Elemental Sensuous

Elemental Sensuous:

Phenomenology and Aesthetics

Edited by

Linda Ardito and John Murungi

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PREFACE

This book presents the sensuous not solely as a principle but as a dynamic emergence that is accessible to the receptive reader; that is, to the reader who is prepared to allow this dynamic sense of the sensuous to present itself, revealing what it has to offer. Given the directness of access in this context, the editors avoid posting themselves between the sensuous and the readers to whom it presents itself. The sensuous has been their guide, and it is their hope that readers of this book will likewise be guided by it. In this way, the reader's direct access to the sensuous can be the basis for its revelation. Thus the editors have opted for a phenomenological method; that is, a method where the sensuous is perceived without mediation. Indeed, the chapters presented herein are intended to provide a phenomenological path to what is essential about the sensuous. Primarily, each contributor addresses the reader under the guidance of the sensuous. This book is a collection of their respective responses to the call of the sensuous, as well as a forum in which readers can share in its richness.

Both editors have independently been inspired by aesthetics and the dynamic principles by which it inherently informs and inspires. From their many conversations within this field of inquiry, they decided it would be important enough to undertake the project that would become this book, with chapters largely written by others who have been similarly inspired. The chapters contained herein are authored by those who have sought to enrich the ongoing discourse on the phenomenology of the world of aesthetics. Each of their voices is an interaction with and a response to the call of this experiential phenomenon. Indeed, the book is a concert of these voices, a concert that may be understood, ultimately, as one in which the sensuous is made manifest through phenomenological and aesthetical principles.

We wish to thank the Office of Technology at Towson University for their assistance in the technical preparation of the manuscript for this book.

INTRODUCTION

Essays in this book evoke and invoke that which is elemental in the context of the sensuous; that is to say, that which constitutes the constitutive elements of the sensuous and that in which all that is may be said to abide. The elemental dimension enhances our receptivity, fostering a sense of belonging to it and thus conceivably to everything else that is. Language and thought are thereby constituted and revealed and, consequently, they manifest and convey from this broadest aspect. In this book, each contributor will be shown to have responded to the call of the elemental in this context and each finds his or her starting point where everyone else may be said to begin and end—in that place, *the* place of the elemental.

Much can be learned about what is elemental in the sensuous just as much can be learned about the sensuous in what is elemental. The lesson is drawn from what is elemental in the sensuous and in what is directed by it. Those to whom it is directed are rooted in a phenomenological relationship with the elemental sensuous and, in this way, become *of* it. They are at home in it and are its envoys. As elemental, what is sensuous is irreducible. It is what makes it be what it is and what makes it appear as what it is. It is in this sense that the sensuous makes itself manifest.

A work of art is one of the theaters of the sensuous. As a sensuous phenomenon, it illustrates what is elemental. The inclination to treat a work of art as though it is solely a symbol or a sign of sorts would be misguided. It has no inside where its meaning may be unconcealed. Nor does it exhibit anything other than itself. We, too, in our elemental sensuousness possess this same essence. We have neither internal nor external reference lying beyond ourselves. In an elemental sense, we exhibit the sensuousness of ourselves. The sensuous informs us in identifying the sense and the essence of a work of art. Knowing such a work does not amount to infusing spirit with an otherwise spiritless or lifeless material. It is a kind of instruction in which we are taught to know that which is sensuous. We are also thereby taught the essence of ourselves. This complex teaching is what aesthetic experience brings into relief. The sensuous world is brought into being in such a way that we too are exhibited as belonging to it. Its world is inalienably our world. Our world is the world of the sensuous. This is precisely what phenomenology

renders explicit. From this elemental vantage point, experience of the sensuous precedes the dichotomy of inner and outer, material and immaterial. We are taken up by the sensible as whole and exhibited as belonging to it fully. Aesthetics and phenomenology inaugurate and secure our membership in the sensible world.

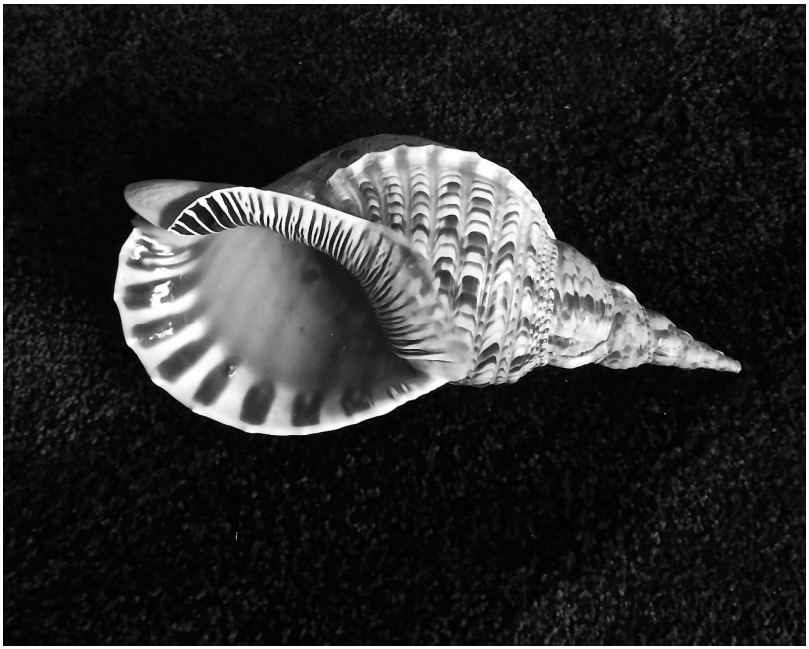
In this elemental sense, the sensuous is palpable. It is not in opposition to mind or to spirit. It does not derive its being in opposition to what is immaterial in favor of what is material, in favor of materialism. It is to be understood as existing on its own terms as a lived-sensuousness. It is a creative force that vivifies; it is the principle of vitality. As the elemental, it is not to be confused with the classical notion of the atom, which is viewed as a self-contained entity into which all reality is reducible. Rather, the elemental is a living creative force that resists categorization. This force embodies the principle of openness and of opening, a principle celebrated and given expression by artists and by other friends of the sensuous, as well as by the authors contained here.

Thus the elemental is not an element in the table of elements, and it is not the sum of these elements. It is not contained within the scheme of the four elements that are associated with pre-Socratic Greek thinking: Earth, water, air, and fire. It is not the sum of them. “What is it?”, then, one might ask. Such a question is not an ordinary one. Nor does it call for an ordinary answer. Rather, it must be understood on an elemental level and that calls for an elemental answer. It must arise from what is elemental and find its answer, equally, in what is elemental. Accordingly, whoever raises the question and seeks the answer to it, must be equally rooted in the elemental if both the question and the answer are to make elemental sense. Even those who do not raise this question or look for its answer are claimed by the elemental in their being. For the most part, the elemental abides unrecognized and never fully yields to recognition, if only because it is not entirely subject to cognition. It has never been fully known and resists ever being fully known. At the same time, its presence is pervasive in everything and it is everywhere. This, and much more, is what the sensuous teaches us. Taught effectively, the subject of elemental sensuous would involve more than a conveyance of information. Teaching about the elemental, which is the teaching at stake here, is not foreign to who and what we are. Moreover, the elemental has a way of teaching itself, of revealing that the future is in the present and the present is in the past, and vice versa. To learn about it or to be taught by it, we must surrender to it. In doing so, we, too, become irreducible in the sense of who and what we are. Indeed, being our elemental selves is, ultimately, who and what we are.

CHAPTER ONE

SEASHELLS

ALPHONSO LINGIS

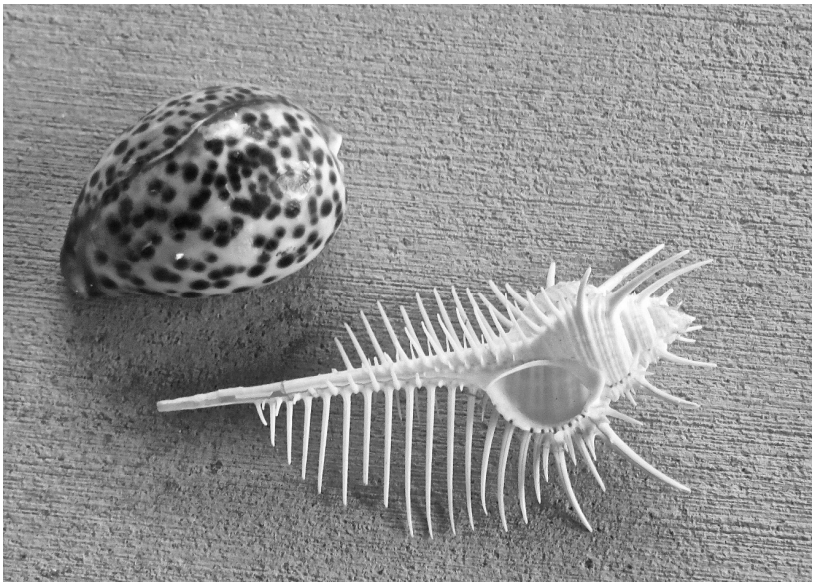


Seashells are scallops, plates, cones, spirals. Their surfaces are smooth, ribbed, ridged, bristled, spiked. They are white, spotted, splotched, penciled with waves of colors, nacreous, gleaming with iridescence. There are upwards of 15,000 types of seashells. On each shell the markings are, like human fingerprints, unique.

From the most ancient times humans have seen beauty in these forms and designs. Seashells are the most ancient art objects. Humans have

fastened them into pendants and chest plaques, strung them into necklaces, beaded their hair with them, adorning themselves with their beauty.

Who is the artist and what is the artistry that makes a seashell? In the seashells that are found on beaches the mollusks have died, and the action of the waves has gritted and broken them. Human collectors seek out undamaged seashells in which their creators are still alive, and kill them.



Genius

Philosopher Immanuel Kant explained that the agency that produces art is genius, a natural talent that creates originality. What genius produces is an aesthetic idea. "By an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e., concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible."[1]

A genius implants an original aesthetic idea in the materials of an artwork. But the idea occurs to him, comes to him from nature. Its source is not his autonomous self-conscious self-determining subjectivity. "If an author owes a product to his genius, he himself does not know how he came by the ideas for it; nor is it in his power to devise such products at

his pleasure, or by following a plan, and communicate [his procedure] to others in precepts that would enable them to bring about like products."[2]

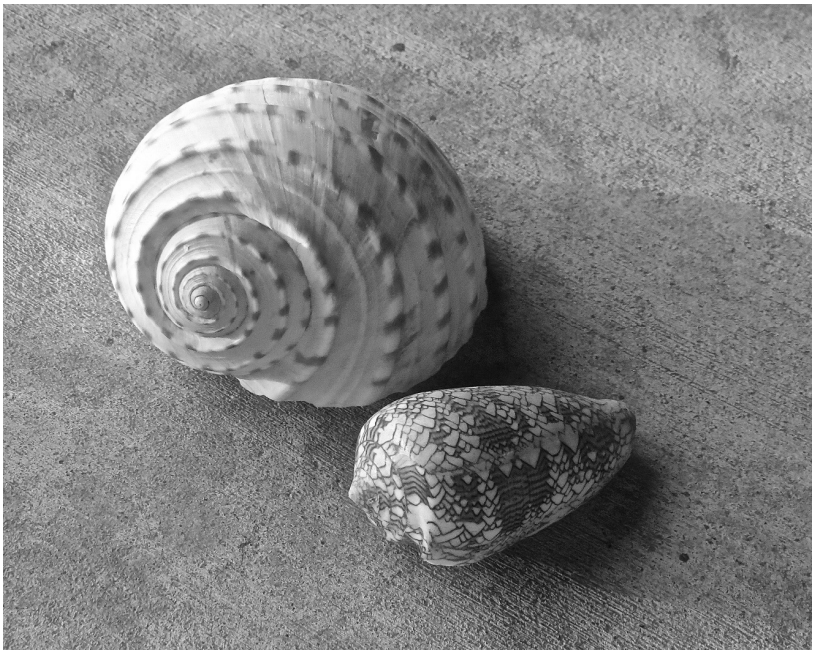
It is "nature" that engenders the idea in him. What is this nature? It is not the phenomenal nature that is known objectively through rational scientific laws. It is the action of noumenal nature, which cannot be articulated in rational concepts.[3]

Aesthetic ideas then are not derived from the culture in which the artist lives, from the laws governing its taste. The genius is an individual acting in freedom from his culture. Artworks produced by genius function as standards and exemplars for taste.

For philosopher G. F. W. Hegel beauty is the organic unity or harmony of different elements, but an object must also manifest the self-conscious self-determining freedom of spirit; this is the "aesthetic idea" in them. For Hegel sculptures of idealized humans and dramas are the most properly beautiful.

Hegel put the question, which is better, a painting of a landscape, or that landscape itself? He responds that the essential in an artwork is the emotion and meaning that the artist has put into the representation impressed upon stone, wood, canvas, or words. "An interest vital to man, the spiritual values which the single event, one individual character, one action possesses in its devotion and final issue, is seized in the work of art and emphasized with greater purity and clarity than is possible on the ground of ordinary reality where human art is not. And for this reason the work of art is of higher rank than any product of Nature whatever, which has not submitted to this passage through the mind. In virtue of the emotion and insight, for example, in the atmosphere of which a landscape is portrayed by the art of painting, this creation of the human spirit assumes a higher rank than the purely natural landscape. Everything which partakes of spirit is better than anything begotten of mere Nature."[4]

A painting of a seashell created by a human artist would be better than that seashell created by a mollusk.



The Unconscious

Sigmund Freud had explained that the manifest content of dreams, free associations, slips of the tongue, and, later, the manifest content of cultural myths are the result of repressed latent drives and desires which reach consciousness in disguised forms, irrational and contradictory; fusing past, present and future; conjoining the most incongruous images. The surrealists were totally uninterested in therapy or in the analysis of the manifest content of dreams and free association in view of exposing the latent content. They were fascinated with the manifest content, with the creative ingenuity with which the unconscious desires and drives and unconscious censorship produces it. The nature that produces aesthetic ideas is within, is a depth of subjectivity.

Surrealist André Breton was a medical student who had been drafted into the French army in February 1915 and after basic training assigned first to a military hospital and then to a neuropsychiatric hospital in Saint-Dizier in northeastern France. There the vivid imagery, the poetry, in the delirious utterances of shell-shocked soldiers fascinated him. “Completely occupied as I still was with Freud at that time, and familiar as I was with

his methods of examination which I had had some slight occasion to use on some patients during the war, I resolved to obtain from myself what we were trying to obtain from them, namely, a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition and which was, as closely as possible, akin to s*poken thought.*"[5]

As free association was for Freud the principal method in therapy to produce material for analysis, automatic writing was for Breton the basic method to produce marvelous poetry. The surrealists treasured dreams and hypnogogic states. Breton and his friends practiced verbalizing in hypnotic trance. André Masson introduced automatic drawing, where the hand moves without conscious control. The surrealists observed the automatic drawing of mediums but attributed the force determining the drawing not to spirits but to the unconscious. Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, and Jean Arp produced artworks with automatic drawing.

Anthropologists have resisted the psychoanalytic reduction of all entities not grasped and apprehended by rational conceptions to emanations of the unconscious. They instead have recorded the visions that come in dreams, trances, and collective rituals in the terms and explanations of the culture they are observing. The surrealists extended their explorations beyond dreams and delirium to the discourse and visions of mediums and seers, then to the images produced in other cultures, Africa, Haiti, Polynesia. In doing so they were leaving behind the unconscious as psychoanalysis had conceived it.

Nature

For Friedrich Nietzsche art issues out of dreams, images that divine the individuality of forms deeper than those seen in everyday reality, and intoxication, which "seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness,"[6] intensifying in nonteleological movements, moments that are not going anywhere. These are the artistic powers of nature, the impulses of nature in our nature. They are "artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*." [7] Dreams give rise to plastic arts and rhythmic music; intoxication gives rise to dance, melody and harmonic music, song, and tragic drama.

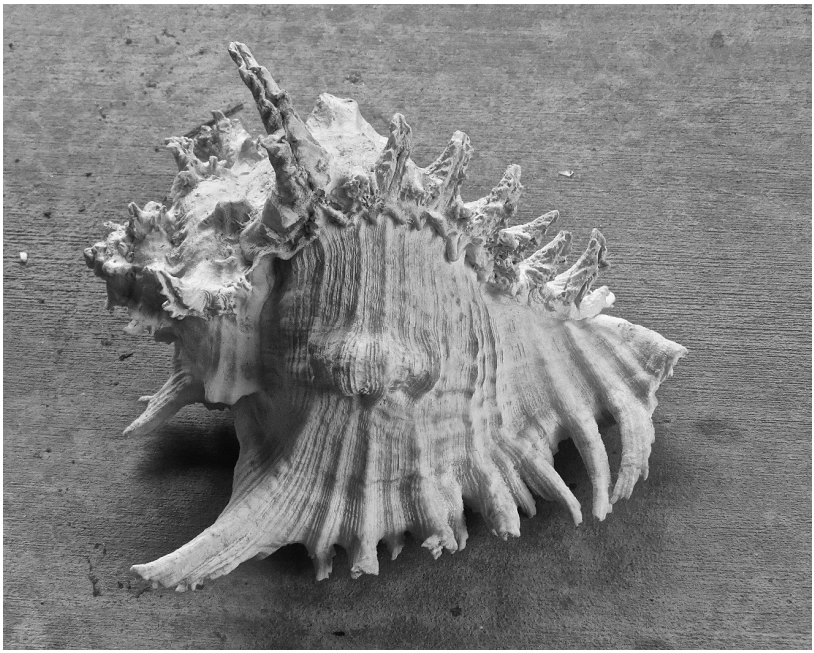
The nature in our nature that burst forth in dreams and intoxication is not for Nietzsche a depth of human subjectivity; it is universal nature. Beneath the multiplicity of fixed forms nature is chaotic forces in Becoming, which produce forms but also disintegrate them.

In humans dreams and intoxication produce sculpture, painting, music, dance, song, and tragic drama, but these are not produced for humans. Nature produces them for itself.

> We are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and . . . we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art . . . while of course our consciousness of our significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it . . . all our knowledge of art is basically quite illusory, because as knowing beings we are not one and identical with that which, as the sole author and spectator of this comedy of art, prepares a perpetual entertainment for itself.[8]

Nietzsche saw in Dionysian festivals individuals divesting themselves of their roles and social identity, taking on and letting go of multiple forms and identities. In them there emerges the world-artist, which ceaseless creates forms and delivers them to disintegration, joyous in the unending creation and destruction of forms. In creating and abandoning his own form and individuality, the participant merges with the force and the feeling of nature, and knows a "metaphysical comfort . . . that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable."[9]

Nietzsche writes of the forces of nature producing creating humans as artworks. He does not write of the forces of nature producing crystals, flowers, sunsets, seashells as artworks.



Action

In the Zen of Japan, the calligrapher, flower-arranger, or archer empties his mind of purpose, intention, foresight, indeed of his sense of identity. Then the hands quickly move, and the calligraphy, flower-arrangement, or flight of the arrow is realized of itself. The calligrapher makes no corrections; if the work is not perfect it is discarded.

The Zen artist first composes "riken no ken," "the seeing of detached perception." It is the state of mind conveyed by a string of Zen Buddhist expressions: *mushin* (no mind), *muga* (no self), *mujyo* (no thing) and *munen* (non attachment). Philosopher Michael Lazarin explains:

> Thus the artist is filled and refilled by the requirements of the ink and paper and brush strokes at each moment in the creation of the artwork. He/she is filled with what the artwork requires. The state of mind in artistic creation is a constant shifting about such that from any point of view, the artist is attuned to what is happening in the artwork: a pure seeing of detached perception. The detachment is the "bracketing" of all prejudices and expectations of what is to be seen, especially the existence or non-existence of what is seen. What happens in this pure seeing is not

> so much an amplification of the usual senses (sight, touch, smell, etc.) but rather dozens of proprioceptive capacities are released from the bondage of mundane existence; sense of warmth, acceleration, spatial orientation, temporal duration, sexual frission, the slavering cruelty of orange, planetary music, etc., etc. There may also be higher cognitive functions that harmonize all the additional input from artistic proprioception. Thus, the detachment (of no mind, *mushin*) allows hundreds of ways of sensing something, the artwork, to be activated.[10]

Philosopher Eugen Herrigel, in *Zen and the Art of Archery*,[11] tells of the Zen master with whom he studied. The master indicates that the mind must be freed from all attachments and thus become egoless. Nothing definite will be thought, planned, striven for, desired, or expected. The will is extinguished; the mind is purposeless, aimless. Concentration on breathing anchors the mind such that it is aware of the sensible world but not attached to it. The mind or spirit is present everywhere, because it is nowhere attached to anything particular. It comes to vibrate on itself and becomes able to summon up energies in any direction and to intensify and release tensions. This state becomes everywhere attuned to, one with the external situation. In this vibrant attunement the arrow flies as by itself to the target. The act is produced out of this attunement and not of a willful effort of the ego.

"At a certain moment," critic Harold Rosenberg observed, "the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or *express* an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."[12] Jackson Pollock did not paint models, landscapes, or still lifes, and he did not begin with a preconceived mental image of a painting. The action issues, he said, out of the unconscious, and out of the artist's inner tensions and emotions. He stepped rhythmically about the painting such that the strokes that cast the paint were supported and moved by the patterns of movement of his whole body. The action was launched from a particular mental and physical state, strikingly parallel to that of a Zen artist. "When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing . . . . the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through . . . . there is a pure harmony, an easy give and taken, and the painting comes out well."[13]

Georges Matthieu painted huge canvases with breathless speed. Speed excludes cognitive intentions and premeditated moves. He painted before audiences, where the action of the artist was immediately communicated.

Chance

The Surrealists found the topics they painted in dreams and spontaneous, irrational images. But mostly they painted like everybody since the Ice Age caves: with critical attention and skill. Salvador Dali practiced the surrealist methods of automatic writing and drawing, speaking and drawing under hypnosis, and painted images that emerged in his dreams, nightmares, and hypnogogic states. He affirmed that the images were not deliberately contrived; he was the first to be surprised by what emerged. Then he set out to paint them with the clarity and precision of seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes.

Jackson Pollock introduced chance in the painting act. He swung sticks, trowels, knives, basting syringes dribbling, dripping paint, sand, and broken glass over the canvas laid unstretched on the floor. He did not touch the sticks to the canvas nor manually modify the result. The shape of the swirls and drippings of the paint resulted from the viscosity of the paint and movements that swung them. But, he said, there is no accident. The chance drippings and splatterings of the paint are evoked by the paintings, by its emergent harmony.

For John Cage the essential in music composition is the presentation of sounds, sounds in themselves. They are to be liberated of dramatic intentions, literary or pictorial purposes. They should be freed of personal expression, drama, psychology. They should not be put forth as expressions of sentiments. The composer frees himself of his personal history, his memory and imagination, his personal taste. The discontinuity of sounds functions to free sounds from the burden of psychological intentions. Sounds are also not to be used to express ideas of order.

This leads to the introduction of chance in the compositional process. Cage will determine notes and their properties by throws of I Ching coins.

In fact sounds have emotional impact. But this should be produced in the listener by his or her emotional susceptibility. It should not be imposed by the composer upon the listener.

> Hearing sounds that are just sounds immediately sets the theorizing mind to theorizing, and the emotions of human beings are continually aroused by encounters with nature. Does not a mountain unintentionally evoke in us a sense of wonder? otters along a stream a sense of mirth? night in the woods a sense of fear? Do not rain falling and mists rising up suggest the love binding heaven and earth? Is not decaying flesh loathsome? Does not the death of someone we love bring sorrow? And is there a greater hero than the least plant that grows? What is angrier than the flash of lightning and the sound of thunder?"[14]

Music does not occur in isolation. There will be ambient sounds, even in the most hushed auditorium. Like the reflections of trees, clouds, sheets of sunlight on the windows of a building by Mies van der Rohe, the ambient sounds are a part of the concert experience. Ambient sounds will be heard with irritation as noises, but if they are attended to they will be heard as interesting. The musical experience is not only received by the ears but by the eyes too, by the whole person.[15]

> "We are not, in these dances and music, saying something . . . We are rather doing something."[16] The composer will function as a faithful receiver of experience. Our work has "moved away from simply private concerns toward the world of nature and society of which all of us are a part. Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos."[17]

There is an ethics, even a politics, in this position. "When the war came along, I decided to use only quiet sounds. There seemed to me to be no truth, no good, in anything big in society."[18]

Cage made compositions in which elements of its performance—the duration of sounds, or their pitch—are not determined; they will be supplied by the performer. In some compositions several musicians are playing scores that are not coordinated. As a result, each performance is unique.

Cadavre exquis is the surrealist practice of composing a poem by having one person write a word, then fold the paper to conceal it but telling what part of speech it is; then the next person adds a word, folds the paper to conceal it, and passes it to the next person, and so on. The surrealists also composed pictures in the same way. They were often stunned by the marvelous poem or picture that resulted. Here the autonomous agency of the poet or the artist is undone. Chance has determined the composition of the poem or the picture.

Dada was launched as an antiart movement, eliminating talent, skill, and training, and planning and composing from making objects. Hans Arp ripped up a drawing and saw that the dropped pieces of paper formed a chance composition. Marcel Duchamp fastened a bicycle wheel to a stool. He found objects he neither liked nor disliked, to which his taste or distaste was indifferent, and made them readymade art objects by signing them.[19] (In fact Duchamp found few objects he neither liked nor disliked, exhibited only 19, and came to find that he liked them.)

In the early 1960s Niki de Saint Phalle produced "shooting pictures." She mounted polythene bags with paint and covered them with white plaster People were given guns and invited to shoot at these, releasing the paint. In 1982 William Burroughs began to create paintings by shooting at

spray cans hung before sheets of plywood.

When chance becomes the agent that composes the artwork, nature becomes the artist as well as the artwork. The work is both produced by and exhibits chance. The marvelous appears in the world by revealing things in webs of connections that are not functional or causal. The marvelous is produced by chance. Marvelous beauty erupts when things meet without cause or utilitarian finality, "beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table," according to the Comte de Lautréaumont. "Convulsive beauty" Breton wrote, "will be veiled-erotic, fixed-exploding, circumstantial-magical."[20]

Each seashell is made as on a template, that of its species, but chance produces the individual signature.

Art without Viewers

Duchanps took everyday utilitarian readymade objects and by signing them make them into artworks. The supposition would be that an art object is a spectacle, something that exists to be viewed.

Adolf Portmann called the antlers, manes, tails and surface designs of mammals and birds "organs to be seen." Charles Darwin recognized in the extravagant elaboration of the tails of peacocks and the huge decorative plumes that overlay the wings of Malay Great Argus pheasants features that nowise contribute to the survival fitness of the species. Indeed, gaudy plumage and burdensome body ornamentation make individuals more vulnerable to predators. Subsequent empirical research has established that female long-tailed widowbirds choose the males with the longer tails, elk cows choose the bull elk with the most developed antlers. Birds-of–paradise (42 species), peafowl, Malay Great Argus pheasants, and hummingbirds (356 species) who have evolved extravagant crests, ruffs, tails have done so because females choose the most spectacular male to whom to give their sexual favors. The males display their splendor with dances and songs. Bowerbirds who construct theaters adorned with collections of objets d'art—colored seeds and berries, feathers, flowers, shells, glass beads—pick them up to show them and perform songs and dances before visiting females.

Mollusks do not see the glamor of the shells they make or those others make. Of the 50,000 known species of mollusks, only octopods, squid, and cuttlefish have eyes with iris, a circular lens, vitreous cavity (eye gel), pigment cells, and photoreceptor cells that translate light from the light-sensitive retina into nerve signals which travel along the optic nerve to the brain—startlingly similar to human eyes. Marine mollusks who make shells have only rudimentary eyes, able to discern light and shadow. Seashells are artworks without viewers.

The oldest known paintings of humanity are those found in caves, those of Sulawesi in Indonesia, dated at 35,400 years ago; those of Europe, of which some 340 have been discovered, the oldest, El Castillo, dated at 40,800 years ago; and those of Australia, some dated at 40,000 years ago. In them animals were sometimes painted in places that can be seen only by researchers who built scaffolds and crawled into tight fissures.

In Byzantine basilicas and gothic cathedrals mosaics, frescos, and statues were put in heights invisible to the worshippers but made with the same talent and care.

Thangkas painted in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia were unrolled and displayed only during the time of meditation, some of them only once a year.

Charles Dellschau, who had been a butcher, after retirement over 21 years filled notebooks with drawings, watercolor paintings, and collages. After his death, the house where they were burned, and everything was

thrown into a landfill. An unknown person salvaged 13 notebooks that then remained under a pile of old rugs in the warehouse of a used furniture dealer. They were shown in a gallery 75 years after his death.

Henry Darger worked as a hospital orderly in Chicago. In the room where he lived he wrote, over 43 years, the 15,145-page, single-spaced manuscript of a novel called *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal,* with more than 300 drawings and watercolor paintings illustrating the novel, a novel*Crazy House: Further Adventures in Chicago*, in 15 volumes; and *The History of My Life*, 4,672 pages in eight volumes. These were discovered by the landlord when Darger was removed to a nursing home shortly before his death.

James Hampton, an African-American, worked as a janitor. Over 14 years in a garage that he had rented he secretly built an elaborate religious throne surrounded by 180 sacred objects, and composed a text in a script that remains undeciphered. They were discovered by the owner of the garage after his death.

In 1982 some 1200 wire sculptures were found by a passerby in bags and cardboard boxes on trash pickup day in an alley outside a transient home in Philadelphia. From objects contained in the sculptures they were dated to 1970. Despite extensive research, no one was found who knew the maker, who is now called the Philadelphia Wireman.

Today the greater part of the works that museums own are in storage.

Tycoons purchase celebrated works for millions, have copies made to hang on their walls while the paintings themselves are in climate- and humidity-controlled vaults.

In the dark depths of the oceans millions of seashells whose sublime forms and exquisite colors are never seen, by mollusks or anyone.

Notes

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987),
[2] Ibid, 175.
[3] Ibid.
[4] George Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art,* trans. F. P. B. Osmaston (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1999), 38-9.
[5] André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor Paperback, 1972) 22-23.
[6] Ibid.

[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Trage*dy, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 2.
[8] Ibid, 5.
[9] Ibid, 7. "We are really for a brief moment primordial being itself, feeling its raging desire for existence and joy in existence; the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena now appear necessary to us, in view of the excess of countless forms of existence which force and push one another into life, in view of the exuberant fertility of the universal will. We are pierced by the maddening sting of these pains just as we have become, as it were, one with the infinite primordial joy of existence, and when we anticipate, in Dionysian ecstasy, the indestructibility and eternity of this joy. In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose creative joy we are united." Ibid, ¶ 16.
[10] Michael Lazarin, personal communication.
[11] Eugen Herrigel, *Zen and the Art of Archery*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Vintage, 1999).
[12] Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" (1952) in *Art News* 51/8, Dec. 1952, p. 22; then published in *Tradition of the New,* 1959.
[13] Pepe Karmel, ed., *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews* (New York: Abrams, 1999), 18.
[14] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings, 50th Anniversary Edition* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyen, 2013), 10.
[15] Ibid, 31.
[16] Ibid, 94.
[17] Ibid, 95.
[18] Ibid, 117.
[19] One of these, a small perfume bottle, was sold in auction in 2009 for $11,489,968.
[20] André Breton, *Mad Love*. Trans: Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln Nebraska: Bison Books, 1988). 19.

CHAPTER TWO

PHENOMENOLOGY OF BEACHING

JOHN MURUNGI

For look! Within my hollow hand,
While round the earth careens,
I hold a single grain of sand
And wonder what it means.
Ah! If I had the eyes to see,
And brain to understand,
I think Life's mystery might be
Solved in this grain of sand.
—Robert William Service

This chapter opens with a poem. There is something essentially poetic about a beach. There is a necessary connection between poetry and phenomenology. The truth of these two claims is not self-evident. Generally, when we think about poets we do not think about phenomenologists, and when think about phenomenologists we do not think about poets. Usually, when one goes to a beach, one does not think about poets or about phenomenologists. It is not poetry or phenomenology that attracts us to a beach. Poetry and phenomenology are taken to be academic matters. They belong to the academy and not to the beach. As the Beach Boys would say, we go to the beach to get away from it all, and the *all* includes academic life.[1] If only provisionally, the reader is asked to set aside this everyday mode of thinking and indulge in a different thinking -–a thinking that is informed by both poetry and phenomenology. Everydayness obscures. Poetry and phenomenology remove this obscurity. With removal, one avails oneself to what the beach has to offer. The beach opens itself to those who are after its elemental sense.

According to Poet Robert William Service, the author of the above poem,[2] if one had eyes to see and brain to understand, a single grain of sand might solve Life's mystery. He has in mind, poetic eyes and poetic brain, or poetic seeing and poetic understanding. If we bear in mind that a

grain of sand is a part of the sand, what the poet says about it necessarily applies to it. If we could see the sand with poetic eyes and understand it with poetic brain, the sand might solve Life's mystery. If we are up to it, this kind of seeing opens up the possibility that a sandy beach could be a special type of presence -a non-everyday sense of presence. The poetic phenomenologist attempts to awaken us to this possibility and asks us to suspend the normal seeing and the normal understanding of the beach. In poetic phenomenology, which is operative here, *poiesis* is indistinguishable from phenomenology and, more strictly, it can be said that *poiesis* is phenomenology, and phenomenology is *poiesis*. In this case, we can focus on phenomenology without being sidetracked by the concern with how *poiesis* is to be understood. In this context, a beach presents itself to us without mediation by cumbersome concepts. This presenting is beaching. In the elemental sense, a beach presents itself in beaching.

Some individuals will have no sense of what the word phenomenology means. Consequently, they might be curious about what is going to be said about a beach in the present chapter. The reader may also be wondering about what phenomenology has to do with a beach. At least, I hope that what is said will lessen one's curiosity but not necessarily get rid of it. A human being needs to retain a sense of curiosity to preserve his or her sense of well-being -a sense that he or she needs to remain human. Without a sense of curiosity one ceases to exist fully aa a self-conscious human being. We are curious beings. Nothing that is going to be said is definitive of what can be said about phenomenology or about the beach. There will be always more to be said about either, just as there will be always more to say about our relation to phenomenology or to a beach and about the relation we have with one another.

Generally, how one looks at an entity determines or is determined by what is looked at. We rarely think about the implications of looking at something or about how what we look at determines how we look. In regard to a beach, it matters how we look at it and what it is that we look at. Often, these two aspects are not mutually exclusive. They co-determine each other. We rarely think about the inescapability of this co-determination and often are oblivious of it.

Looking at a beach from a phenomenological perspective differs from everyday ways of looking at it. The difference is not obvious. For many of us, the everyday way of looking at it creates an obstacle to the understanding of the difference particularly on an elemental level. We prejudge what a beach is even before we look at it, and this impoverishes our understanding of the difference. It may not be self-evident but we do an injustice to it when we take it for granted or demand that it present

itself to us the way we want it to present itself. We fail to let it be or to let reveal itself to us the way it is.

I am assuming that the word "beach" is surely familiar to most of us. For many, what a beach is, is taken for granted. It appears to be nothing more than a strip of land made up of sand, rocks, or pebbles at the water's edge. A geographical definition of a beach easily satisfies us and appears to be the only definition that is open to us. Among other popular uses, it is where some people go to have fun or to socialize when the weather is accommodating. It is especially a popular spot during the summer holiday. It is a place that is there for us to do what we go there to do. We are so caught up in what we do there or what we anticipate doing there that we rarely wonder about what this place is. A particular sense of geography rules at the expense of other senses of geography.

At times, what is familiar may turn out to be unfamiliar, and what is unfamiliar may turn out to be familiar. The word "beach", -a word that appears to be so familiar to some of us may turn out to be unfamiliar especially if we let a beach speak to us. A beach is taken to be a place-thing and things are not expected to speak. We have largely convinced ourselves that only human beings speak, and it is presupposed that we already know what speaking is. We also typically presuppose that a beach is seen and not heard. In the presence of a beach the ear is put out of commission and the eye reigns. We are convinced that seeing and hearing are mutually exclusive. We are convinced that this is the way to be in the presence of a beach. Convictions and presuppositions, however, are not necessarily paths to truth. They can fail us. Anyone who thinks otherwise is taken to be mad or is viewed as a victim of erroneous thinking.

In its poetic nature, phenomenology bridges the gap between hearing and seeing. It may have been forgotten that, in its primordial sense, poetry was and had to remain oral. It was not intended to be written or read as it is normally the case today. Writing was the expression of the orature. At the moment of writing and reading, it was the writing and the reading of the oral. The audible nature of the oral was visible and the visible nature if writing was audible. One can see what the audible as visible and see what is visible as audible. Writing is an externalization of the oral without externalization. In an elemental sense, the oral remains itself as it externalizes itself. The distinction between the external and internal is annulled. To see is to hear what is seen and to hear is to see what is heard.

A beach that is heard when seen and that is seen when heard is likely to jolt our senses. When the word "phenomenology" is brought to bear on it, it gets itself caught up in this disruption of the normal and renders normal awareness abnormal. It is tempting to avoid this abnormality. However,

avoiding it at any cost may result in an impoverished understanding of the beach, of phenomenology and, ultimately, may lead to an impoverished understanding of ourselves. By linking the word "phenomenology" with the word "beach" we seek to deepen and broaden our understanding of what each is and also our understanding of their connection. If this is accomplished, we also stand to benefit from a deeper and broader understanding of ourselves, for we are not outsiders to what they are or to what their connection is.

In its academic setting, the word "phenomenology" became prominent in a philosophical discourse on what historians of Western philosophy refer to as Twentieth Century Continental European philosophy. It is associated with Edmund Husserl who is widely acknowledged as its father or as its founder. Also, associated with it is Martin Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Jean Paul Sartre. In response to the question on what phenomenology is, Merleau-Ponty tells us that.

> It may seem strange that this question has to still be asked half a century after the first works of Husserl. The fact remains that it has by no means been answered Phenomenology is the study of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts back essences into existence and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their facticity. It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertion arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; ; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there before reflection begins –as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world. And endowing that contact with a philosophical status.[3]

I am not bringing up Husserl or other phenomenologists so that one can turn to them to find out what phenomenology means as is common with many students and teachers of philosophy. It is also not very helpful to rely on a dictionary or on an encyclopedia to find out what phenomenology means. Phenomenology has an extra-lexical sense, a sense that is already there before it is entered into a lexicon. The lexical sense is derivative, and to make a fuller sense of it one has to turn to a pre-lexical world in which it is constituted. The sense of phenomenology is experienced without mediation. It presents phenomena directly, without mediation. In doing so, it also presents itself without mediation. What occurs here is a phenomenology of phenomenology.

There is nothing exclusively European or Twentieth Century about phenomenology. If it is understood in its basic philosophical sense, it has a

philosophical geography, a geography that is common to all of us. Geography is not exclusively a matter of natural or physical science, or a matter of common sense. It is also a matter of philosophy. What this means cannot be stated fully until what philosophy is, is clarified. This is clarification is possible only if what geography is, is philosophically clarified. Philosophy expresses what it is geographically. As philosophy, phenomenology is geography-centered and its history does not exclusively lie within the history of European philosophy. As mentioned Previously, it is a part of the broader history of philosophy. In *Being and Time,*[4] for example, Heidegger, traces the origin of phenomenology to Greece because, for him, phenomenology is inseparable from philosophy. In his view, as is the case with other historians of Western philosophy, Greece is the cradle of philosophy.

Contrary to the conventional view in the West, European Greece, which is to be distinguished from Greek Greece, is not the origin of philosophy. To the extent that philosophy has a decisive role to play in defining phenomenology, its true historical root, that is, its cradle, must and should be adequately identified. Greece is not the exclusive birth place of philosophy. The birth place of philosophy cannot be determined or identified if one does not know what philosophy is. As I see it, such knowledge continues to be elusive, primarily because what philosophy is, is elusive. Accordingly, it cannot be said with certainty what the geographical origin of philosophy is. It also follows that it is unreasonable to confine the geography of philosophy and hence, the geography of phenomenology to Europe or to Greece. To do so is unphilosophical and unduly restricts the inquiry on the origin of philosophy.

Tracing the birth of philosophy to Greece and, hence, the history of philosophy to Greece as is the customary way of thinking in Western European thinking, does injustice to the geography of philosophy and to the history of philosophy. The historical root of philosophy predates its emergence in European history. Accordingly, as already stated, in its philosophical context, phenomenology is more than a Twentieth Century European phenomenon. The geography of philosophy and the history of philosophy are matters of human geography and of human history. If we have a proper phenomenological understanding of a beach, this understanding will take us beyond the shores of the Greco-European world and will lead to a broader world, a world in which the European world is a constitutive member. Phenomenology leads to such a world and it is this world that vitalizes it. It is in it that it has its home, and it is where we have our home if we are true to what our home is. When a beach offers itself phenomenologically to us, we are thereby phenomenologically offered to

ourselves. We are at home at the beach. A beach is a mirror of our existence.

In the quest for an answer on what phenomenology is and what phenomenology of the beach discloses about a beach, the quest can be self-undermining if we look away from ourselves. In response to the quest of the meaning of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty has correctly noted that

> A purely linguistic examination of the texts in question would yield no proof; we find in texts only what we put into them, and if ever any kind of history has suggested interpretations which would be put on it, I is the history of philosophy We shall find in ourselves and nowhere else, the unity of the true meaning of phenomenology. It is les s counting up quotations than determining and expressing in concrete terms this phenomenology for ourselves which has given a number of present day readers the impression on reading Husserl and Heidegger, not so much of encountering a new philosophy as of recognizing what they had been waiting for. Phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method.[5]

As I present a phenomenology of a beach, one might be tempted to expect me or someone else to provide an answer as to what phenomenology is. This temptation should be avoided at all costs. When we succumb to it what phenomenology is withdraws. Teachers of phenomenology are likely to be obstacles to what phenomenology is if they fail to get out of the way when phenomenology presents itself. What Merleau-Ponty says is that each of us must look up to himself or herself to find out the true meaning of phenomenology; of course, bearing in mind that none of us has a monopoly of this meaning. We necessarily have to find the meaning together. The meaning will be our meaning. As our meaning, we will be guarded from wallowing in a morass of subjectivism. Phenomenologically presented, a beach is my beach. It is your beach. It is our beach.

To look up to ourselves for the true meaning of phenomenology should not be taken to imply that its true meaning is subjective, implying that each one of us has his or her true private sense of the meaning of phenomenology; that is, a meaning that is different and, perhaps, in opposition to the sense that others have of it. Merleau-Ponty is not making a case for a subjective sense of phenomenology and, it is not my intention to make a case for a subjectivist phenomenological sense of a beach. You are witnesses to what is being said, for you have a direct access to that which authorizes what I say. The sense of a beach is your sense of the beach, just as it is *my* sense of the beach. It is *our* sense of the beach. What *your, my*, or *our* mean is mysteriously in the womb of the beach, if we are