manner of configuring sense. While keeping in mind the ambiguous essence of painting as a contemporary form of art, I aim to show that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to the embodied working process can help articulate how painting continuously questions painting’s own physical and conceptual borders.

Keywords Merleau-Ponty · Derrida · Embodiment · Contemporary painting · Framing

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1 Introduction

“I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you”¹

What usually comes to mind when referring to “painting” is a canvas to which paint has been applied, such as Paul Cézanne’s *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (ca. 1902–06) or *Apples* (1878–79). Consider, however, the following two examples. First, in Katharina Grosse’s exhibition *Mumbling Mud*, a work consisting of abstract brushstrokes engulfs the inside of a building by covering its walls, various objects, and large pieces of cloth.² Grosse creates immersive spaces with an industrial paint sprayer, in which the distinction between the work and what could be considered mere surroundings are often diffused. In some instances, the wall is used as a mere background upon which the work appears, while in other spaces, she uses the walls or the furniture as an integral part of the work itself. Second, in the exhibition, *Temporary Object*, Amy Sillman shows several large works on canvas, small drawings, and something she calls the “spine” of the exhibition: a row of prints on a wooden display consisting of photographs she took with her iPhone, depicting all stages of the working process of a digitally made painting.³ A “finished” or “final” painting is deliberately not included in the exhibition.⁴ In terms of both its material appearance and the employed artistic methods Sillman’s work can become almost anything: her artistic practice ranges from zine-making, writing and video-looping, to drawing cartoons, and working with oil on canvas.

The works and artistic practices of Grosse and Sillman exemplify what a contemporary painting may look like, and how it may appear. By using anything other than only paint, canvas, or brushes, contemporary paintings might not be easily recognized as such. Contemporary painters employ a wide array of methods, materials, and references, and by doing so, they present a disruption with traditional painterly methods and upset the distinctions between traditional artistic mediums.⁵ These changes call for a novel, non-restrictive understanding of what painting can still be. In this paper, I show the promise of a contemporary phenomenological aesthetics that draws on and further develops Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression, by

¹ Paul Cézanne to Emile Bernard, October 23, 1905, as quoted in Derrida (1978/1987, p. 2); see also Shiff (2001, p. xxxiv).

² Katharina Grosse, *Mumbling Mud*, exhibition at K11 Art Museum Shanghai, China. From November 10, 2018 to February 24, 2019.

³ See Higham-Stainton (2023).

⁴ Amy Sillman, *Temporary Object*, exhibition at Thomas Dane Naples, Italy. From April 26 to July 23, 2023. For a collection of Sillman’s writings about her works and artistic practice, see Sillman (2020).

⁵ In this paper, I consider works by contemporary artists that designate their works as painting and I take this characterization at face value. I do not, however, provide an account of what constitutes an artistic medium, and by extension, what painting is as an artistic medium in the context of contemporary art. For the purpose of this paper, it is sufficient to highlight that the notion of an artistic medium possessing an inherent essence, along with its own essential processes and materials, has been widely contested in philosophy of art and art-theory. For an influential account of medium-specificity, see Greenberg (1965/1982). For an influential account opposing this view, see Krauss (1979) For an approach to how painting can be described as post-medial, see Graw and Lajer-Burcharth (2016, pp. 7–9).

exploring the potential of his manner of foregrounding the embodied working processes of the artist in relation to the work of art.

In the context of contemporary philosophical aesthetics, and especially with regard to the relation between art and embodiment, the work of Merleau-Ponty continues to generate fruitful debate. So, for instance, recent critical phenomenological research considers the experience of and the impact on the embodied perceiver in their encounter with contemporary works of art.⁶ In what follows, I aim to foreground the potential of Merleau-Ponty's thought with regard to the artistic possibilities of painterly practices and, hence, focus on the embodied working processes of the painter. At first glance, it might seem that Merleau-Ponty's approach to painting does not extend far beyond the work of prominent figures in the modernist tradition of art, such as Cézanne, Klee, or Matisse. However, in what follows, I outline the value of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of painting as embodied expression and articulate one way in which his historically situated account can in fact embrace contemporary painting's many forms of appearing. By turning to Derrida's deconstruction of the "frame" via the figure of the *parergon*, I foreground the role of "undecidability" and "invisibility" in acts of framing.⁷ I propose to reread Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression via Derrida's thought and develop an account of contemporary painterly practices approached as an embodied act of framing.

To reassess Merleau-Ponty's reflections on painting and explore how his framework might extend to artworks beyond those he directly considered, I discuss Grosse's immersive painterly work. Her work upsets the clear distinction between the inside and the outside of a work of art and gives, I argue, credence to Derrida's deconstruction of the *parergon*, read as an instance of *différance*.⁸ However, as I also aim to show, Merleau-Ponty is already attuned to painterly practices going beyond the traditional understanding of painting of that which is restricted to the canvas. Instead of comparing and contrasting Merleau-Ponty and Derrida's methodologies, I focus on their shared attention to the artistic practice and letters of Paul Cézanne.⁹ By turning to the work of Sillman, I show how Merleau-Ponty's theory allows for a radical move away from approaching painting as a strictly delineated material art-object and instead allows us to consider painting as a broader, ongoing, artistic practice. Sillman's work, at the same time, necessitates a reconsideration of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the visible and the invisible in his theory on painting, as compared to his understanding of these processes in his theory of perception more broadly construed.¹⁰ I assess to what extent his description of painting's ability to

⁶ See Al-Saji (2019); Fielding (2015). However, the role of the embodied working process of the artist is most often discussed in forms of art in which the body is physically present, e.g. in performance or body art. See Jones (2018).

⁷ The *parergon*, as discussed in Derrida (1978/1987).

⁸ For a brief explanation of *différance*, see Derrida (1967/2016, p. 25).

⁹ It is beyond the scope to provide an in-depth comparison of the methodological differences and similarities between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida's thought. See Reynolds (2004); Marratto (2012); Holland (1986).

¹⁰ I trace the role of the invisible and the visible in Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of painting, as most prominently argued for in Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964); (1960a/1964); (1960b/1964); (1964a/1993); (1964b/1968).

render visible and accessible more than can be habitually perceived aligns with his view on the necessary particularity of the embodied subject.

After highlighting some of Merleau-Ponty's key insights into the role of embodiment and painting (Sect. 2), I draw in the following sections on the insights of both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty to articulate how a contemporary phenomenological aesthetics can consider the embodied working process of the painter and render the co-constitution of the visible and the invisible, or the inside and the outside of the art-object, productive for painting as an ongoing practice. The artistic practices of Grosse and Sillman exemplify two aspects of contemporary painting, which translate to two different notions of framing at work in the painterly process: the material act of proposing a frame and framing as a responsibility concerning what comes to visibility and what remains invisible. By embracing the ambiguous essence of painting as a contemporary form of art, a radicalization of Merleau-Ponty's account of painting as expression can help articulate how painting can put into question its presupposed material and conceptual borders. By approaching painting as an embodied act of framing, I underline the socio-political implications of embodiment, and the ways in which art can contribute to thinking about the irreducible heterogeneity of manners of configuring sense.

2 Merleau-Ponty and artistic expression: the role of embodiment

Merleau-Ponty's theory of painting as expression challenges the common understanding of the image and paintings as images. Given his articulation of the manner in which painting gives expression to how the subject perceives the world rather than depicting this world by way of an image, he presents a valuable starting point for a non-restrictive understanding of what painting can be. Merleau-Ponty's account entails a critique of Jean-Paul Sartre's description of how images are perceived and what they bring about. In addition to criticizing Sartre's understanding of the image as "trompe-l'oeil,"¹¹ Merleau-Ponty's thinking concerning painting can also be read as a departure from the Husserlian distinction between the *image-thing*, *image-object* and *image-subject*.¹² For Husserl, the *image-thing*, or physical art-object, allows for the *image-object* to appear in a particular manner. The colored hues of a figurative painting, the canvas, its lines and forms allow for the *image-object*—"the appearing object that is the representant"¹³ to appear. In turn, Husserl maintains that this object represents the *image-subject*, the thing that the representant actually refers to: the represented object that is depicted (e.g., an apple, a person).¹⁴ In this context, being conscious of a physical image differs from mere recollection or phantasy, as the former takes place in relation to something that appears as a physical work of art, while the latter is a becoming conscious without reference

¹¹ Perri (2013, pp. 80–85).

¹² See Husserl (2005). Husserl's distinction has influenced Sartre's account of the image, which in turn influenced Merleau-Ponty's thinking, see Perri (2013, p. 79).

¹³ Husserl (2005, § 9, p. 20).

¹⁴ Husserl (2005, § 9, p. 21).

to a physically appearing object. For instance, the *image-subject* that appears might be an apple, while the *image-object* is the appearing apple on a canvas in Cézanne's work. For Husserl, therefore, the *image-object* and *image-subject* have a re-presentational relation, and he states that "[t]he appearing object is not just taken by itself, but as the representant of another object like it or resembling it."¹⁵

Merleau-Ponty presents a critique of this understanding of painting in terms of representation, and instead articulates an understanding of painting as "a process of expressing."¹⁶ According to him, a representational understanding of the image entails that a painting's "meaning would lie entirely beyond the canvas."¹⁷ This would render a painting a mere copy of something else, or akin to a signifier pointing toward something that exists in the world.¹⁸ Rather, he holds that the painter attempts to "create on the canvas a spectacle which is sufficient unto itself."¹⁹ In line with his phenomenological understanding of perception, he underlines the importance of taking into consideration the embodied working process of the painter: what is expressed in painting is the ongoing event of the world coming into appearance for an embodied perceiver.²⁰ According to him, paintings are not a representation of something else, but they give expression to "the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside."²¹ That is to say, the painter paints the "inside of the outside," or how the world is in the process of appearing, always already laden with sense. At the same time, the painting is the "outside of the inside," referring to the embodied painter, who brings how the world is in the process of appearing to them to the outside again, rendering the painting the "'visible' to the second power."²² Analogous to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the subject's motor-intentional relation to the world, the painting is always an expression *of* something, derived in one way or another from the visible, sensible, world. Therefore, he states that "painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility."²³

In order to explain how the painter brings their experience of the world into view in a painting, Merleau-Ponty often turns to Cézanne's working process. He states that Cézanne paints an "emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes."²⁴ For instance, Cézanne shows a table's perspective as warped, as if a subject encounters a table from the lived perspective of their moving, sensing, body. In so doing, Merleau-Ponty shows how painting gives expression to an embodied and situated manner of perceiving the world. His theory of expression

¹⁵ Husserl (2005, § 9, p. 22).

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, p. 17).

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1948b/2004, p. 71).

¹⁸ See Merleau-Ponty (1948b/2004, p. 71). For Merleau-Ponty's rejection of a painting's ability to invoke objects, see also Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964).

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1948b/2004, p. 72).

²⁰ As mainly put forward in Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993); and Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964).

²¹ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 126), square brackets in translation.

²² Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 126).

²³ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 127).

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, p. 14). See for several examples of how Cézanne painted objects, Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, pp. 14-16).

helps to move away from understanding painting in terms of what it may or may not resemble or represent, as he draws attention to the embodied working process of the painter as constitutive of what appears in the work of art. Similar to habitual perception, his phenomenological approach to painting foregrounds the role of the body in how the world appears to a subject.²⁵ As such, Merleau-Ponty presents a valuable improvement on the traditional representational approach to art. A representational approach focuses on the artwork as object and its possible referents, while a theory of expression helps foreground the role of the embodied practice, and the expressive processes involved in what is considered to be the “work of art.”

3 Moving away from modernist painting

Merleau-Ponty’s move away from representation to expression presents a non-restrictive way of exploring what a work of art can be, and in turn, what it might bring about. In what follows, I will evaluate if his historically situated approach can embrace contemporary painting’s ability to exceed its own presupposed traditional characteristics, in this case, the material limits of the rectangular frame of the canvas. By turning to Derrida’s deconstruction of the “frame,” I aim to pinpoint where Merleau-Ponty already makes room for moving away from a modernist view on art. For the purpose of my account, modernism in art refers to a strict delimitation of artistic mediums (e.g., sculpture, painting, photography) with each of them having supposedly particular, fitting, and necessary materials and working processes. Applied to painting, this relates to the idea of painting as a material object consisting of paint or pigment applied to canvas. Even though it is beyond the scope of this attempt to discuss the aptness of the division of art into artistic mediums, I will utilize the term “modernist” in order to set apart a particular, traditional, and widely accepted understanding of painting from what I call “contemporary” painting, which is an equally ambiguous term in the context of art. Here, the latter will be used to refer to artistic practices that explicitly question or subvert the tradition of painting and are part of the art-discourse from the 1990s onward.

In order to evaluate the applicability of Merleau-Ponty’s approach to contemporary painting, consider Grosse’s exhibition *The Bedroom* at Galerie Max Hetzler.²⁶ This exhibition refers to a pivotal moment in 2004, when Grosse spray-painted her own bedroom, including the objects lying around on the bed, the bed itself, the floor, and the bedroom walls. For the first time in her practice, she did not only use a room as canvas, but she incorporated objects and furniture exactly as they were present, by spray-painting them in broad gestures. In both *Das Bett* (2004) and *The Bedroom* (2023), her gestures put up for discussion what belongs to the work, what is considered mere background, and what the material of a painting can be. Similar to immersive exhibitions such as *Mumbling Mud* as described above, *The Bedroom* and

²⁵ He maintains that the relationship between the subject and the world is reciprocal (see Merleau-Ponty 1964a/1993, pp. 125–26).

²⁶ Katharina Grosse, *The Bedroom*, exhibition at Galerie Max Hetzler, Paris. September 8 to October 21, 2023.

Das Bett exemplify how painting is no longer confined to the material boundaries of the canvas: her gestures blur the line between daily life, and what is considered to be a work of art.

Merleau-Ponty presupposes a particular manner in which painters are using their bodies, hands, and eyes to apply *paint* to *canvas*, which might lead him to be considered as holding a modernist understanding of art. The many references to paint and canvas reflect what he is taking for granted due to his historical situatedness. For instance, he explains that “it was in the world that he [Cézanne] had to realize his freedom, with *colors upon a canvas*.”²⁷ Or, “[i]t is true that, scarcely having drawn his system of equivalences from the world, the painter invests it again in *colors and a quasi-space on a canvas*.”²⁸ Or, painting “is carried out upon a *canvas or sheet of paper* and so lacks the wherewithal to devise things that actually move.”²⁹ With regard to the painterly process, he focuses on the manner in which the painter gives expression to the world as it is in the process of taking shape, by making something appear in *paint* on a *canvas*. He describes how the painter transfers their manner of perceiving the world, their “style” of being onto canvas.³⁰ Artistic expression, for him, takes place in the moment in which perceptions are turned into painting; when the vision of the painter, when their body “reaches the canvas and invades it.”³¹ Even though this explains how painting gives expression to the event of the world coming into appearance for an embodied perceiver, strictly speaking, he does presuppose what the painting will be like qua material object: he seems to remain beholden to the material limits of the canvas, and only describes one manner in which the act of painting takes place—as a transference of paint by the hand with a brush.

In light of these remarks, Grosse’s work can be taken to put pressure on Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the working process of the painter. Due to his manner of describing the moment in which the experience of the world is turned into painting, Merleau-Ponty neither problematizes the materiality of the painting as object, nor the process of applying paint to canvas. He presupposes a fixed concept of what belongs to the inside of the painting and thereby seems to restrict painting’s possibilities to problematize the material limits of the image, the rectangular frame of the canvas, or the very material that can be considered as painting (e.g., a bed, a pile of clothes, a room). Merleau-Ponty describes how artists like Cézanne challenge the representational relation between the *image-object* and the *image-subject*. However, in his many references to painting he does not consider the possibility of painters questioning the material *image-thing*, and he likewise does not problematize what constitutes the artistic working process. Due to the very works of art he considers and by directing his questions only toward the inside of the painting he approaches the inside and the outside of a painting as strictly defined. However, as I will demonstrate by reading him together with Derrida’s deconstruction of the frame, this

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, p. 25). Square brackets and emphasis mine.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1960a/1964, p. 55). Emphasis mine.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 144). Emphasis mine.

³⁰ See Merleau-Ponty (1960a/1964, p. 52; 66).

³¹ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 147). Referring to a citation of Paul Klee.

does not preclude the possibility of applying his theory to contemporary painterly practices.

4 Derrida's *parergon* and the undecidability in painting as framing

Turning to Derrida's deconstruction of the *parergon* can help flesh out how Merleau-Ponty's insights can account for artistic practices that exceed the traditional boundaries of the frame.³² In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida addresses the materiality of the painting and upsets the clear delimitation of the work's inside and its surroundings or outside. He draws attention to the necessary ambiguity that comes with deciding on the limits of the work of art as material object. In upsetting the clear distinction between what is intrinsic and extrinsic to the work of art, his deconstruction of the frame presents a way to understand the artistic possibilities of contemporary painting. However, as I indicate, Derrida's deconstructive analyses by themselves do not suffice as an account of contemporary painting as he does not consider the body's role in the constitution of the lifeworld of the artist and, more importantly, its role in the processes involved in the constitution of the work of art.³³ Therefore, I propose to read Merleau-Ponty and Derrida together, and employ the workings of the *parergon* in Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression to help understand painting as an embodied act of framing.

In *The Truth in Painting* Derrida states that he will not provide a stable definition of painting, by describing that he will instead "write four times here, *around* painting."³⁴ In accordance with Derrida's methodological adherences, his account of the *parergon* should not be used as a concept, but as a means to highlight the inner tensions that are always already to be found within a text or concept. According to Derrida, deconstruction therefore cannot be applied "to something from the outside."³⁵ I propose to understand the *parergon* as an instance of Derrida's notion of *différance*.³⁶ As such, the *parergon* has the ability to defer the meaning of a knowable essence of a work of art, and upset the presuppositions as to what belongs to the work of art. Consequently, this manner of foregrounding tension helps to explain how the definition of contemporary painting becomes open-ended, enabling artists to put pressure on the material and conceptual limitations of painting as a form of contemporary art.

³² As put forward in Derrida (1978/1987, pp. 1–148.) See for an analysis of the *parergon* in literature, Heller-Andrist (2011, pp. 19–70). See for an explanation of the *parergon* in art Duro (2019).

³³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Derrida's understanding of the subject, which is not explicitly addressed in the light of his deconstruction of the frame but present in his writing nevertheless. See Lumsden (2014).

³⁴ Derrida (1978/1987, p. 9).

³⁵ Derrida and Caputo (1997/2021, p. 9).

³⁶ Derrida only briefly mentions the connection between the *parergon* and *différance*. See Derrida (1978/1987, p. 80).

In the narrowest sense, a *parergon* signifies something accessory, or added to, a work (of art): the prefix “para-,”³⁷ indicates being added to, in this case, a work (“ergon,” or “erg”).³⁸ Derrida notes that Kant uses the *parergon* in this way, as mentioned in the *Critique of Judgment*.³⁹ Kant understands the *parergon* as an object such as a frame, clothes that do not belong intrinsically to a statue’s essence, or a temple’s columns. *Parerga* are hence objects that demarcate what belongs essentially to a work of art, as an addition to its outer borders. In the case of painting, by approaching it as a physical, locatable, and merely additional frame, Derrida notes that Kant presupposes a knowable essence of a work of art. In this context, essence might be understood as the presupposition that a painting must consist of a rectangular canvas or flat plane, depicting mostly figurative imagery—as was the case for painting during Kant’s life.

In turn, Derrida deconstructs Kant’s understanding of the *parergon* in order to put into question the inside and the outside of the work of art as strictly oppositional. He states that the *parergon* is “neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [*hors d’oeuvre*], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work.”⁴⁰ In his view, the *parergon* is not a strict boundary separating the inside of the work from its outside in the way Kant argues: it should not be viewed as something merely added, but it should instead be approached as something that is neither internal, nor external to the work.⁴¹ Rather, the *parergon* remains ambiguous, enabling it to question the interaction between the inside and the outside and hence, the delimitation of the painting as material object. If something is understood as merely added to a clearly defined inside, what is intrinsic or essential to the work should be determinable in the first place, which for Derrida amounts to the “unlocatable center of the problem.”⁴² Derrida sets out to deconstruct the *parergon*, in order to foreground the co-constitutive, and necessarily ambiguous relation between an inside and an outside. A clearly defined boundary can not be determined if neither a center, essence, or inside of a work of art, nor what is strictly on the outside or inessential to it can be pinpointed.

For Derrida, the *parergon* points toward the work’s ambiguous essence, and it upsets the certainty as to what is taken to belong intrinsically to it. He notes:

What constitutes them as *parerga* is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*. And this lack would be constitutive of the very unity of the *ergon*.

³⁷ Oxford English Dictionary (2024).

³⁸ Oxford English Dictionary (2023).

³⁹ For Kant, a *parergon* is like an ornament or decoration. It is distinct from the actual work, seen as a supplement. See Derrida (1978/1987, p. 53; 57). See also Kant (1790/1987, p. 72).

⁴⁰ Derrida (1978/1987, p. 9). Square brackets in translation.

⁴¹ Derrida (1978/1987, p. 54).

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Without this lack, the *ergon* would have no need of a *parergon*. The *ergon*'s lack is the lack of a *parergon*.⁴³

In this passage, he indicates that a *parergon* understood as mere “surplus” would entail having the ability to objectively determine the work’s essence, or its “unity.” Here, he underlines that a *parergon* is not merely added to an internal lack, as what is lacking can also not be pinned down or located. As such, he shows that the *parergon* is not as easily detachable as Kant had argued. For Derrida, a *parergon* is supplementary: the inside and outside of a work of art cannot be determined in advance, and therefore it “needs the supplementary work.”⁴⁴ The supplementary work done by the *parergon* is not additional but necessary: it is able to give rise to a work even though its essence remains unlocatable. As Simone Heller-Andrist notes, a lack can only become apparent as lack because of the “workings of the frame.”⁴⁵ Derrida’s deconstruction of Kant’s *parergon* shows that, if there is neither an essence, nor a clearly pinpointed lack in a work, the act of framing should be thought otherwise. Below, I will further elaborate on how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can help further develop what constitutes an act of framing, and why it is vital for approaching contemporary painterly practices.

The lack inherent to painting might be described as the impossibility of fully defining what the essence (or truth) of painting is. Following Derrida, the lacking of a fixed essence of painting entails that what a painting is remains undecidable, which consequently allows for the artistic practice to remain in flux. The *parergon*, approached as a decision made regarding a frame, upsets the presuppositions about the essential parts of the work, and calls into view Derrida’s notion of undecidability. For Derrida, all decisions need to go “through the ordeal of the undecidable.”⁴⁶ This ordeal entails that a decision can only be made, or can only count as a decision, when it is at the same time possible and impossible. The impossibility of a decision is its very possibility: if a decision was possible or decided in advance, it would have been a mere calculation, a following of an already decided rule or axiom.⁴⁷ Undecidability entails for Derrida the impossibility of knowing beforehand whether or not a choice is right, or just, and when the decision has been made it remains uncertain if it was indeed the right one. In another context, his deconstruction of justice, he emphasizes that every choice will remain haunted by other possibilities. The moment of decision-making in Derrida’s deconstruction involves a moment of madness, and an inevitable leap that has to be taken.⁴⁸ A choice will always have to be made, even though it must have been an undecidable one. According to Derrida, what is “just” or “right” cannot be pinned down, even though an impossible decision needs to be made. In so doing, he does not attempt to evade responsibility, but

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 59–60.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 56.

⁴⁵ Heller-Andrist (2011, p. 48).

⁴⁶ Derrida (1992, p. 24).

⁴⁷ Derrida (1992, pp. 23–25).

⁴⁸ See Robb (2024, p. 183).

he shows that deconstruction “calls for an increase in responsibility.”⁴⁹ Following Derrida, what a “painting” is cannot be fully determined: it will remain haunted by what it is not, by concepts that it recalls or rejects, and by the possibilities of what it could have been. If it is already decided that a painting stops at the edges of the canvas, no responsibility can be taken for the choice. When the inside and the outside are approached as ambiguous and undecidable, painters like Grosse can employ the moment of making decisions on the work’s eventual borders as an indispensable part of a working process. In this way, contemporary artists are able to problematize the pre-given, traditional boundaries of “painting.” Derrida’s *parergon*, understood as a manner of proposing a frame, draws attention to this eventual moment of making a decision: there will always be a need for an eventual act, or decision on the frame, yet the decision is not determined in advance.

As highlighted above, Derrida does not put forward a robust account of the subject in his deconstruction of the frame, and hence, in the context of an elucidation of framing as taking place in contemporary painting, he does not provide us with the tools to understand the role of the embodied and situated working process of the painter when it comes to the moment of making these inevitable decisions. Therefore, there is a need for a phenomenological approach to help understand what constitutes the act of framing, what is consequently made visible, and what is rendered invisible *in* the painting, and *by* the painting as a material object. By thinking Derrida and Merleau-Ponty together, I aim to bring into view the embodied act of framing, as each painting is always in need of an eventual impossible decision on its inside and its outside. A decision, as I will argue, that is closely connected to the subject’s particular manner of being embodied and situated.

5 Rereading Merleau-Ponty via Derrida: painting as embodied act of framing

I suggest to develop the potential of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking for contemporary painting by starting from the way in which he and Derrida both discuss the works and letters of Paul Cézanne.⁵⁰ Derrida focuses on the promise made by Cézanne to Emile Bernard in a letter, as quoted in the epigraph, while Merleau-Ponty focuses on Cézanne’s working process and the connection between phenomenology and painting as expression. Their shared attention to Cézanne’s promise pertaining to painting allows me to upset the idea of a distinct “truth” or stable essence that presupposes what a painting should be. Derrida deconstructs Cézanne’s promise concerning his attempt to tell about the truth to, or in, painting. According to him, the truth that Cézanne promised to tell will remain unfulfilled. His acknowledgement that Cézanne’s debt is still owed might be read as an indication of the impossibility to fulfill the promise.⁵¹ The promise will remain, as Derrida would phrase it, *to-come*.

⁴⁹ Derrida (1992, p. 20).

⁵⁰ For Merleau-Ponty’s approach to Cézanne, see Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964); (1964a/1993). For Derrida’s approach to Cézanne, see Derrida (1978/1987, pp. 1–13).

⁵¹ Derrida (1978/1987, pp. 2–4).

His understanding of undecidability consequently entails the impossibility of full presence, always pushing stable definitions forward into the future. He emphasizes that concepts, essences, or truth will always remain “to come, *à venir* [...]”. It will always have it, this *à-venir*, and always has.”⁵²

While Derrida deconstructs the promise, he does not locate Cézanne’s questions in his material attempts to paint. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, does not explicitly describe the promise made to Bernard in the way Derrida does, but focuses instead on the way in which Cézanne expresses his doubts about his ability to paint.⁵³ He underlines that Cézanne considers his practice as a continual search, as mere attempts to create in painting what he envisioned. Merleau-Ponty further explains these doubts by discussing Cézanne’s outlines and by considering the difficulty of bringing objects to visibility.⁵⁴ According to him, Cézanne’s multiple, seemingly moving or unstable outlines do not mark the inside of an object in strict opposition to its outside, but they simultaneously connect and separate objects from their surroundings. He shows that outlines are not strict borders, and they cannot be made visible as such.⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty in this way already hints at how Cézanne embodies the uncertainty involved in acts of framing, similar to the ambiguity that Derrida’s *parergon* brought to the fore. Returning to Merleau-Ponty via Derrida amplifies the way in which he already considers a form of undecidability as part of a painterly practice, albeit confined within the canvas.⁵⁶

Rereading Merleau-Ponty, via Derrida’s manner of rendering the essence of painting ambiguous, foregrounds where Merleau-Ponty’s analysis is more attentive to undoing the presupposed conceptual and material boundaries of painting than may initially seem the case. Even though his questions do not extend to the material limits of the work itself, and even if he does not describe other processes than paint being applied to canvas, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach does not preclude the possibilities of painting becoming otherwise in a radical sense. For instance, he underlines that painting is never finished or complete: “If no painting completes painting, if no work is itself ever absolutely completed, still, each creation changes, alters, clarifies, deepens, confirms, exalts, re-creates, or creates by anticipation all the others.”⁵⁷ As becomes most explicit in his descriptions of Cézanne’s working process, each painting is calling for another attempt to paint: “in one sense the art of painting still remains to be created. [...] Thus painting as a whole presents itself as an abortive effort to say something which still remains to be said.”⁵⁸ These remarks indicate that Merleau-Ponty considers painting as a form of art that remains

⁵² Derrida (1992, p. 27).

⁵³ See Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964). See for Cézanne’s letter to Bernard Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, p. 9). As he wrote: “Will I ever reach what I have so diligently searched for and what I have so long pursued?” Paul Cézanne to Emile Bernard, September 21, 1906 (Doran 2001, p. 49).

⁵⁴ See Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, pp. 12–15).

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, pp. 143–145); (1948a/1964, p. 15).

⁵⁶ For a comparison of the undecidable in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, see Reynolds (2002).

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 149).

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1960a/1964, p. 79). He is already open to the possibility of painting being either figurative, abstract, or unfinished, see Merleau-Ponty (1960a/1964, p. 51).

unfinished. As such, his phenomenological understanding of the painterly process renders the promise of a stable truth to painting positively unfulfilled and allows the material limits of the painting qua art-object to be approached as undecidable, even though an act of framing has to take place each time. Merleau-Ponty's manner of describing Cézanne's doubts and hesitations can be extended to the process of questioning the work's material boundaries and can therefore account for the possibilities of contemporary painterly practices that go beyond the limits of the canvas strictly speaking. Even though contemporary artists like Grosse take this idea many steps further in terms of material possibilities, both Grosse and Cézanne similarly refuse to decide in advance where the work will begin and end. By positively taking up Cézanne's doubts and by moving away from focusing on the work of art as a static, finished object, Merleau-Ponty's thought allows for a reconsideration of the artistic working process as ongoing, instead of being decided in advance.

6 Considering absence and invisibility

In order to further outline the implications of understanding the artistic process as such, there is a need to revisit Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the visible and the invisible in the context of painting, in comparison with his understanding of these terms in his theory of perception more broadly construed. That is, in several passages he indicates that painting can render visible that which in straightforward perception remains invisible: the process of the perceived world coming into appearance. In the following, I will show that, if this process is approached only via what the painter brings to appearance in and through the painting, it does not fully capture how the process of making visible remains necessarily ongoing. Describing it as such would not do justice to the inexhaustibility of painting, as it would not pay enough attention to that which cannot come to visibility or that which is continually rendered invisible. By extending Merleau-Ponty's own theory of situated perception more radically to painting, his theory of painterly expression can in fact account for what cannot be asked, seen, or revealed by a particular embodied perceiver. As such, it can foreground the vital role of the limitations of visibility and presence in the context of contemporary painterly practices.

Consider again the work of Sillman, who deliberately upsets the idea of a painting as a determinate end-product and regards her practice as a continual attempt. In *Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting* (2012), Sillman brings together a video animation on an iPad and a room full of reproductions of digitally made images—each one a printout of a single frame of the animation.⁵⁹ In this exhibition, she questions what a work might become if she would keep on working it over. The work considers possible futures, or alternative endings of a singular work of art. By treating all images comprising the animation as equally important, instead of as a culmination toward a finished work, and by treating paintings as an ongoing process of layering, Sillman emphasizes the fluidity, arbitrariness, and temporality of her artistic working process.

⁵⁹ Amy Sillman, *Thirteen Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting*, exhibition at Tate London 2012.

Can works like these be embraced by Merleau-Ponty's framework? I demonstrated that, with regard to the possibility of exceeding the frame, Merleau-Ponty's theory allows for the work's material boundaries to be open-ended rather than decided in advance. However, there is a need to further develop his account of how the work of art creates visibility as compared to his description of the relation between the visible and invisible in perception. To start, he posits that painting "gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible."⁶⁰ According to him, what is expressed in painting is the *habitually invisible* process of the world becoming visible to an embodied perceiver. For Merleau-Ponty, this habitually invisible process is rendered visible in the work of Cézanne, who "wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization."⁶¹ Here, the subject's particularly situated experiences and bodily possibilities can be read as the "invisible," or the background in accordance with which the subject is configuring sense. This habitually invisible field of perception is comprised of acquired and sedimented bodily habits and possibilities, giving shape to how the world appears. On the one hand, this indicates that painting presents an exemplary case for Merleau-Ponty's account of situated perception, showcasing how painting interrupts habitual manners of perceiving the world by presenting us with the very processes of perception that habitually remain unreflected. On the other hand, however, his emphasis on the process of painting as a process of bringing to visibility simultaneously highlights why his descriptions of the painterly process need to be critically reevaluated. By focusing on what a painter brings to appearance, and by not expanding on what remains invisible, what is rendered invisible or what becomes marginalized by fore- or backgrounding particular aspects in the painting, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the co-constitutive role of the invisible in the context of painting does not go far enough.

In arguing that painting makes the habitually invisible process of appearing visible, Merleau-Ponty describes in several instances that the painter *asks* the landscape "[T]o unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which it makes itself mountain before our eyes."⁶² The painter asks what was necessary for the mountain to appear as such, referring to the shadows, shapes, and colors as seen from the lived perspective of the painter in their reciprocal relation to the world. By ascribing to the painter the capacity to uncover the invisible and to reveal the background structure that allowed the world to come into appearance in a particular manner, he states that art and painting innocently look at the world, and that "[o]nly the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees."⁶³ In doing so, he is not attentive enough to the impossibility of suspending embodied habits in the process of painting, which is opposed to his manner of describing the processes of embodied perception more broadly construed.⁶⁴ That is to say, when it comes to his

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 127). This process is made visible via the lived-perspective in the works of Cézanne, as described in Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, p. 14).

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, p. 13).

⁶² Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 128). See also Merleau-Ponty (1960a/1964, p. 56; 63).

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 123).

⁶⁴ See Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012, p. lxxvii).

theory of painting, Merleau-Ponty can be understood to be too beholden to presence and visibility—or more than he should on his own account.

Consider the following descriptions of the painterly process: Merleau-Ponty states that “[t]he painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.”⁶⁵ By proposing that what the painter paints can be made wholly visible to another subject he is not paying attention to the irreducible heterogeneity of manners of configuring sense. Merleau-Ponty takes this process of rendering visible a step further by indicating that a successful work “will have united these separate lives; it will no longer exist in only one of them like a stubborn dream or a persistent delirium, nor will it exist only in space as a colored piece of canvas. It will dwell undivided in several minds, with a claim on every possible mind like a perennial acquisition.”⁶⁶ He states that what can be encountered via painting is the “silent world of the painter, henceforth *uttered and accessible*.”⁶⁷ Even though informed and restricted by the subject’s embodied and situated way of experiencing the world, the painting seems to be able to make their perspective accessible and visible for the other. As such, his manner of describing painting does not pay enough attention to what the painter is unable to see, ask, or experience. By focusing on what is made visible in the strict sense this approach is unable to approximate the role of what is absent, of what remains invisible in the work of art due to the subject’s sedimented and habitual structures of seeing.

Importantly, he indicates in his phenomenological account of perception that the subject only has a “limited perspective,”⁶⁸ which already forecloses the possibility of uniting the perspectives of several subjects in a wholly accessible way.⁶⁹ That is, in his theory of perception, Merleau-Ponty explicitly does not argue for the possibility of full visibility or presence: he discusses the gaps, lacks, and ambiguities of perception, and the manner in which the invisible is co-constitutive of the visible.⁷⁰ He explains that “the hallmark of the visible is to have a lining of invisibility in the strict sense, which it makes present as a certain absence.”⁷¹ He argues that visibility always transcends itself, radiates beyond itself, and is never fully present.⁷² In accordance with this, Merleau-Ponty explains how the painting qua material object radiates beyond itself when encountered.⁷³ However, as I have highlighted above,

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, pp. 17–8). See for his understanding of the accessibility of painting Merleau-Ponty (1960a/1964, p. 51; 80).

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, p. 20).

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1960a/1964, p. 51). Emphasis mine.

⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1948b/2004, p. 53).

⁶⁹ For instance, compare this with how Merleau-Ponty describes looking at a landscape together. Here, he explicitly underlines the depth of the visible and does not argue for full accessibility to the others’ views. Merleau-Ponty (1964b/1968, pp. 142–43).

⁷⁰ For a nuanced account of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of presence, see Marratto (2012 pp. 113–163).

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 147). See also Merleau-Ponty (1964b/1968, p. 136).

⁷² See Merleau-Ponty (1960b/1964, p. 20).

⁷³ See Perri (2013, pp. 88–91). See for instance Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the Lascaux cave paintings, Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 126).

and in contrast to his own understanding of the horizon-like structure of habitual perception as continually in transition, the painter, in the process of expression, does seem to have the capacity to give access to the habitually invisible, or to render the process of the world coming into appearance visible to another embodied perceiver. My aim here is to highlight that, similar to how he describes that the co-constitution of the visible and the invisible is due to habitual, embodied, and therefore limited perception, the painterly process, like perception itself, both foregrounds *and* backgrounds in and through the act of artistic expression.⁷⁴

Even if painting has the capacity to render the very processes of perception visible, it should be foregrounded that the painting equally appears by virtue of what it renders invisible, in what remains unseen, unasked, lacking, in what cannot be made or is not considered accessible. As a second order expression of a subject's motor-intentional relation to the world, the expressive act of painting follows the same process of appearing as the expressive process that gives rise to habitual perception. The figure-ground structure of the subject's ever-changing field of perception already indicates that no object in perception can be ever fully visible. In turn, being attentive to a painting's manner of fore- and backgrounding cannot be described as similarly accessible to all subjects. Consider here how Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that when we perceive a painting, we do not merely look at it but rather see "according to, or with it."⁷⁵ Seeing in accordance with a work requires an acknowledgment of the invisible that co-constitutes the work's visible appearance, and calls for an awareness of how these lacks either can, or cannot be, taken up by the perceiver. When extending Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception more radically to his descriptions of how the painter renders the process of perception visible in the painting, it becomes clear that the habitually invisible background structure upon which the work appears can neither be fixated, nor can it be rendered wholly visible. Both what appears "in" the painting and due to the painting qua material object are experienced as part of a perceptual field that is always already situated within the dynamic interplay of the visible and the invisible. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of perception highlights that how we direct our attention toward things in the world is dependent on our embodied habits and experiences, which make certain things available to us, and make other things appear out of our reach.⁷⁶ What appears in painting therefore always retains the possibility to shift in terms of what is fore- or backgrounded, and what is experienced as within or outside of one's reach.⁷⁷

For instance, Cézanne's manner of being conscious of the *Montagne Sainte-Victoire* gives expression to his particular way of being embodied and situated. What comes to visibility, and what does not, is informed by his manner of perceiving the

⁷⁴ This is related to the processes in perception Merleau-Ponty refers to as the body-schema. See Romdenh-Romluc (2015, p. 92).

⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 126). See also Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1993, p. 142).

⁷⁶ The potential of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology for showing how things appear within or beyond one's reach due to embodiment and one's particular situatedness is recognized by contemporary thinkers, such as seen in Ahmed's queer phenomenology. See Ahmed (2006).

⁷⁷ Even though it is beyond the scope of this attempt to describe the connection and its implications in full, Merleau-Ponty brings painting's ongoing expressive process in close connection to the concept of Institution [*Stiftung*] as an ongoing event. See Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 41).

world, and the questions he is able to ask. What appeared to Cézanne as significant or insignificant about the mountain frames how it appears. His paintings of the *Montagne Sainte-Victoire* would have been otherwise if he was differently embodied or engaged in another lived project. As Merleau-Ponty explains, it was Cézanne's particular life that called for his paintings, without arguing that his life is able to explain his works in full.⁷⁸ His manner of describing Cézanne's working process as ongoing can be put to work in the context of contemporary painting. As he already notes, "[e]xpressing what *exists* is an endless task."⁷⁹ In order to develop a phenomenological approach to contemporary painting, it is necessary to extend Merleau-Ponty's description of the interplay of the visible and invisible in his theory of perception more rigorously to his own understanding of painting. His theory of expression brings into view a more contextual approach to the embodied working process and takes into consideration more than the strictly visible in any singular painting. Following this, the artist, like any other embodied perceiver, can never present a neutral or universally recognizable or accessible manner in which the world comes to appearance. The artist's manner of configuring sense is neither fully accessible to himself, nor to the other.

When considering contemporary practices like Sillman's, we see how painting, like perception, never just makes something visible (even if painting can make visible how a world can appear in perception): it actively selects and makes invisible in a process of fore- and backgrounding. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of perception can capture the generative power of painting as an ongoing practice, as it can consider how each work appears on a field that allows it to come into appearance, framing one particular way in which the work might be taken up. That is, a work like Sillman's does not only take place *in* the work and by what we might see appearing, but it can only be considered in a broader context of appearing. For instance, David Joselit describes contemporary painterly works as transitive as they operate in several contexts. He holds that it is within these changing contexts that the works should be considered, which therefore means they are not static, but continually in flux.⁸⁰ Considering these contexts foregrounds that the process of appearing is ongoing, both by what is made accessible or inaccessible due to the painter's decisions and due to each perceiver's own particularly embodied and situated field of perception. What Cézanne and Sillman's works explicitly show is that the intertwining of the visible and the invisible is not only taking place in the expressive process of creating a painting, but that the process remains ongoing when the art-object comes into appearance on an already sense-laden background.

Painting gives expression to a manner of configuring sense. Therefore, painting proposes a frame that allows the work to come to visibility, and influences what is framed as invisible. As each work is a decision on a particular frame, it cannot present a neutral, fully accessible, or self-sufficient view. The invisible both haunts and constitutes what comes to visibility and should therefore be equally considered when approaching contemporary painterly practices. There is a need for a contextual

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, p. 20).

⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1948a/1964, p. 15).

⁸⁰ Joselit (2009, pp. 125–34).

approach that does not only take into consideration the strictly visible, but foregrounds the co-constitutive role of the invisible and approaches the work as it is appearing in a field of perception. In the case of Sillman's work, this entails a consideration of the processes of working over the material, and the contexts in which her work appears. Not only does her work show that the embodied working process is constitutive of the work of art (like Merleau-Ponty already showed with Cézanne), but in an even stronger sense, the process of working-over the material should be considered *as* the work. The work is only able to appear as such in the context of her oeuvre, in connection to her writing, and it is guided by her knowledge about the art-discourse she is responding to, and embedded in. Her particular manner of being embodied and situated, and the material working process itself enable to work to appear, but they cannot be considered to be visible or present in the narrow sense.

Artistic expression, being an instance of embodied expression, will always present a partial view, similar to the subject's habitual manner of experiencing the world. As Derrida's understanding of the *parergon* highlighted, the processes of rendering visible and invisible are not only at work on the inside of the work, but equally at the limits of the painting qua material object. Both manners of framing are undecidable, but a decision will have to be made each time. Painting gives expression to a particular lifeworld and foregrounds the responsibility that comes with any act of framing. I consider a continual problematizing of the painting's borders a vital part of the painter's embodied working process. Approached as an expressive, embodied act, the painter's manner of proposing a frame is closely connected to their particular manner of perceiving the world. In every painting that makes something appear, something else is rendered invisible, becomes marginalized, or falls outside of the work's conceptual or material frame. Drawing on and further developing Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression presents a valuable starting point for understanding how each painting actively renders invisible, due to being an expression guided by particular orientations, bodily possibilities, and sedimented habits. A phenomenological approach to painting that describes the artistic practice as embodied and particularly situated, will consequently open up new possibilities to consider art's socio-political critical potential. That is, Merleau-Ponty foregrounds how the world appears in a particular way due to our bodily habits and possibilities, and his phenomenology can as such account for how social, political, cultural, or gendered norms influence how the world takes shape. As Sara Ahmed puts it: "[p]henomenology helps us explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures."⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty's manner of closely connecting the expressive processes of painting and perception underlines that one such gesture is art, giving expression to a particular lifeworld, or, a particular way of being-in-the-world. As such, a contemporary phenomenological account of art can consider limitations of embodied expression, allowing the role of what slips away from painting to be thought otherwise.

Embracing the ambiguous essence of painting entails that it becomes an open-ended practice, which does not mean that contemporary painting as a practice is

⁸¹ Ahmed (2006, p. 552).

arbitrary. Rather, it can be understood as being “beside itself.”⁸² By explicitly subverting or deconstructing what it is traditionally taken to be, painting still marginally engages with itself. It can still be considered as a particular manner of art-making, even though its possibilities are not determined in advance, and anything might be able to become painting. Returning to Merleau-Ponty via Derrida’s deconstruction of the frame allows for a reading of the expressive working process that no longer adheres to a restrictive understanding of what a painting should be, and provides a valuable starting point for a non-restrictive, contextual approach to contemporary painterly practices.

7 Concluding remarks

By rereading Merleau-Ponty’s insights on painting by turning to Derrida, and by engaging with the unfulfilled promise of a truth to painting, I have aimed to show how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can account for the possibilities of painterly practices today. A phenomenological approach does not limit the artistic possibilities of painting but locates its possibility to transform itself in the embodied working process of the painter. Two manners of framing are at work in a contemporary painterly practice: the material act of proposing a frame and framing as a responsibility concerning what comes to visibility and what remains invisible. Drawing on both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty’s insights foregrounds how the artist relies on a process of undecidability in order to question what appears and what is rendered invisible in the painting. As I have pointed out, the difficulty of deciding what comes to visibility is not only at work on the inside of the painting, but this is equally the case for the painting qua material object. I suggest that the manner of framing the ambiguous essence of a work as presented by the *parergon*, allows for an open-ended approach to what painting can be. If the lack of a presupposed essence is embraced, we can understand how painting can both push its own limits and be still considered as painting. The edges of the canvas are no longer the outside of the work, and what is regarded as invisible in a work shifts: the surroundings might become the work (e.g., Grosse) or an ongoing process might be considered the painting (e.g., Sillman). The embodied process of framing, its accompanying undecidable moment, and the eventual proposal for the work’s material borders, constitute the very promise of continually attempting to paint.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

⁸² Joselit (2009, pp. 125–34).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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