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# Cultivating Perception: Phenomenological Encounters with Artworks

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**Abstract:** Phenomenally strong artworks have the potential to anchor us in reality and to cultivate our perception. For the most part, we barely notice the world around us, as we are too often elsewhere, texting, coordinating schedules, planning ahead, navigating what needs to be done. This is the level of our age that shapes the ways we encounter things and others. In such a world it is no wonder we no longer trust our senses. But as feminists have long argued, thinking grounded in embodied experience can be more open to difference; such embodied thinking helps us to resist the colonization of a singular, only seemingly neutral, perspective that closes down living potentialities.

Phenomenally strong artworks have the potential to anchor us in the world and to cultivate our perception. For the most part, we barely notice the world around us, as we are too often elsewhere, texting, coordinating schedules, planning ahead, navigating what needs to be done. This is the level of our age that shapes the ways we encounter the world and others.<sup>1</sup> In such a world it is no wonder we no longer trust our senses. But as feminists have long argued, thinking grounded in embodied experience is more open to difference and helps us to resist the colonization of a singular, only seemingly neutral, perspective that closes down living potentialities. I want to show how a phenomenological approach that draws on embodied perception has much to offer feminist engagements with art.

Recognition of feminist phenomenology as a movement itself is relatively recent.<sup>2</sup> Despite a reliance on embodied experience as well as a mediation between the material and subjective, twentieth-century feminists were critical of phenomenologists for universalizing a European, able-bodied male subject, or for assuming the transcendental subject, the pure ego, which allowed them to relegate differences such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, and class to everyday empirical differences that belong to the social sciences (Fisher 2000, 2010, 85; Heinämaa and Rodemeyer 2010, 1-3). But more recently, feminists have recognized the important possibilities of a methodology that reveals embodied engagement with things, people, and relations. At the same time, they have also made significant methodological interventions, investigating for example what happens when we begin with the assumption that embodied lived experience structures the reflective process itself. This intervention enables them to ask how social, cultural, and corporeal differences actually shift the ways in which the world is understood, the ways in which it becomes meaningful. Gail Weiss, for example, explores how these differences organize meaning in terms of horizons that provide the “unthematized

background context that structures daily life” (Weiss 2008, 2). Other feminists also explore the ways in which temporality—that is, duration, habituation, and sedimented experience—shape the ego.<sup>3</sup> Still others, as I do here, draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s methodology to show that it is not only that reflection rests upon and is shaped by lived embodied experiences but also, the body itself has its own ways of understanding and interpreting the world.<sup>4</sup> In other words, there is a need to recognize the primacy of embodied perception that underlies cognition. The dismissal by some of the political potency of art belongs, I would argue, to the refusal to recognize this primacy of perception (Merleau-Ponty 2012); its confinement to designated spaces is a way of controlling its power.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, for feminist phenomenologists, bringing to view the ways in which we understand and interpret our lived existence and world, so that we can reflect upon them, opens up possibilities for change. For Linda Martín Alcoff, for example, describing the ways in which race, though not a biological category, is still real allows her to address how a “postural body image or a habitual perception” can be reoriented through critical phenomenological description (Alcoff 2006, 194). Racialized perception belongs to the imposition of representations and structures on our encounters with others, which means we do not actually engage with who or what is there. The “we” I refer to is a general “we” that belongs to a dominant world and coexists with particular worlds sometimes paradoxically and often painfully.<sup>6</sup>

There is plenty of evidence that even those of us who consider ourselves not to be racist or sexist engage in implicit bias.<sup>7</sup> We move into and take up this shared world’s generalities, its dominant ways of moving, perceiving, and corporeally understanding, even if we also resist them. There is, moreover, a tendency to remain largely unaware of this phenomenon since the forgetting of embodied perception belongs to this age. Feminist phenomenological approaches

address this forgetting by exploring the ways in which the world becomes meaningful, with world understood as both our particular and shared experiences of a web of material, discursive, affective, and sensual relationalities.

For this reason, artworks that rely on embodied encounters lend themselves to a feminist phenomenological approach. Brian Jungen's artwork, *People's Flag*, is one such work. When I first encountered it at London's *Tate Modern*, entering the gallery where it was hung, I was mesmerized by the vastness of the red swath of material suspended from the ceiling and folded on to the floor, providing a red glow against the white walls.<sup>8</sup> If I had simply glanced at the flag and then exited the hall, I would have been left with an impression of immense redness. But my companion and I tarried a while, examining the details of the flag composed of multiple pieces of worn clothing, sewn together by hand.<sup>9</sup> As we spent time with the work, something wondrous began to happen. The uniformity of the red disappeared, and the individual pieces of clothing—shirts, hats, skirts, vests, bags, umbrellas—began to pop out in a multitude of variations of reds, browns, pinks, and oranges. After a while, rather than seeing an enormous swath of red material, we encountered a sea of differences, of distinct colors and shapes of garments worn by different bodies, joined together by a web of stitches. We had moved into the level of the work and were seeing according to it.<sup>10</sup>

Levels, as Merleau-Ponty shows us, are established by situations we enter, and they tend to retreat into the background once our bodies adjust (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 253-62). For example, our eyes move into and adjust to a new lighting level as we move from a poorly lit space to a bright one. Besides the particular levels we move into and take up by virtue of being embodied, we also inhabit, I would argue, a more general epochal level that privileges efficiency and calculation, as well as, for example, racialized, sexist, and heteronormative understandings

of the world. But *People's Flag* establishes its own level according to which viewers perceive. As Merleau-Ponty claims, when we encounter an artwork we do not so much look at the work as perceive “according to” it; the work can open us to new perspectives and worlds that are not our own, or deepen our understanding of the world or worlds in which we live (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 164). Because we always move from one level to the next, we bring them with us along with our embodied histories, which shape the ways we encounter the new. I, for example, brought with me my own particular experiences as a white feminist academic, including the sedimentation of the artworks with which I have previously engaged. If I had been British, my understanding of the history of the work, which I will shortly address, would likely have been deeper. Nonetheless, one does not need the full history in order to encounter the work as a material object, although the closer one is to its cultural specificity, the more likely it will resonate deeply.

Accordingly, artworks can make a difference politically when they so ground us. Perceiving according to the work moves us away from being a subject who stands back and assesses an aesthetic object. The artwork becomes a kind of participation in the material, signifying, sensible, and affective texture of the real, creatively contributing to opening up this texture or fabric in new ways and helping us to rethink what we mean by reality. Indeed, the flag can itself be understood as a texture, a fabric, or a tissue of the world.<sup>11</sup> Of course, artworks are usually set up in museums and galleries to be looked at and framed by curatorial discourses, often impeding phenomenal encounters, though this potential to guide us to perceive and think in new ways remains.<sup>12</sup>

In his posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty muses on this fabric of the real in a meditation on the color red. Indeed, my reading of this passage

intertwined with my experience of Jungens's work; the colors of red that Jungens chose for his artwork are, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, variants in relation to their surroundings (1968, 132). Each piece of red cloth appears through the fibers of the material, connecting it with the other reds around it; colors attract, dominate, repel, intertwine—the visible itself is shown to be a web of relations that extends beyond the interaction of colors, of the variants of red in the space of the museum gallery, to the reds that belong to various cultures, to national flags, to religious symbols, to the embodied signification of personal experiences, indeed all the ways we have in the past experienced the color red, with its attendant meanings, including, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “from the depths of imaginary worlds”.<sup>13</sup> Colors like these reds, then, are participations, relations between “exterior” and “interior horizons” that remain open to change, “modulation[s] of this world” (1968, 132). Jungens's flag thus works to open up an interior temporal depth that both creates and enriches identity through resonating and responding to past experiences as the work is experienced in the present. Thus, *People's Flag* is not merely a collage of different reds; it shows up this fabric of the real, this intertwining and overlapping of the visible with the invisible, the overlapping of the visible pieces of clothing with the bodies that inhabited them, that made and cared for them. For, as Merleau-Ponty points out, red is always a red *something*—colors are always intertwined with texture, shape, size, and the identity of the object.

Thus, Jungens's *People's Flag* shows us how the weft of the real relies not only on the material world but also weaves materiality together with ideas, signification, perception, affect, and living bodies. It allows us to experience how to move from the general concept of red flag to the particularities of experienced material redness that support that concept and also break it apart. The work shows us difference coming into appearance if we attend to it. Flags normally accompany national identities that carry with them histories of inclusions and exclusions;

Jungen, as an indigenous artist, is well aware of North America's settler colonialism that elides the history of First Nations peoples through a series of exclusions including cultural devastation as well as genocide (Morgensen 2011). Though this work does not take up an indigenous theme as such, this history likely inflects both the artist's practice as well as some viewers' encounters with the work.

Flags work to unify and shape identities. Jungen's flag phenomenally shows up the differences that support identities— differences that are particular, material, sensual— differences that must be attended to over time in order to appear. In that the alterity established in the work *takes time* to encounter, it further contributes to opening up my own interior temporal depths.<sup>14</sup> Corporeal perception slows things down. It takes time to move into the level of the work, to run one's eyes along and to walk about the length of the fabric. Thus, the flag only comes into appearance gradually as one moves into the work's level, showing the viewer how underneath mass generalizations, identities, and national groupings that might appear as unified, the perceptual lived world is extraordinarily diverse. For a short while, if the viewer can leave behind the dominant level of our age, of planning and reckoning, she can experience the multiple particularities of difference that also intertwine with shared generalities like redness. Moreover, since perception is sedimented over time, we are addressed by works that attract or repel our gaze. Within the work itself, I am perceptually drawn to some garments more than others. The work thus engages each viewer both more generally in terms of its level and more particularly with the viewer's engagement with the specificities of the fabrics that makes up the whole. At the same time, it also reminds us conceptually that from a certain distance and speed that excludes duration, situation and movement—that is, the encounter—humans can appear under a unifying banner that obscures their particularities.

As Dorothea Olkowski explains, the dynamical system of classical physics that underlies much of Western thinking prioritizes space over time. The real is given to us through projections of “mathematical and physical structures” whereby “space and time are given, not emergent” (Olkowski 2012, 85, 121). In classical physics time appears according to spatial parameters as a sequence of moments, and space in terms of things side by side. In this framework there is no room for encounters. If space is calculably measurable, then nearness and distance can be accordingly reckoned, and everything becomes equally available; there is no difference. Although it is a system that is apparently endless or infinite, because encounters are not possible, it is ultimately closed, providing only more of the same. It is not the same as situations experienced by living bodies where the structure provided by the milieu allows for inexhaustible possibilities and an indeterminate future. If we remain within the “cognitive-linguistic realm of existence,” we can inhabit a system that is limited only by the infinite possibilities of human creativity, which can be both extraordinary and atrocious (Arendt 1958).<sup>15</sup>

Jungen’s work calls viewers to attend to the intricate and time-consuming labor involved in weaving together each article of clothing, a process that takes time and a task Jungen shared with others. For, just as vision is itself an intertwining of visible and invisible elements, so too does my vision intertwine synaesthetically with other senses, in this case, predominantly with touch. As my eyes run across the texture of the flag, I can almost feel the textures of the materials I see; my hands know the softness of wool, the smoothness of vinyl. Though touching the work is prohibited in this museum space, my hands are drawn to the fabrics, subtly reversing the priority of vision over touch even as the two senses inherently overlap. This intertwining of vision and touch helps me to see that each piece was individually stitched into the whole—and though *People’s Flag* is composed of mostly mass-produced garments, the pieces bear the

particularity of each body that wore them, reminding us as well of the invisible work of each particular laborer involved in the production of the mass-produced clothing that provides the material of the flag, as well as the garments we wear.

Thus the encounter with the work is inherently temporal and spatial—the looking and walking around the piece, the making of the work, the wearing of the articles of clothing, repeatedly over time, the repetitive motion in confined spaces required of the laborers, the place for which it was made. For, Jungen made this work for the Tate Modern, which is itself a converted factory.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that viewers are also reminded of the specificity of place. The work is in fact an homage to England’s history of “popular protest and to England’s left” (Gopnik 2009).

Indeed, we know from Karl Marx that the alienation of labor from the products of consumption contributes to commodity fetishism, whereby labor is obscured under an idea or value imposed from without. Jungen’s work calls us to recognize our responsibility to the individuals’ hands that produce the products we wear and consume, even as this labor is part of the invisible fabric of the flag that shows up in the traces of the stitches and that precedes our active perception of the articles of clothing themselves. His work weaves this experience into the attentive viewer’s own embodied fabric. Moreover, though this piece is not at first obviously gendered, we cannot ignore that the labor harnessed for mass-produced clothing is predominantly female, and that textile production as an art practice has also been associated for the most part with women, and hence until recently, largely undervalued. Through this artwork, we are brought back in touch with, and called to reflect upon, this meaningful material world.

Accordingly, *People’s Flag* calls the viewer to reflect upon the ways we currently produce, buy, and wear clothing, as well as upon what it means to belong to a community of

differences. In the way Alcoff (2006) suggests, the work allows for phenomenological description by providing the viewer with the opportunity to reflect upon her habits of perception. For experience on its own is not sufficient to enact change. We also need to reflect upon that which we experience; otherwise, we risk simply appropriating sensations, colors, beauty into our embodied being without questioning or acknowledging, as Luce Irigaray describes it, who or what has contributed to who we are, opening us to repeating the colonizing and appropriating gaze (Irigaray 2004).

If we are to take feminist criticism of phenomenology seriously, then we have to consider the extent to which sedimented meaning structures impose themselves upon that which we perceive. But artworks can counter habitual ways of perceiving, opening up our embodied perception and showing us how to perceive in new ways, including how to encounter difference. Phenomenally we are not locked in our own unique worlds. As Irigaray writes, we see differently when we look at something with someone else (Irigaray 2004, 399). Copercption of an artwork reveals how we confront, are shaped and moved by an autonomous material reality even as we bring our own individual histories and worlds to that encounter.<sup>17</sup> On that day at the Tate Modern, I shared my experience of Jungen's artwork with my companion. Through her gaze I perceived differently. To cultivate perception is to be attentive to the here and now so that it emerges as a shared reality, which entails acknowledging a rich web of perceptions, affects, meanings, horizons, and experiences with all its potential. Indeed, the perceptual meanings we arrive at are more compelling when they are shared, relational and acknowledged by others—and they have the potential to challenge imposed ideas like those of the unified and boundaried nation-states that flags represent.

It is my claim that shifting the ways we encounter the world as embodied beings, deepening and attending to our perceptual engagement with what and who is there, can initiate change. Since thought itself is always corporeal and situated, artworks can help to guide us in this task. Indeed, even though an encounter with Jungen's artwork is limited since it is displayed in a museum, just as Jungen creates a work that engages in the fabric of red, it does not need to be seen by all to become part of a cultural generality. So too, in engaging with the artwork myself, I bring the deepening of my own perceptual capacities to my relations with others who may never have the opportunity to encounter the artwork themselves. Ultimately, to change reality, we need to know where we are in order to decide what action to take. Some artworks can help to cultivate our perception and to bring embodied being to our thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Mariana Ortega (2001) extends Martin Heidegger's understanding of world to worlds. But here I refer to a dominant world that casts its shadow over multiple worlds.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher (2000) is considered the first naming of this field.

<sup>3</sup> These feminists engage largely with Edmund Husserl, considered the founder of twentieth-century phenomenology. See, for example, Al-Saji (2010) and Heinämaa and Rodemeyer (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Weiss (1999), Ahmed (2006), Rawlinson (2006), and Fielding (2011).

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<sup>5</sup> This move works in tandem with a similar one to associate the body, the feminine, and the exoticized, the erotized, and the racialized other together in a binary relation with the mind, the masculine, and the European.

<sup>6</sup> Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Weiss describes the anonymous body as a kind of nonreflective intentionality that guides our daily interactions, which is not the same as imposing the universalized body of the male European philosopher. Weiss notes that the anonymous body is not general since it is always taken up in particularized situations (Weiss 2002, 192-94).

Nonetheless, Mary C. Rawlinson (2006) also points out the contradiction in Merleau-Ponty's "we," since it both imposes a historically and conceptually based privileged European masculine subject, even as Merleau-Ponty espouses the contingency and situatedness of all ideas and experiences.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke (1999).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Jungen is a Canadian artist with a Swiss-born father and an Indigenous mother who was a member of the Dane-zaa Nation (see

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=188487>). I saw the work that was made for the Tate Modern in June 2006 and at Museum London.

<sup>9</sup> My companion was Mary Rawlinson, whom I thank for her contributions to this discussion from our postconference museum visit. I have encountered the work since at Museum London in Canada.

<sup>10</sup> I draw on the body hermeneutics of Samuel B. Mallin (1996).

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty uses the word "flesh" to refer to this fabric or tissue that is both material and imbued by imagination, signification (1968, 123, 138, 140, 144).

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<sup>12</sup> There are of course significant efforts to counter this tendency of confining artworks to museums and galleries.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, when *People's Flag* was shown in the *National Museum of the American Indian* in Washington DC, this venue apparently prompted some to interpret the work in terms of the US “flag of a united Red Nation of Indian people.” a concept that would not have been part of Jungen’s Canadian upbringing. See Gopnik (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Here I draw on Rawlinson’s description of contact with alterity opening up the viewer’s own interior temporal depths. She shows how literature allows the reader to come into contact with embodied essences or styles of being that are not her own—something that philosophy is not able to achieve since it draws on a shared and common language that does not open to difference (2006, 76-79).

<sup>15</sup> The cognitive-linguistic realm of existence is Mallin’s (1996, 275-76) term for what is usually understood as mind set up in opposition to body understood as perception, affective-sociality, and motility.

<sup>16</sup> Importantly, there is no museum entrance fee, and the room where the work hung lies just inside the main entrance.

<sup>17</sup> Fisher emphasizes the materiality that sometimes gets lost under all the social-cultural and symbolic representations (Fisher 2010, 88).