

Derrida, Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Painterly Practices:  
The Borders and Limits of Painting and the Interrogation of Perception

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Date: June 14, 2021

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University: Tilburg University, Department of Philosophy  
Philosophy of Humanity and Culture  
MA: MA Thesis  
Academic Year: 2020-2021  
Supervisor: Dr. H. Jacobs  
Second Reader: Dr. C. M. Robb  
Word count: 16441

## **Abstract**

In this thesis I give an account of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Jacques Derrida's understanding of painting to assess the extent to which their theories can be put to work in order to capture the possibilities of contemporary painting. Contemporary painting is able to transgress its own conceptual and physical borders, and has left medium specificity and thinking in terms of essences behind. Painting has the capacity to question its borders, frames and limits, and by drawing on Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's insights I argue for my approach to contemporary painting and its possibilities to question perception, and what we take a painting to be. Merleau-Ponty brings to the fore the close connection between painting and perception, and how a painting can question perception. By turning to Derrida, I challenge Merleau-Ponty's ideas about what a painting is, as well as what problematic presuppositions we adhere to in terms of what belongs to the inside and the outside of a painting, and what constitutes its borders. By discussing the contemporary painterly practices of Richard Aldrich, Katharina Grosse and Jennifer Packer, I underline how processes of transgressing and questioning the limits and borders of painting are in each case at work. Both the embodied working process of the painter and the material object of the paintings themselves can challenge the presuppositions of painting. Painting itself can put into question what a painting is, and question habitual manners of perceiving. In both instances, contemporary painting challenges the processes of selection and framing from within.

*Keywords:* Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, contemporary painting, perception, frames

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## 1. Introduction

Painting as a form of art has been extensively written about, as it has undergone many changes from the cave paintings in Lascaux, to classical art, modernism and what it is today. Painting in the contemporary condition has been the subject of declarations of its supposed death (Crimp, 1981), to be “beyond” (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth, 2016, p. 9) or “beside itself” (Joselit, 2009, p. 134). In the postmodern or contemporary condition, it is commonly acknowledged that a painting no longer needs to consist of paint or pigments applied to canvas, or another rectangular flat plane, leaving behind strictly modernist or medium specific adherences. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth introduce the problems painting faces today in what they call, “to use Rosalind Krauss’s term, “the post-medium condition”” (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth, 2016, p. 7). They might be regarded as positioning themselves in opposition to modernist conceptions of painting focusing on medium specificity, as they underline that comparable to other mediums, painting no longer has a “stable sense or substance” (Graw & Lajer-Burcharth, 2016, p. 8). In this light, they aim to define what painting’s specificity might still be today. Their approach to leaving medium specificity behind has been influential to my own painterly practice as a visual artist, and for instigating my attempt to question contemporary painting and its borders in this research.

In this thesis, I give an account of Merleau-Ponty’s and Derrida’s understanding of painting to assess the extent to which their theories can be put to work to capture the possibilities of contemporary painting. Contemporary painting is able to transgress its own conceptual and physical borders. By drawing on their analyses of painting, I propose my account of what pertains to painting in the contemporary, postmodern condition – when medium specificity or the idea of an essence in painting is left behind. Focusing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of perception and the role of the painter, in intersection with Derrida’s questioning of the frame via the *parergon* (Derrida, 1978/1987), I evaluate how their approaches to painting might account for the transgression of the borders of the painting, and how painting interrogates perception. In both instances focusing on the works and writings of Paul Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida follow different methodologies but each on their own terms question what is visible and invisible in the painting, what is on the inside and what is on the outside. Taken together, I argue they can help to understand the possibilities of painting in the contemporary, postmodern condition. By emphasizing the

painter's process of decision-making and selection, this thesis revolves around the question: How can contemporary painting, in its transgression of the physical or conceptual borders of the canvas, question what constitutes a painting and what painting might become? Seeing how painting deals with its own borders and limits, how can painting question and interrogate perception?

Merleau-Ponty and Derrida are notably different thinkers with distinct methodological adherences. However, bringing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Derrida's deconstruction together can provide insights on presuppositions about painting, while leaving room for the embodied working process of the painter. Although their methodologies have been compared and contrasted<sup>1</sup>, there is no account of their combined value for analyzing contemporary painting. There is a noticeable gap in Derrida's thinking when it comes to Merleau-Ponty on painting<sup>2</sup>. While Merleau-Ponty elaborates on Cézanne's artistic practice, Derrida draws attention to a promise Cézanne made. Therefore, when Derrida discusses Cézanne in *The Truth in Painting* (1978/1987) it is unexpected that he almost entirely overlooks Merleau-Ponty.

By starting from their engagement with Cézanne, I propose an open-ended approach to contemporary painting. I engage in a conceptual and textual analysis of Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's theories on painting, in order to propose my own account of contemporary painting, and how it deals with questions pertaining to a painting's inside and its outside. Drawing on secondary literature and analyzing their approaches enables me to bring Merleau-Ponty and Derrida together, in order to put forward my approach to contemporary painting.

### *Outline*

This thesis will consist of three main parts. After this introductory section, I will focus in Section 2 on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of painting as a primarily expressive process, focusing on the role of the painter. By drawing on Merleau-Ponty's close connection to Cézanne as a starting point, as put forward in *Eye and Mind* (1964/2007b) and *Cézanne's Doubt* (1945/2007a), I engage with his understanding of the painter's capacity to

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical reflection of Derrida's approach to Merleau-Ponty, see Reynolds (2008). For a comparison between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on presence, see Holland (1986).

<sup>2</sup> For Derrida's most extensive analysis of Merleau-Ponty, see Derrida (2000/2005).

make visible what was previously invisible in the process of perception. By underlining the move away from painting as representation toward an understanding of painting as expression, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's approach provides a valuable tool for understanding contemporary painterly practices: focusing on the process of the painter and how this process questions and interrogates perception, instead of focusing on what a painting resembles.

I focus on *Cézanne's Doubt* and *Eye and Mind*, as well as *The World of Perception* (1948/2004) and *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962) to analyze the connection between painting and perception. By drawing on Trevor Perri's (2013) analysis of Merleau-Ponty's approach to the image, the interdependent relation between the visible and the invisible becomes clear. I draw on Galen A. Johnson's (2013) and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc's (2015) analyses of Merleau-Ponty in order to emphasize the sense of movement present in painting. Following their notions, I show that the inherent movement in painting emphasizes the ongoing need to analyze painting, as they cannot be fully captured.

In Section 3, I focus on Derrida's writings on painting and on the notion of the *parergon* as put forward in *The Truth in Painting* (1978/1987) in his deconstruction of Kant's use of the term. Derrida draws on the figure of the *parergon* in order to highlight the tensions in the relation between the inside and the outside of a painting. I analyze how this approach challenges some problematic presuppositions about what we think a painting is, and what is included and excluded within it. By engaging with Derrida's deconstruction, I will focus on the importance of a continuous instability and ambiguity of the painting's frame. In order to capture Derrida's thoughts on a painting's frame, I outline his deconstructive approach as explained by John D. Caputo (Caputo, 1997/2021b; Caputo, 2021a). By drawing from the interview with Peter Brunette and David Wills (1994), I underline how deconstruction is at work in Derrida's approach to painting<sup>3</sup>. Following Derrida's questioning of what is on the inside, and what is on the outside of a painting, and seeing how Simone Heller-Andrist (2011) approaches the *parergon* in literature, I will put it to work in Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on painting in order to argue for my approach to contemporary painting. Challenging Merleau-Ponty's approach enables me to argue for my understanding of painting as having the capacity to question its own borders – as well as the limits of

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<sup>3</sup> For an approach to aesthetics and Derrida, see Bennington (2014).

perception.

In Section 4, I will put these theories to work in order to understand painting in the contemporary condition. I draw on Derrida's (1992) approach to the problems of decision-making and David Joselit's (2009) account of painting and its larger context. I argue for an open-ended approach to painting, without on the one hand losing all specificity, and on the other hand without reducing it to traditional adherences. In this way I can argue why painting is an ongoing questioning, dependent on the painter, as well as on how the material object of the painting itself might instigate a similar form of questioning in the eventual perceiver when encountering the work of art. I will formulate a critical outlook on existent ways of framing and perceiving, by focusing on how these questions might be made visible and interrogated in contemporary painting. I will focus on the contemporary painterly practices of Richard Aldrich, Katharina Grosse and Jennifer Packer in order to show how these processes of framing and questioning painting and perception are in each case at work.

Throughout my approach to painting in the contemporary condition, I engage with Cézanne's promise: "'I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you" (to Emile Bernard, 23 October 1905)" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 2). Lacking an essence or truth in the postmodern condition, and the very impossibility of promising a truth, might be what instills in painting its capacity to question its own borders, and how painting questions and interrogates perception.

## **2. From representation toward painting as expression:**

### **Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of perception**

In this chapter I draw on Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on painting and his phenomenological understanding of embodied perception, in order to bring to the fore how painting can interrogate perception. I focus on his analysis of the work of Paul Cézanne, and how Cézanne represents a philosophical and phenomenological approach to perception. Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on painting provide a valuable analysis of the embodied working process of the painter, which plays a vital role in understanding what pertains to painting today. He presents a critique of understanding painting as representation, toward an understanding of painting as expression<sup>4</sup>. To argue for my account of contemporary painting, I underline several internal ambiguities inherent to painting, mainly due to the painter's embodied working process in their attempt to give expression to their manner of perceiving: painting has the capacity to question how we habitually think about perception.

First, I analyze what in accordance to Merleau-Ponty, a painting is not, and explain how this calls for a move away from understanding painting as representation, toward an understanding of painting as expression. Second, I describe what he argues a painting is and how it is understood as an approach to making visible the invisible. In doing so, I also discuss what in Merleau-Ponty's view Cézanne's work shows about painting, and how his painterly technique entails a phenomenological approach to perception. Thirdly, while drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to painting, I argue for my thoughts on painting as a medium that has the capacity to remain an ongoing process of questioning of how things appear. I maintain that Merleau-Ponty's approach enables a change in what we understand to be the capacities of painting, when painting is understood in relation to how it questions perception, and not in terms of what it may or may not resemble.

*What a painting is not: from representation toward an understanding of painting as expression*

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<sup>4</sup> I will discuss Merleau-Ponty's approach to painting primarily in accordance to what he brings to the fore in *Eye and Mind* (1964/2007b) and *Cézanne's Doubt* (1945/2007a). Although Trevor Perri (2013) discusses Merleau-Ponty in the light of Sartre's approach to painting, I will draw on his understanding of the distinction between representation and expression and his approach to the image. For the movement inherent to painting I draw on Romdenh-Romluc (2015) and Johnson (2013).

Merleau-Ponty presents a critique of understanding painting in terms of representation. He explains that all forms of painting, whether abstract, figurative, historical or modern “celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 357). This does not mean that paintings are a representation of these visible objects. Many paintings show the perceiver objects that might be recognized from out there in the world, and paintings might be conceived to be about those represented objects. Representation of objects could be understood as what a painting primarily does, no matter what style or technique is used. However, Merleau-Ponty turns this presupposition of painting in terms of representation around, and shows that “painting evokes nothing” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 357).

According to Merleau-Ponty, painting is not a representation or copy of something that is already out there in the world. He explicitly states that “art is not imitation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a, p. 77). This can be understood in the following manner: if painting’s definition was to be an imitation of something else, it would make the painting secondary to this object. Trevor Perri discusses Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of Sartre’s statement that paintings are representations or a “trompe-l’oeil” (Perri, 2013, p. 83). Perri underlines Merleau-Ponty’s rejection thereof, asserting that a good painting never has to do with invoking an absent thing (Perri, 2013, p. 84). For Merleau-Ponty, painting is dissimilar from mere representation, which entails a move toward understanding all painting as “the act of expression” (Perri, 2013, p. 84). I will return later to what this painterly act entails.

Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of a painting’s aim to invoke objects becomes clear when he states that “just as words do not *resemble* what they designate, a picture is not a trompe l’oeil” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a, p. 77). Merleau-Ponty’s comparison between painting and words brings to the fore that in a similar way as the word ‘mountain’ does not resemble a mountain, the painting of a mountain does not aim to make that particular mountain appear as an optical illusion. If this were the case, a painting would be an indexical sign, or a signifier pointing toward what it actually is, making a painting a mere representation thereof.

Merleau-Ponty raises further objections to painting understood as a mere representation, as they would in that case be like “arrows in stations” (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004, p. 95). They would be signifiers pointing us in the direction of an object in the world, as an arrow can be understood as a conveyer of information (Oxford English

Dictionary, 2021a). If this were the case, it would entail that “its meaning would lie entirely beyond the canvas” (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004, p. 95). Importantly, he emphasizes that in the encounter with a painting, the perceiver is not engaging with or directed toward the object in the world that is depicted. Rather, it is an aesthetic experience in which resemblance does not play a vital role (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004, p. 96).

Following from this move away from understanding a painting in terms of representation, Merleau-Ponty describes that a painting is “a world of its own” (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004, p. 96). I understand this to mean that a painter engages in a process of creating something new, which does not need to rely on the object it was originally derived from, and neither points toward it. Merleau-Ponty calls what is expressed in a painting a “spectacle which is sufficient unto itself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004, p. 96). I take these statements to be an argument in favor of an autonomous approach to the work of art: a painting understood as a world in itself, is no longer dependent on what it might seem to refer to. It is no longer viewed in terms of resemblance, but might become something entirely other: what is painted becomes a painting, and not a sign that resembles or imitates an object in the world. This, I argue, highlights the difference between an understanding of painting as representation, and an understanding of painting as expression.

In the next section, I will turn to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of what a painting expresses. When he rejects the notion that paintings invoke absent objects, he argues that it should be understood to be almost the opposite (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 357).

*Painting according to Merleau-Ponty: The process of expressing the event of perception*

Following Merleau-Ponty’s approach to painting, it becomes clear that the painter has the capacity to render the heretofore invisible, visible on the canvas. Merleau-Ponty explains that “painting gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 357). Here, the question remains what is made visible. Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of painting highlights his underlying manner of thinking about perception. In his approach, painting is closely connected to perception. According to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of perception, perception is an embodied process, reliant on the embodied subject. This entails that knowledge is derived from an embodied starting point, as the subject is embedded in the world (Merleau-Ponty,

1945/1962). As embodied perceivers, we cannot have a complete understanding of the world, because we are embedded in an ongoing process of perception: “the world is not what I think, but what I live through” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. xvi-xvii).

Merleau-Ponty (1948/2004) brings to the fore that in our ordinary way of looking, the world appears as logical and our perception is directed toward understanding. He argues that it entails a misunderstanding of perception: a forgetfulness due to our familiarity with the world. Therefore, we need to rethink this familiar world (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004, p. 39). In order to rethink the familiar world, he adheres to the phenomenological method which entails that the world and our experience of it has to be approached and described while always remaining a beginner: someone who does not presuppose anything (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. xiv). Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty maintains that we need to suspend our presupposed knowledge of things, and engage in a “radical reflection” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. xiv) of our experience of the world.

Similar to how phenomenology engages in this reflection, for Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne’s painterly process shows that the painter equally engages in this ‘radical reflection’ via painting: they bring the experience of the world into view in the painting. Painting’s relation to perception is captured by Merleau-Ponty in *Cézanne’s Doubt*, relating to Cézanne’s approach to painting which embodies a “lived perspective” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a, p. 73). Cézanne’s paintings show the manner of embodied perceiving. He captures the process of moving around in the world, describing what he sees appearing, which is therefore not seen from a single stable perspective, but a process of capturing all these movements. He paints an “emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a, p. 74). Painting captures this process, similar to how this act of appearance is ongoing when moving around in the world as a perceiver. Or as Perri explains: painting makes visible “the manner of appearing of things” (Perri, 2013, p. 85).

Merleau-Ponty is drawing on Cézanne’s painterly technique, as a manner of leaving our habitual way of looking behind, and to show that the world is not as stable as it appears. Merleau-Ponty explains that Cézanne is undoing habitual perceiving and “reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a, p. 76). For Merleau-Ponty, this entails that both the phenomenological method and the painter give expression to the ongoing process of appearing, which we have forgotten in our habitual

approach to the world. Following this, the invisible that is approached by the painter, is the event of the world becoming visible: the event of coming to appearance is what is commonly invisible.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the image can further highlight what a painter attempts to make visible. He draws on Cézanne, who shows that the reciprocal relation between the subject and the world, entails that what we see, invokes an "echo in our bodies" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 355) as we are made of the same material as the world. The painter sees something in nature, which invokes an echo in them. According to Perri this is possible because the world is "prefigured by the body" (Perri, 2013, p. 92). This echo might equally be due to a painter's approach to the world in their work: they are not attempting to understand the world around them, but engage in a process of questioning it. Via painting, the painter attempts to make this echo visible again. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty refers to the painting – or more broadly speaking, the image – as the "visible to the second power" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 355).

This process of making visible thus entails that painting is an image. Perri (2013) brings to the fore that Merleau-Ponty aims to change the common understanding of images. The image in its common meaning is perceived to be a mere secondary copy (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 356). Merleau-Ponty explains images are:

the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside, which the duplicity of sensing [*le sentir*] makes possible and without which we would never understand the quasi-presence and imminent visibility which make up the whole problem of the imaginary. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 356)

This can be understood as a comparison between the reciprocity that is existent in our relationship with the world and what takes place in painting. The image as the 'inside of the outside' refers to what the painter makes visible, namely; the world in the act of appearing. As Perri states: "they bring to visible expression what in the body (inside) allows it to bring a world to appearance (outside)" (Perri, 2013, p. 94). An image is the 'outside of the inside', which I understand as giving expression to what was internalized by the painter. The image is externalized, and is therefore outside in a second instance. Romdenh-Romluc describes the act of externalizing images, in which the outside is the work, and the inside "the

configuration of the body schema” (Romdenh-Romluc, 2015, p. 92). The painter externalized an image again, which responded to what the body was able to see in the world.

Approaching painting as expression entails that the visible and the invisible are not to be seen as oppositional, but as co-constitutive. The visible and the invisible equally constitute the painting: in the reciprocal process between a painter and what they see, the painting becomes painting and gives expression to this very process. The emphasis on doubt in Merleau-Ponty’s essay *Cézanne’s Doubt* (1945/2007a), implies that making the invisible visible is not a process of certainty, but of possible failure. Therefore, the doubt that arises in the process of painting emerges from this tension in expressing something that lies somewhere between nothing and something. Every mark made by the brush attempts to make something visible, which I argue has to be seen as a choice, or leap that the painter has to take.

#### *Painting as the questioning of perception*

As I have explained in the previous sections, Merleau-Ponty understands painting not as representation, but as a process revolving around expression. The value of his approach lies in the understanding of painting as something that does not posit how things are, but questions how things appear to us. I develop my account of painting by showing how Merleau-Ponty’s approach presents a valuable tool to understanding painting’s capacity to question perception, and what we think we see. I will underline several ambiguities inside the painting, which refer to the way in which a painting appears as an image, and the process of making visible the invisible as attempted by the painter. A painting’s capacity to question how we think about perception must not be understood as the aim or purpose of painting, but refers to what constitutes it. I will explain how several ongoing senses of movement in painting can circumscribe the paradoxes present in the painterly process. In doing so, I aim to develop an understanding of what constitutes a painting, and how this influences a perceiver’s encounter with it. Building on Merleau-Ponty’s theory, I argue that painting can establish an interruption of our ordinary way of perceiving. By understanding painting as an expression of how things are in the act of appearing, it makes visible the ongoing process of hierarchical perception and selection. It is an explicit questioning of what is included and excluded from our field of perception.

### *Questioning the visible and the invisible*

The painterly act of making something visible that was invisible in our habitual manner of perceiving, entails that the invisible was actually already there. According to Perri (2013), what is expressed in painting entails a paradox: expression for Merleau-Ponty does on the one hand not presuppose a prior existence, since painting does not imitate, but on the other hand, it is not derived from nothing, insofar as it is only possible to “express what is able to be expressed” (Perri, 2013, p. 84). Perri explains that a painting assumes that there was something that existed beforehand, but simultaneously, the painting is also something entirely new: “paradoxically, it seems that the painter paints something that was already there, but that what the painter paints only exists insofar as it is painted” (Perri, 2013, p. 85). I argue that in this ambiguous appearance lies a painting’s possibility to critically engage with perception. When painting does not rely on what it makes visible, the focus shifts toward the embodied working process of rendering visible. This opens up the possibilities for painting: it no longer focuses solely on the painted object, but questions and emphasizes the entire process of painting and giving expression. This shifted focus is able to embrace the ambiguities of the working process and the eventual image that is created by the painter.

The painter paints something that was already there: it is taken from nature and seen by the eyes, but it is also not fully constituted yet. This does not refer to an absolute invisibility, but only a virtual invisibility. A useful comparison here, is one that Merleau-Ponty briefly makes: he refers to childbirth and posits that before birth, the baby is only “virtually visible” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 358). This statement does not seem to refer to invisibility as being absolutely non-existent. In comparison, Merleau-Ponty states that “the painter’s vision is an ongoing birth” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 358). Therefore, the painter sees what is already there, only virtually and not absolutely invisible. This instills in painting the capacity to bring new ways of perceiving to the foreground. The painter’s act of expression functions as a “suspension of natural perception” (Perri, 2013, p. 85). In painting, we do not seem to remain in our familiar relationship with the world. In this way, painting shows what is rendered invisible, forgotten, or beyond our field of vision. In an embodied process of bringing to the foreground, or pushing back to the background, the painter determines what comes to the perceiver’s attention. In Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to perception, the invisible is in some way already there as constitutive of the visible. He therefore makes a broader claim about what is included and excluded in

perception more generally speaking.

Cézanne's paintings show the experience of the interplay between the visible and the invisible, by the reversal taking place between the fore-and the background and the receding and appearing contours and lines. In the next section I will engage with this sense of movement inherent to painting. Emphasizing movement entails that there is an ongoing need to analyze painting, in the sense that a painting is an object that cannot be fully captured.

### *Movement inherent to painting*

When analyzing Cézanne's method, Merleau-Ponty brings to the fore that "all the partial views that the gaze catches sight of must be welded together" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a, p. 77). He explains that when a painter approaches the world, they perceive distinct moments, all captured and combined on a single plane – the painting. This means that these separate moments are brought together and present themselves as a single image. Understood like this, a painting is actually a depiction of a duration of time, as experienced and expressed by the painter. Moreover, if the image does not capture a single moment but a process of ongoing events, it is no longer in the strict sense a fixated or static object, even though a painting is usually motionless.

This sense of movement in a motionless object is another way in which a painting interrogates our manner of perceiving the painting. The internal sense of movement, as instilled in the image by the painter is explained by Merleau-Ponty as an "internal discordance" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 374). He points out that what is depicted could never have been as such, since all parts are depicted as being in a different times. Or, as Romdenh-Romluc explains: parts of a body depicted in an artwork are actually distinct moments, creating tension in the perceiver because of the impossibility of actually ever being in this position. These distinct moments seen together in the image, create a feeling of motion (Romdenh-Romluc, 2015, p. 83).

Galen Johnson (2013) brings to the fore that movement in painting is not merely a sign representing movement – which I argue is comparable to how the painting in itself is also not a sign – but movement in painting is "actual movement" (Johnson, 2013, p. 491). He explains that there is actual movement taking place between the perceiver and the work. According to Johnson, this is caused by the different times as seen together, but he also

explains that for Merleau-Ponty, the lines in the painting depict movement.

The movement instigated by painting in the perceiver can be best described by drawing on Cézanne's painterly technique and focusing on his outlines. Merleau-Ponty defines Cézanne's approach as having a paradoxical nature (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a). He explains that Cézanne let himself be guided by his sensations, and did not approach his work in terms of standardly accepted painterly techniques. His attempt to stay close to how nature appeared to him, results in distorted surfaces, multiple or seemingly incomplete contours and a prioritization of color instead of outlines. Merleau-Ponty highlights Cézanne's unusual approach by drawing on what Bernard once called "Cézanne's suicide: aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a, p. 72). By refusing to outline the object, and refusing the classical approach to perspectival composition, his paintings show "matter as it takes on form" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a, p. 73). For Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne's painterly method embodied the phenomenological approach to perception.

In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty discusses in the rejection in painting of the line approached as something to encapsulate an object. Painters like Cézanne know that "there are no lines visible in themselves" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 372). A line is thus not an object in itself, and should not be made visible as such. Lines are necessary in painting, in order to approach what the eyes see, but should not be seen as strict borders.

Cézanne's use of outlines shows how painting interrogates perception: the seemingly moving or unstable appearance of the objects in the painting approximates how we move around in the world, and perceive in an embodied way. The embodied working process of the painter is similar to the eventual manner of engaging between the painting and the perceiver. The perceiver encounters how the world appeared to the painter, in a similarly embodied way and experiences the successive instances expressed by the painter: the movement instilled in the painting remains intact for the perceiver.

Cézanne's lines and contours are an exemplification of what it might look like to make an object visible in painting in the act of appearing. As Perri explains, for Merleau-Ponty, the visible and the invisible are not oppositional, and perceiving a painting is "*ambiguous* insofar as presence and absence, reality and unreality, and visibility and invisibility inherently participate with or are implied in one another" (Perri, 2013, p. 77). This co-dependence is made visible in painting. Lines do not demarcate the inside or the outside

of an object, but are in need of each other. The use of the line in this non-oppositional way highlights the inherent movement instilled in painting. When encountered again by the perceiver, painting can point out the ambiguities in our habitual manner of perceiving.

### *Conclusion*

Merleau-Ponty provides a way to approach how painting can question perception. The interrogation of perception is vital for the painter in order to express how the world is engaged in an ongoing process of becoming visible. Merleau-Ponty argues for a move away from determining painting as representation, toward an understanding of painting as expression. His approach to painting and perception opens up the possibilities for the painter, and what they attempt to express. Instead of representing an object, painting becomes closely connected to the embodied working process of the painter. I have elaborated on Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the embodied working process of the painter and how it can highlight that painting interrogates perception, thereby questioning what we think we see. In order to develop my understanding of what pertains to painting in the contemporary condition, I focused on the sense of movement instilled in painting. Painting shows the movement and ambiguity that is inherent in embodied perception, and in doing so simultaneously highlights this process of becoming visible in habitual perception. Painting has a capacity for critical engagement with how and what we perceive by engaging with the ongoing processes of invisibility and selection, underlying what is thought to be visible. In the radical questioning embodied by painting lies its capacity to question the event of perceiving. Painting presents a critical reflection on perception, by making the co-constitutive process between the invisible and the visible, visible for an eventual perceiver.

### **3. Derrida's deconstruction of Kant's *parergon*: challenging Merleau-Ponty's understanding of painting**

When addressing contemporary painting, it becomes clear that there are limitations to Merleau-Ponty's approach. In this part I focus on two concerns by turning to Jacques Derrida. First, Merleau-Ponty's understanding is not clearly applicable to contemporary painterly approaches or methods as his theory is engaged with a modernist conception of art. Both Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne can be considered modernists in this sense. As opposed to postmodern or contemporary art, I understand modernist painting to be focused on medium specificity. For painting, this refers to paint applied to canvas in the strict sense. Second, Merleau-Ponty's understanding does not question the borders and limitations of the painting itself. Although he challenges the idea of a painting being a mere representation, he does not question the possibilities for painting transgressing the borders of the canvas. Merleau-Ponty's questions are directed to the inside of the painting, and do not have the capacity to embrace how painting might become something that exceeds its own presupposed limits. In order to analyze the contemporary possibilities of painting, I underline why questions must equally be directed toward the limits and the borders of the painting.

In this section, I engage with Derrida's approach to painting, and show how he focuses particularly on the borders and limits of the painting. I will start by briefly outlining Derrida's deconstruction by drawing on John Caputo's and Derrida's (Caputo, 1997/2021a; Caputo, 2021b) explanations as put forward in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. Next, I elaborate on Derrida's engagement with the promise of Cézanne before turning to Derrida's deconstruction of Kant's understanding of the *parergon* as presented in *The Truth in Painting* (1978/1987). By drawing on Heller-Andrist's (2011) approach to the *parergon* in literature, I highlight the *parergon's* manner of questioning painting. Lastly, the *parergon* will be put to work with regards to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of perception, where I will focus mainly on *Cézanne's Doubt* (1945/2007a) and *Eye and Mind* (1964/2007b). In doing so, I argue for my approach to contemporary painting, and how it can transgress its own physical and conceptual borders.

*Derrida, différance, and deconstruction*

Although Merleau-Ponty and Derrida are very distinct thinkers, there are some valuable connections to be found between them. By thinking them together and intersecting their thoughts, painting and its contemporary possibilities can be questioned and approached. I remain aware that for Derrida, his method and terms should not be used as definitive, stable concepts or definitions. Deconstruction is about a constant re-evaluation or overturning: it is a process of undoing fixed meaning. John Caputo brings to the fore that Derrida's deconstruction should not be brought back to a simple rule or concept as "deconstruction by definition resists reduction to a single principle" (Caputo, 2021b, p. xxvi). Caputo explains that when it is approached like a principle, it would undo its own adherence to highlighting tensions and undecidability. When it is understood that deconstruction is not a principle or methodology, it becomes clear why Derrida explains that it cannot be applied "to something from the outside" (Caputo & Derrida, 1997/2021, p. 9). Derrida explains that deconstruction is already active on the inside. Following this description, deconstruction is to be found within a text or concept: it highlights the inner tensions that are already there, within the text or concept to be deconstructed.

Caputo brings to the fore the importance of the future-directedness in Derrida's deconstruction. He points to the impossibility to precisely define or fixate the meaning of any concept or thing, as they will always transgress their own limits: "what is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always to come" (Caputo, 1997/2021a, p. 31). Meanings are not stable, and can never be stable. As Caputo puts it, meaning for Derrida always "slips away" (Caputo, 1997/2021a, p. 31). Derrida focuses on this notion of to-come throughout his writings. A similar sense of future-directedness is to be found in Derrida's notion of *différance*. As Derrida brings to the fore in *Of Grammatology* (1967/2016): "*différance*, an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring [*différer, au double sens de ce mot*]" (Derrida, 1967/2016, p. 25). Although impossible to fully determine, broadly speaking, the term indicates that definition of meaning will be always *different* from its concept, as well as *deferred*: pushed back into the future.

Generally speaking, deconstruction aims to disturb. For Caputo, who is aware of the problematic nature of defining deconstruction, deconstruction might be called an effort to find supposedly stable meanings or concepts, and to "crack it open and disturb this tranquility" (Caputo, 1997/2021a, p. 32). He explains that deconstruction in this sense pushes against all limits it can find, trying to open up seemingly stable concepts. Thereby

embracing differential meaning and the impossibility of its own task.

Following these attempts to explain deconstruction, it becomes clear why Derrida, when discussing painting or art, will not define what painting is, or what the truth in painting is. Doing so would undermine his attempt to underline tensions and to defer meaning. If Derrida would determine painting as such, he would claim to understand painting as a fixed concept. This is an impossibility for Derrida's task, as all concepts are always haunted by inherent tensions and absences. As Caputo puts it: deconstruction is an "*hauntology*" (Caputo, 2021b, p. xxvii). So when Derrida states in *The Truth in Painting* that he will "write four times here, *around* painting" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 9) it already shows that there will not be a definition of painting. Following his approach to deconstruction, this equally implies that the *parergon* should not be used as a concept, but as a means to highlight and question inner tensions. In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida upsets the distinction between the inside and the outside of the work of art.

Derrida's emphasis on the deferral of meaning and the impossibility of stable meaning, is present in his emphasis on the promise made by Cézanne in a letter to Emile Bernard, which remains unfulfilled up until today (Derrida, 1978/1987). In *The Truth in Painting* Derrida emphasizes Cézanne's promise, bringing attention to it in the form of a quotation, originally written by Paul Cézanne: "I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you" (to Emile Bernard, 23 October 1905)" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 2). Derrida indicates that the promise of truth was first owed by Cézanne. However, after quoting it again, it seems to be Derrida's due: "I shall acknowledge the debt" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 2). On the one hand, this might indicate that the promise to tell the truth in painting, is now Derrida's. On the other hand, it might also indicate that Derrida merely acknowledges that there is still a debt. The latter can be seen as Derrida's first indication of the impossibility to fulfill the promise, as his acknowledgement of the debt highlights that Cézanne's promise is still unfulfilled, and will remain this way.

The inability to fulfill the promise is further heightened when Derrida states: "let us suppose that I wrote this book in order to find out whether that condition could ever be fulfilled, whether there was even any sense in defining it – which remains to be seen" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 4). The statement that it 'remains to be seen', does not only refer to an insecurity about the possibility of fulfilling the promise, but might indicate that a definition of the truth in painting is always in the future. It *remains* to be seen: the

fulfillment of the promise will always be directed toward the future, and stay uncertain.

Derrida brings to the fore several paradoxes that arise within Cézanne's promise. He states that Cézanne does not show or define anything (Derrida, 1978/1997, p. 3). He notes that it is a sentence signed by a painter, but written in words. The sentence itself shows nothing, and Cézanne does not express anything that might further elaborate his ambiguous statement. Moreover, Cézanne's promise in itself only refers to an act in the future. Derrida highlights that it remains unclear whether Cézanne will tell the truth, paint the truth, show the truth about painting, or tell about the truth via painting<sup>5</sup>.

It was Cézanne himself who also questioned the possibility of truth in painting. Richard Shiff notes that neither he, Bernard, nor Cézanne himself, know what exactly the promise entails (Shiff, 2001, p. xxxiv). Cézanne questioned his work constantly: throughout his life was in search of something in painting, but until his death it remained unclear what he was searching for, and if he ever achieved it<sup>6</sup>. As he wrote to Bernard: "will I ever reach what I have so diligently searched for and what I have so long pursued?" (Cézanne, 1906, September 21, p. 49). Throughout his life Cézanne was uncertain about his paintings.

Cézanne's brief sentence in the form of an unfulfilled promise, is of importance to contemporary painting. Due to its unfulfillment, it remains necessary to attempt to formulate the possibilities of painting, or the possibility of a truth in painting. Whatever might pertain to this truth, the fulfilling of the debt lies in the future. Following Derrida's (1978/1987) analysis of Cézanne's statement, I maintain that the truth in painting must remain a mere promise, in order to make painting possible. Without the uncertainty this unanswered promise provides, there would be no possibility of painting transgressing its own possibilities in the contemporary condition. In order to assess the value of the promise for contemporary painting, I need to draw on both Derrida and Merleau-Ponty. Derrida alone cannot take into account the vital role of the painter and their embodied working process. However, Merleau-Ponty's approach to Cézanne's process remains encapsulated within the clearly defined frames of the painting. His approach needs to be expanded beyond the edges of the canvas.

### *Derrida on Kant and the parergon*

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<sup>5</sup> For another focus on Cézanne's promise, see Johnson (2013).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of Cézanne's letters, see Doran (2001).

Before highlighting how Derrida's notion of the *parergon* can be used to elaborate on the tensions already existent in Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on painting's relation to perception, I will first explain how Derrida's *parergon* relates to and differs from Kant's use of the concept in his aesthetics in the *Critique of Judgement*<sup>7</sup>. In *The Truth in Painting* (1978/1987), Derrida discusses the theories of aesthetics of Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. It is beyond the scope of my attempt to explain these influential aesthetic theories, as I concentrate on what Derrida lays bare about Kant's understanding of the *parergon*, in order to formulate his approach to this figure<sup>8</sup>. He elaborates on Kant's aesthetics and his aim to formulate the possibility of an objective aesthetic judgement. Derrida notes that, according to Kant, the aesthetic feeling of beauty is "a judgement of universal validity" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 45). A claim concerning universal agreement is already suspicious for Derrida's deconstructive approach: theories that question the meaning or value of art, presuppose an underlying agreement on what belongs to the work of art, and what is extrinsic to it (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 45). Derrida explains that Kant's attempt to define what a universally agreed upon aesthetic judgement entails, needs to rely on the presupposition of knowing what is on the inside, and what is on the outside of the work of art. He sets out to question this presupposition.

For Derrida, a similar claim of a knowable essence of the work of art is to be found in Kant's use of the term *parergon*. The word *ergon* or 'erg' refers to a work (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020a). This noun is combined with the prefix 'para-', which indicates something added to, or beside something else (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021b). Together, in its strict definition, the *parergon* refers to something added to, or beside a work (of art). Kant uses the term *parergon* in this manner. For Kant, they are like ornaments or decorations (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 53). The *parergon* is distinct from the actual work, as it "belongs to it only in an extrinsic way" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 57). Derrida critically engages with Kant's three different examples of *parerga*: the clothes on a statue, the columns outside of a temple, and the frame added to a painting. In all these instances, the *parergon* is for Kant a supplement to the work.

Derrida puts into question the rigid opposition between the inside and the outside of

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida shows that Kant's *parergon* is used in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (Derrida, 1978/1987).

<sup>8</sup> The *parergon* has not been extensively discussed in the literature. For the *parergon* in literature, see Heller-Andrist (2011). For a discussion on Derrida's *parergon* and Kant, see Krell (2000). For a discussion on the *parergon* in art, see Duro (2019).

the work of art. He brings to the fore 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” (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 9). The *parergon* does not separate the work from its outside in the way Kant presupposes. It should not be viewed as something added to the work: not internal, nor external to it (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 54). In this ambiguous position, the *parergon* questions borders and the very interplay between the outside and the inside.

Derrida brings to the fore the ambiguity as to why certain things are to be seen as external or intrinsic to a work of art. According to Derrida (1978/1987), Kant presupposes a rigid opposition and clear boundary between an inside and its supplements or additions, as well as a strict limit between a work’s inside and outside. Before determining a *parergon*, when it is understood as something added or exterior to the work, one needs to know what is intrinsic to the work. According to Derrida, this constitutes the “unlocatable center of the problem” (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 63). Here, it becomes clear that Derrida adheres to the thought that a center is unlocatable more generally speaking. Consequently, if we cannot determine the center or essence of a work of art, we cannot determine a strictly defined border or *parergon*.

In Kant’s view, a *parergon* should be detachable, whereas Derrida notes that it is hard to separate from the work (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 59). In Derrida’s approach, the *parergon* points toward a lack: the uncertainty of a fixated and knowable inside and what pertains to it. It makes us aware of this integral lack and thereby questions the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the work. Derrida explains it in the following manner:

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*. Without this lack, the *ergon* would have no need of a *parergon*. The *ergon*’s lack is the lack of a *parergon*. (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 59-60)

This is a crucial passage in order to understand Derrida’s approach to the term. Here, he indicates that the *parergon* is difficult to detach from the work, as it is not an addition, or ‘surplus’, because this would entail having objective knowledge about the work’s essence to which it is added. Rather, what makes a *parergon* question the work’s limits, is precisely

because it is closely connected to what is lacking on the inside. When Derrida uses the term 'rivet', he might be drawing attention to the connection between a *parergon* and the lack, understood as a close attachment, or a connection made between two separate pieces. A 'rivet' can refer to a pin or nail used to secure separated pieces together (Oxford English Dictionary, 2020b). Drawing on this connection or attachment, the lack is what constitutes the work, and is inseparable from it. From this passage might be derived that the *parergon* frames the unlocatable center of the work. When Derrida notes that without a lack, there would be no need for a *parergon*, he seems to imply that a lack can only become visible by virtue of being framed. According to Heller-Andrist the lack becomes apparent because of the "workings of the frame" (Heller-Andrist, 2011, p. 48). A lack is in need of a border or limit, in order to be a lack.

Following Derrida's deconstruction of the term, it becomes clear that the *parergon* is similar to the notion of *différance*. Derrida only briefly mentions the connection between the *parergon* and *différance* (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 80). The *parergon* is an internally upsetting structure, that pushes against its own borders. It is differential, not fully a part of the concept, nor fully outside of it. A *parergon* defers the meaning and location of a knowable essence of a work of art. It emphasizes that the inside and outside are implied in one another and not a strict opposition. By understanding the *parergon* as such, the definition and limits of painting remain open-ended.

The lack inherent to painting might be described as the impossibility of fully and definitively defining a painting. Painting remains in an ambiguous position, as the *parergon* shows that there is no center which it frames. Following Derrida's approach, I thus interpret it as the lacking of a fixed essence or center which enables the concept 'painting' to remain in flux. Moreover, this figure upsets the presuppositions one has about the essential part of the work of art, leaving determining the inside in a definitive manner impossible. The *parergon*, the framing or making visible of the ambiguities pertaining to a work's inside and outside, is what breaks open the possibilities for painting. Due to the questions the *parergon* presents, painting might leave behind the modernist emphasis of painting consisting of paint applied to canvas. Comparable to Merleau-Ponty's move away from representation toward expression, the *parergon* shows that without a lack, painting would be a determinable, stable object; just as in Merleau-Ponty's critique painting as representation would be a mere secondary copy of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 356). The *parergon* highlights

the lack of essence and thereby opens up the possibilities for painting to question its own limits.

Simone Heller-Andrist (2011) discusses Derrida's *parergon* and how it functions in literature. In her analysis of Derrida's approach she argues that the interaction instigated by the *parergon* between the work itself and its frame, is why it can function as a "valid methodological tool" (Heller-Andrist, 2011, p. 20). Her approach shows that, even though for Derrida the *parergon* is not a tool, by putting it to work in art or literature it can provide valuable insights about the friction inherent to art, in its way of interacting with a work.

Heller-Andrist notes Derrida's remark regarding the painter's brushstroke, that on the one hand marks a separation between two halves of a painted object, but on the other hand unites them: "the edge is the line that divides and unites at the same time. It cuts a whole in two, and hold two wholes together" (Heller-Andrist, 2011, p. 28). She notes that a similar movement of bringing together and separating is what happens in every edge or act of framing. In Derrida's description of the painter's stroke, it becomes clear that for him it both brings objects together, and separates them (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 5-6). In a similar movement as Derrida attempts to make with the *parergon*, I maintain that Cézanne's lines find a way to circle around the ambiguities on the *inside* of a painting. His lines do not mark the inside of an object in strict opposition to their outside, but connect and separate objects from their surroundings and the objects themselves. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2007a) describes that Cézanne's use of multiple outlines capture the moment of appearance. I maintain that his lines are in their movement questioning the relation between inside and outside, highlighting how borders are ambiguous and porous. Derrida's *parergon*, and how it marks the co-constitution between the outside and the inside of the painting, is made visible by Cézanne's use of lines, but is not limited to it.

#### *The parergon at work in Merleau-Ponty's approach to painting*

As I have noted, deconstruction is working from the inside, and not a concept to be applied from the outside. Therefore, comparing and contrasting the views of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida in the light of the *parergon* would not help me to formulate my approach to painting. Instead, the questions the *parergon* raises will be put to work in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to perception, in order to highlight what is lacking in his theory on painting, what is already present and what remains valuable for contemporary painterly

practices. By returning to Merleau-Ponty via Derrida's approach, I can argue for my approach to contemporary painting, and its relation to perception, as will be further discussed in Section Four. By returning to Merleau-Ponty, I highlight what Derrida brings to the fore with his deconstructive approach and what Merleau-Ponty's approach will inherently oversee: the inside and the outside of the painting are not strictly defined. Merleau-Ponty does not take into account the role of selection and invisibility in the painting itself, while he does make room for these processes in embodied perceiving. In his approach to painting, the invisible seems to be rendered wholly visible in the painting. As he focuses on how the world in its process of appearing is made present in the painting, he does not take into account new forms of invisibility that arise within the painting. The ambiguities brought to the fore by the *parergon* can underline what Merleau-Ponty's theory on painting does not take into account: the impossibility of making the appearance of the world come to visibility in a painting. This rests on two presuppositions about painting: First, Merleau-Ponty presupposes that what is expressed in the painting, is inevitably the world. Second, he does not question the decisions in the painter's process of selection, and thereby he does not question presuppositions about the painting's borders. I discuss each of these presuppositions in turn and locate them in the paintings of Cézanne.

### *The role of the invisible*

Merleau-Ponty presupposes that what will be expressed in a painting, is the world. In his emphasis on Cézanne, he focuses on an eventual unity with the world via painting. In Merleau-Ponty's return to the things as they appear to us, he argues that "art and painting alone do this in full innocence" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 352). Consequently, this means that for Merleau-Ponty, the painter will make the world visible on the canvas. In painting, he focuses on what is present and perceptible even though constituted by the invisible. When he argues that "painting gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 357) he has already made a decision about what a painting is. Moreover, he decided that the painter will render the appearance of the world visible on canvas.

In his analysis of painting, Merleau-Ponty leaves behind his own theoretical adherence to the idea that there is a process of invisibility underlying perception: he does not articulate what a painting renders invisible. In his phenomenological approach to

perception, he takes into account the invisible: in his attempt to bring us into contact with the world we think we perceive, he concedes that it is only accessible in our “limited perspective” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968/2004, p. 69). Contrary to his theory of perception, in his description of painting he does not explicitly take into account that invisibility always shifts: with every choice of making visible, there is equally something rendered invisible or beyond what is brought to the fore on the canvas.

Merleau-Ponty’s adherence to giving primacy to presence in painting means that his approach is too limited to explain the possibilities for contemporary painting. Making the world visible within the boundaries of the canvas is not a painter’s only option. It presupposes a fixed concept of what a painting is, and what it might become. For instance, Merleau-Ponty would not be able to take into account the possibility of removing canvas in order to create a painting, as can be seen in the work of Richard Aldrich<sup>9</sup>. In the work *If I Paint Crowned I’ve Had It, Got Me*, Aldrich (2008a) takes apart the traditional stretcher of the painting, which in turn becomes the painting. Merleau-Ponty’s approach to painting would not suffice to explain how this would constitute a painting, as the painter does not make the appearance of the world visible in a traditionally painterly act. Rather, things are rendered invisible in the literal sense by removing canvas.

### *Selection and Framing*

Similar to perception, in painting there must always be an absence in what has been made present. Merleau-Ponty, even though making room for the invisible in his analysis of perception, does not take into consideration the impossibility of making the appearance of the world visible in painting. I maintain that the process of painting simultaneously makes invisible: it is selective like perception. Derrida makes room for this ambiguous absence in painting, and what haunts a painting’s presence<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, Derrida’s questions as presented by the *parergon*, can be used to highlight the inherent absence in painting, located in overlooked or excluded parts. Merleau-Ponty does not fully take into consideration that in every act of making visible in a painting, something else is rendered invisible, or falling outside the borders of the canvas.

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<sup>9</sup> In Part Four I further elaborate on Aldrich’s approach to painting.

<sup>10</sup> This approach highlights Derrida’s critique of metaphysics of presence more generally speaking. For a comparison between Derrida and Merleau-Ponty on presence, see Holland (1986). For Derrida’s approach to presence and absence in drawing, see Escoubas (2006) and Derrida (1990/1993).

Similar to Kant's decision that the frame of the painting, understood as *parergon*, is not an inherent part of the work (Derrida, 1978/1987), Merleau-Ponty also presupposes that the things falling outside the frame of the painting, are not a part of the work. This limit does not necessarily need to be the physical frame, but can consist of the parts that did not come to visibility in the painting. This is the limitation to Merleau-Ponty's approach to painting: it cannot consider the possibility of focusing on what is lacking, even though he acknowledges this process in his theory of embodied perception. In painting, his focus lies on presence, and not on what slips away in a painting.

### *Visibility, invisibility and Selection in Cézanne*

In order to further explain Merleau-Ponty's presuppositions, I turn to the work of Cézanne. In one of Cézanne's many approaches to the same landscape of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire, in his painting *Montagne Sainte-Victoire* (1902-1906) the blank canvas is shining through the paint, whereas in another attempt, the *Montagne Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine* (ca 1887), the painting seems to be fully filled. Considering Merleau-Ponty's presupposition about the appearance of the world in painting, I maintain that in describing these paintings, he would focus on what is made visible in the works, and not on what is lacking from them. He notes that the painter, when approaching the mountain, asks the mountains to reveal "how they make us see the visible" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 358). This brings to the fore Merleau-Ponty's adherence to understanding painting as a process of making the world visible. In Merleau-Ponty's approach to perception, the invisible is seen as constitutive of the visible, but in painting the invisible does not have a place. The mountain is only asked what it reveals, not what it conceals.

What Cézanne's series of the mountain shows, is that the process of selection is inherent to painting, similar to how the process of selection is inherent to embodied perception. I maintain that the missing sections of paint that are so prominently visible in *Montagne Sainte-Victoire* (1902-1906), are also at work in *Montagne Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine* (ca 1887). In every choice of making present, something else is excluded. Due to every trace of paint that is visible, other things are left out of the image, which means that the world does not come to visibility in the painting. Whereas Merleau-Ponty presupposes that the mountain in the painting is in the process of appearing and will become visible, Cézanne is already dealing with the very impossibility of making visible: he seems to be

considering the lacks, gaps, the ambiguities and invisibilities that remain absent in the painting. Even though an absence of paint or seemingly unfinished parts should not be taken as literal examples of a lack in the work, in Cézanne's case it can help bring to the fore how Merleau-Ponty focuses on presence, and overlooks the critical role of absence and selection. Seeing the gaps as constitutive parts of the painting, allows questions about what belongs to the painting to be asked.

Merleau-Ponty notes that Cézanne always doubted his own attempts to make a painting, as "what we call his work was, for him, only the attempt and the approach of his painting" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007a, p. 69). Cézanne's uncertainty about whether or not his works are paintings, shows that the impossibility of making visible plays a crucial role in his painterly practice. Cézanne's attempts of approaching the visible, and his doubts about the possibility, emphasize that a painting always remains lacking as it is selective about what becomes visible. Cézanne embodies the impossibility of understanding a painting as fully present. What Merleau-Ponty overlooks, is that every painting is a process of selection which renders things equally invisible.

Due to Cézanne's uncertainty, it becomes possible to question a painting's borders, similar to the questions presented by the *parergon*, as it is not directly clear what distinguishes the inside from the outside of the painting. I maintain that Cézanne's encounter with the impossibility of determining beforehand whether or not something will become a painting, might be in itself the possibility of attempting to create a painting in the contemporary condition. When it is not clear beforehand what the inside and the outside of the painting will be, presuppositions about what a painting is can be left behind. The borders of the painting, and what is made visible and invisible, should be questioned and approached as ambiguous, and not as strict limits.

Derrida's *parergon* upsets the distinction between what is viewed as insignificant, and what belongs to a work's essence. In *Eye and Mind* (1964/2007b), Merleau-Ponty discusses the ambiguity of the line. Here, he argues that outlines are not strict borders, and that they should not be visible as such. This shows that Merleau-Ponty is already questioning the relation between presence and absence, even though he will eventually focus on what is made visible. A line is neither fully here, nor fully there: "they are always between or behind whatever we fix our eyes upon" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 372). In this respect, Merleau-Ponty already points out what Derrida further develops, although his questions

remain confined within the canvas, whereas Derrida's approach can be used to equally upset the physical borders and possibilities of painting. Merleau-Ponty and Derrida both approach and embrace the ambiguous relation between presence and absence, albeit in different ways. Taken together, they enable me to consider painting in the contemporary condition.

I argue that Merleau-Ponty's definition of painting, as being dissimilar to a mere representation of the world, is a valuable approach to painting as it shows how painting questions and interrogates perception. By approaching it again via the *parergon*, I highlight that a similar ambiguity between what is present and what is absent in the process of perception, is equally at work between the inside and the outside of the painting as painting. Merleau-Ponty's account of perception must be taken further and directed to the painting's physical and conceptual borders, in order to underline that his presuppositions about a strict inside and outside to a painting are no longer applicable in the contemporary condition. This does not mean that it renders Merleau-Ponty's approach useless for contemporary practices, but rather, by focusing on what he overlooks, it can be used to think about painting even when the painting transgresses its own borders. The questions directed toward a painting's border or frame, as well as the questions inherent to the painting in the process of expressing, are what constitutes a painting. Painting pushes against its own limits by denying a fixed essence, by circling around what is lacking, ambiguous or absent.

### *The promise of painting*

The promise made by Cézanne is not discussed by Merleau-Ponty, but it can be seen to underly his approach to painting<sup>11</sup>. By taking into account the process of selection and the focus on invisibility that is equally constitutive for painting, painting seems on the one hand to be similar to perception. On the other hand, painting is dissimilar to perception, insofar as it does not need to bring a world to appearance. Therefore, Cézanne's working process makes visible why his promise cannot be fulfilled. His manner of doubting and questioning his painting implies that he can never reach his goal. This means that the unfulfilled promise is what constitutes Cézanne's working process, and the necessary failure to make painting equal to perception.

Following Derrida (1978/1987), I argue that the promise of the truth in painting must

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<sup>11</sup> For an account of truth and origins in Merleau-Ponty and painting, see Johnson (2013).

remain unfulfilled. For Merleau-Ponty, a painting is in the process of making the world visible, which presupposes an essence of painting and a strict border between painting and world. However, seeing the *parergon* questioning the inside and outside of Cézanne's paintings shows that the truth in painting is the impossibility of knowing whether or not something will become a painting. If a painter would be sure about whether or not something will become a painting beforehand, they rely on presuppositions about a fixed essence. Painting in the contemporary condition questions these presuppositions, and is therefore in need of being in a constant state of doubt. Cézanne's approach is valuable for further questioning painting in the contemporary condition, if his questions are directed outwards toward the painting as a material object. The question itself, whether or not it is actually a painting, functions as the only way to approach painting. The lack of truth, the ambiguity of painting, might therefore be the only truth in painting.

### *Conclusion*

By challenging Merleau-Ponty's thoughts to a Derridean reading, thereby pointing out the tensions inherent to it, I have shown that it can be taken further to question contemporary painting. By approaching their different methodologies of discussing art and painting, I highlight an understanding of 'painting' without ascribing to it a fixed concept, or a closed-off definition. As Merleau-Ponty (1964/2007b) brought to the fore, the invisible is made visible in painting. By combining this with the ambiguity of the relation between the inside and the outside, as proposed by Derrida, I have highlighted that these processes are simultaneously at work on the painting's inside, as well as on its borders. Painting rests on ambiguities, and tensions between what can be seen, what cannot be seen, what is included in the work and what is not. These tensions should be highlighted in a painterly practice. The constant questioning, the undecidability and doubt of the painter, are vital aspects of painting in the contemporary condition. In the last chapter, I argue for my approach to thinking about contemporary painting, while it is lacking a presupposed essence. I further develop how painting is connected to perception, as painting highlights the limits of perception. Painting has the capacity to question the borders and limits of vision and painting itself, as a dynamic process of constant re-evaluation.

#### 4. The borders and limits of painting in the contemporary condition

In this section I will draw on what I have thus far elaborated in relation to Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's approach to perception and painting. I discuss several contemporary painterly practices in order to show how the questions pertaining to the eventually framed inside, as well the questions presented to the boundaries and borders of the painting provide me with a means for a philosophical reflection on contemporary painterly practices. Even if there is no truth or essence of painting, my attempt is not an argument in favor of an 'anything goes' attitude concerning painting. Instead, it is vital to circle around the question what painting might be, in an attempt to discuss the process of pushing against the existing, established limits of painting as a form of art. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the embodied working process of the painter as described in *Cézanne's Doubt* (1945/2007a) and *Eye and Mind* (1964/2007b), combined with Derrida's (1978/1987) *parergon*, it becomes clear that a painting cannot exist wholly without boundaries. I relate to Cézanne's promise concerning a painting's truth in order to transform it: in contemporary painting, the lack of truth is the prerequisite for the possibility of painting.

Contemporary painting has the capacity to surpass the borders of the canvas in physical and conceptual ways. I start by explaining why I argue this process is reliant on the process of decision-making and selection, enabling painting to continually question itself and its own borders. Then, I will substantiate my argument in three subsections. First, I discuss how contemporary painting makes the process of deciding on its inside and outside visible, by turning to David Joselit's (2009) approach in the light of Derrida's deconstruction of the frame, as exemplified in the work of Richard Aldrich. Second, I turn to the process of perception that can be made visible through painting. Not only the embodied perspective of the painter is made visible in painting as is shown by the work of Katharina Grosse: contextual, non-subjective elements can equally question the process of perception. Third, I focus on the process of selection inherent to painting. Discussing the work of Jennifer Packer highlights the importance of painting's capacity to deal critically with perception. When discussing and interpreting these contemporary painters in the light of Derrida's and Merleau-Ponty's insights, I bring to the fore how painting can question our habitual manner of perceiving, and challenge our expectations about what a painting can be.

### *Surpassing the rectangular frame: the painter's decision*

Painting in a contemporary practice calls for several decisions on its limits, edges or frame. The process of selection is at work on the painting's outside, as well as within the work. These decisions imply that, due to the process of selection, a painting deals simultaneously with the borders and limits of our embodied perception, as well as with its own borders as a material object. The necessity of making a decision, of framing, will always render things visible and invisible: there cannot be an inside, without something on its outside. As such, painting can highlight the importance of keeping the borders ambiguous and open-ended: as a form of art, but equally as an encounter with our own selective perceptual processes.

Contemporary painting should not presuppose an essence, or adhere to predetermined limitations, but there are always decisions involved. In it, countless decisions are made with each brushstroke, as Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2007a) description of Cézanne's working process highlights. Moreover, the painter equally needs to decide on the work's framing: on what is expressed, what is considered to fall outside of the work or rendered insignificant. In Derrida's deconstructive approach, there is a focus on the moment of "undecidability" (Caputo, 1997/2021a, p. 137). Derrida discusses the undecidable moment in the light of the possibility of justice in *Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"* (1992). Undecidability does not mean deciding between several rules, or not choosing at all, but refers to an "impossible decision" (Derrida, 1992, p. 24), which thus involves a risk. Undecidability entails leaving open possibilities for choice: if something is already presupposed, a real decision cannot be made. According to Derrida any decision needs to entail "the ordeal of the undecidable" (Derrida, 1992, p. 24). Applied to painting, it shows that if it is already decided that a painting must consist of paint applied to canvas, there is no real choice involved, but a mere following of a preestablished rule. Involved in the 'ordeal' of decision-making, is the moment of taking a leap. As Caputo puts it, when deciding, one "looks into that abyss, and then makes the leap" (Caputo, 1997/2021a, p. 137). The leap is a moment of taking a risk, in order to attempt to make a decision.

In my approach, the contemporary painter needs to rely on undecidability, in order to have a real possibility of taking risks and making decisions. The leap in the process of painting is present in every decision made by the painter concerning what is included or excluded from the work, even if these decisions are based on uncertainty. Contemporary

painting directs these doubts toward the work's outside: toward the physical and conceptual limitations of painting. Consequently, the painter relies on continual doubt, in order to underline the impossibility of knowing beforehand if they will eventually produce a painting.

### *The possibility of painting in the contemporary condition*

In the contemporary condition, painting is a process of reevaluation and change. In its process of questioning itself, contemporary painting becomes possible without losing all specificity, and without presupposing an essence. It circles around its own center, and remains open-ended. Here, a connection can be made between Merleau-Ponty's emphasis of the embodied painter and Derrida's approach to undecidability and the impossibility of determining a painting's essence. Together, they can help to formulate the possibility for painting in the contemporary condition.

The questions directed towards the work's outside are connected to Derrida's approach to the *parergon*. He notes that it should not be understood as the physical frame of a painting, even though in some cases, it might be. He states that "it will be said that not all frames are, or have been, or will be square, rectangular, or quadrangular figures, nor even simply angular" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 77). Similarly, I will not argue that a painting must transgress its physical or rectangular borders in order to question them. As long as it is an attempt to challenge what is on the inside and the outside of the painting, the frame is already breaking down. Without a frame, there would be no possibility of painting, but the frame does not need to be rectangular. In the next three subsections, I look at three ways in which contemporary painting challenges perception and painting itself by way of discussing the paintings of Richard Aldrich, Katharina Grosse and Jennifer Packer.

### *The decision as framing and the work of Richard Aldrich*

According to Derrida, the *parergon* does not only question what is internal to the work, it simultaneously separates the work from its surroundings. It marks a decision between an inside and an outside, and should therefore be questioned in a theory or practice of art (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 61). For Derrida, the outside of the work might for instance be the wall behind it, or the room it can be seen in. The *parergon* eventually distinguishes the work from the work's general context, which he calls "the whole field of historical, economic, political inscription" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 61). For postmodern

painting, I want to add to this general context the work's situatedness in the context of the artist's oeuvre and the relations between the works. The focus shifts from questions about a presupposed inside of a painting, as was the case in Cézanne's practice, toward a more contextual approach, which positions the work in a larger artistic process. I interpret the *parergon* as a conceptual frame and the moment of decision-making. This approach can engage with the borders of the physical work, as well as choices pertaining to the work's depiction or 'inside'.

In order to substantiate the need for a contextual approach, I draw on David Joselit's theory of painting, focused on a work's "transitivity" (Joselit, 2009, p. 128). Primarily, he understands a work's transitivity as "expressing an action which passes over to an object" (Joselit, 2009, p. 128). He explains that in this approach, a painting can both question tensions inherent to the work, and how it relates to its surroundings, as it always behaves in several networks. The aim of various contemporary practices is for Joselit to give visibility to this transitivity: how the work behaves in its networks and how these actions might be made visible again in the painting (Joselit, 2009, p. 130-131). This transitive approach can thus be understood as aiming to keep what a painting can be in flux, as the network into which the work enters influences it. According to Joselit, it highlights that in the contemporary condition, "painting is beside itself" (Joselit, 2009, p. 134).

This analysis provides an apt representation of the condition of contemporary painting, and how the edge is not static, but ambiguous, such as Derrida's *parergon* has highlighted. I maintain that, by using the term 'beside', Joselit is already engaging with the ambiguity of defining the strict limits and possibilities of painting. 'Beside' denotes a sense of displacement, which I interpret as a reference to an action that must still marginally engage with itself. In the light of my analysis of the difficulties of deciding on an inside and an outside of a painting as presented by Derrida, Joselit's approach can help to highlight why there is still something particular to painting in the contemporary condition. Even though there is no longer a sole focus on what is expressed inside the painting, but on how it relates to the historical, cultural and theoretical contexts, there is still an engagement with painting's tradition, in order to challenge it. It can no longer be presupposed beforehand that a work will become a painting, as it is lacking an essence. By being 'beside' the traditional understanding, it can transform into something different.

Focusing on the contextual relations of the work is necessary, as the borders or limits

of painting might not be visible in themselves. Derrida's approach underlines that the *parergon* is not visible in and of itself, but in how "it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy" (Derrida, 1978/1987, p. 61). Following Derrida's analysis of this receding movement of the *parergon*, an approach to the painting's inside and outside needs to be reevaluated in every singular instance, as the *parergon* itself will 'melt away' after pointing out the ambiguities concerning its borders. Singular, insofar as we cannot presuppose an essence to painting as a form of art, which therefore means that each work must establish how it relates to these borders anew. I understand the process of making the borders and limits between the inside and the outside of the work to be ambiguous and fluid, by focusing on contextual relations to be the primary influence of the *parergon* in contemporary practices.

Richard Aldrich embodies such an approach, as his works defy categorization. In his work, material choice, methodological approach, style and manner of expressing differ, making each painting a singular attempt to paint. Aldrich uses for instance paint, objects, textiles and language. For example, the work *Looking with Mirror Apparatus* (2008b), uses a figurative image, a mirror installed on the stretcher, and a cut piece of linen. Whereas in the work *Untitled (Four New Starts)* (2013), wooden objects and pieces of cloth are applied to the canvas. These two examples already show Aldrich does not adhere to traditional limitations of painting, and defies strict categorization. Each work transgresses painting's presupposed borders, while seen in the light of his oeuvre, it is clear that he engages with painting specifically. In his open-ended approach he changes what was thought to be possible for painting as a form of art.

Painters such as Aldrich show that each work has the capacity to challenge what painting is. The painter decides on the eventual framing of the painting, either physically or conceptually speaking. Therefore, it is valuable to think about painting specifically, as it still working both with and against traditionally established possibilities and limits. Even though painting lacks an essence, or truth, it is engaging with the discourse on painting and challenges the limits from within. In the interview with Brunette and Wills, Derrida emphasizes the need for the painting to be "countersigned" (Brunette & Wills, 1994, p. 18), which can further explain how painting can engage with itself, albeit marginally or by expanding its possibilities. Derrida explains that there must necessarily be an act of countersigning, for instance by an art institution, or the general art public, in order to be

recognized as a work (Brunette & Wills, 1994, p. 18). The relation between the signer, the one who made the work, and the receiver of the signature, entails that there was already a possibility of someone countersigning before signing, as it is an instance of the “future perfect” (Brunette & Wills, 1994, p. 19). The retroactivity of countersigning is necessary in order to understand the possibility of painting today, when the only truth to painting is the lack of truth or fixated essence.

The emphasis on the decision-making of the painter highlights that even though not everything is a painting, a painter might declare almost anything to become a painting when engaging in a process of challenging painting’s possibilities from within. Without this engagement, it would not be recognized as a painting. By pushing its own boundaries, recognition is possible without the need to adhere to a reductive, dogmatic or medium-specific approach to what a painting might be. Via this marginal engagement with what was thought to belong to painting, its contemporary possibilities are opened up.

#### *Porous borders and the work of Katharina Grosse*

As the painter works with the ambiguities of bringing forth a work, and decisions on its framing, I maintain that the interaction between the work and the perceiver mimics the process between the painter and the work that initially took place. According to Johnson, painting in Merleau-Ponty’s approach presents the perceiver with movement (Johnson, 2013, p. 491). Therefore, I maintain that when the painting presents the perceiver with questions pertaining to their manner of perceiving, they are simultaneously confronted with what is included and excluded therein. In order to explain how this might be encountered by the perceiver, I will draw on Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the cave paintings in Lascaux.

Merleau-Ponty (1964/2007b) describes the encounter with the work in terms of the impossibility of locating it to one particular place. A painting is not an object that exists in the same way as other objects we perceive, and he describes:

Pushed forward here, held back there, supported by the wall’s mass they use so adroitly, they radiate about the wall without ever breaking their elusive moorings. I would be hard-pressed to say *where* the picture is that I am gazing at. For I do not gaze at it as one gazes at a thing, I do not fix it in its place. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 355)

In this passage, it becomes clear that the painting is neither similar to the wall, nor a mere sign pointing toward actual animals. Paintings are not fully here, nor fully somewhere else. Perri notes that Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between how the actual objects like the wall are there, and how the paintings are there (Perri, 2013, p. 90)<sup>12</sup>. I maintain that in Merleau-Ponty's passage, the borders between the paintings and the walls seem porous. Here, he is keeping the ambiguity between inside and outside intact, which could be understood as similar to Derrida's *parergon*.

In the light of this passage, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty would ascribe this sense of movement being caused by the embodied working process of the painter. However, I want to emphasize that the impossibility of locating the painting is equally due to the work's framing. The paintings in Lascaux are directly applied to the walls, which makes the border between where the walls begin and the paintings end hard to define. In the case of a framed painting on canvas, a similar uncertainty remains. Moreover, in the contemporary condition a painting no longer needs to consist of paint applied to a flat rectangular surface, making it necessary to engage with a painting's contextual relations, in order to define what belongs to the work and what does not.

The lack of essence in contemporary painting opens up its possibilities to make use of materials usually associated with other artforms, or traditionally non-art related objects or acts. Therefore, it should not be presupposed that a painting's surroundings are strictly outside of the work. Merleau-Ponty seems to already argue for the idea that a painting does not necessarily stop at the edges of the painted canvas, even though his own analysis of painting focuses only on the traditional and modernist understanding of painting. Following his description of the Lascaux paintings, the impossibility of determining the essence of painting during the working process of the painter, applies to the perceiver as well: they similarly cannot capture or locate the work.

Take for instance the approach to painting as presented by Katharina Grosse, and her exhibition *Mumbling Mud* (Grosse, 2018-2019) created in the *K11 Art Museum* in Shanghai. Her work shows the process of physically exceeding the limitations of the canvas. Her immersive work interacts with the spaces in which it has been installed, and defies painting's traditional adherence to being flat. An installation-based painting such as *Mumbling Mud*

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<sup>12</sup> For an account of the ontology of the image, see Perri (2013).

makes it hard to define the borders of the painting. The walls are a part of the work, although they are simultaneously the background and on the outside. Her contemporary painterly practice shows what Merleau-Ponty already found present in the paintings in Lascaux, which for the perceiver entails that “rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2007b, p. 355). The perceiver’s gaze is guided through the space, and follows her movements and traces of paint sprayed throughout the spaces. The ambiguity of borders is in Grosse’s work made tangible. I maintain that her work shows that the painting is capable of presenting the perceiver with an image that cannot be attached to one place. The perceiver’s gaze attempts to follow the painter’s process of making visible, selecting and rendering invisible, and engages in a similar process in relation to the work.

Grosse’s work shows that not only an embodied subject can instill in painting the capacity to present the perceiver with questions about perception: these questions can equally be made tangible during the engagement with the material work itself. Not only the embodied process of the painter, but the material object itself can challenge what is inside or outside of a context, and has the capacity to highlight the process of perception. Merleau-Ponty already saw that the embodied subject had this capacity, but seeing painting in the light of Derrida’s approach makes it clear that this entails a too narrow conception of what makes such ambiguities visible. The painting as painting can question the limits of perception and has the capacity to either conceal, or bring to visibility for the perceiver. These processes are dependent on the decisions of the painter, as well as on how the work itself is presenting its framing and questioning its context.

#### *Selection and detail in the work of Jennifer Packer*

Due to its specific relationship to perception, painting has the capacity to push not only its own limits, but the limits of perception more generally speaking. It can highlight a manner of reevaluating what is lacking from our habitual manner of perceiving. The works of Jennifer Packer represent a possibility for painting for critical engagement with perception. Her works do not defy the physical borders of the painting, but challenge the limits of perception. She engages with highly personal motifs, and politically charged subjects, such as in her recent exhibition *The Eye is Not Satisfied with Seeing* (2021). In doing so, she points the perceiver of the work toward the process of selection, and what is usually rendered invisible in perception. Importantly, she embodies the hitherto marginalized perspective of

female, Black artists and explicitly attempts to visualize this perspective. In her work, she deals with problems such as marginalization, police brutality, racism and her personal engagement with Black lives (Manlaykhaf & McVeigh, n.d.). Her paintings draw attention to her personal engagement with the world, which in the process might create a new sensibility for the perceiver for that which has been beyond their field of perception. She gives visibility to a world that is marginalized in everyday life, which might be understood as similar to Merleau-Ponty's (1964/2007b) analysis of making heretofore invisible, visible in the painting.

Packer provides the perceiver with an encounter that questions what is inside and outside our field of perception. Packer's work does not question the context of the work in the broad sense, but does so within the painting. Packer foregrounds seemingly insignificant items in her paintings that have meaning in relation to what falls outside of the painting: her political reality. These seemingly insignificant items frame the meaning of her paintings, similar to how the *parergon* functions as a way to circle around a lack. As Heller-Andrist explains, the *parergon* might be the "voice around the work" (Heller-Andrist, 2011, p. 49), which thereby points the individual engaging with the work toward what is lacking.

Packer, by emphasizing her personal engagement with her works, highlights the role of selection in perception. Our field of perception is always inherently selective and painting challenges these boundaries. Looking at Packer's work as an exemplification, the process of selection inherent to painting has the capacity to instigate a similar awareness for selection in the perceiver's manner of perceiving. Packer's way of questioning painting does not lie in transgressing the physical borders or the material of painting, but deals with the process of selection in perception – in this case, the political reality of her direct environment and the attempt to make it visible.

Painting revolves around the lack in perception, and the co-constitution between what is invisible and visible. A painting captures this lack, circles around it, and has the capacity to question our habitual manner of perceiving. Due to its embodied working process, the decisions of the painter can be followed in a similarly embodied manner by the perceiver. Highlighting the absence, the lack in the painting, enables it to deal with the ambiguities of perception by focusing on what is lacking from it and what remains invisible.

### *Conclusion*

Painting has the capacity to engage with the limits of perception, as it makes visible

how selection is taking place in a singular image. As there is no longer a fixated essence or truth connected to painting as a concept in the contemporary approach, there is a need to question the relation between the inside and the outside, as well as between the singular work and its context. In contemporary painting, it is necessary to focus on the framing and the act of decision-making. A contextual approach to painting enables it to exceed and question its presupposed borders, without losing all specificity. By drawing on three contemporary painterly practices, I have shown how the painting can question perception by way of pushing its borders from within, by transgressing its borders physically, and by critically engaging with what lacks from our habitual way of perceiving. Not only the painter as embodied subject can instill in painting this capacity to question the limits of perception, and of painting itself in the contemporary condition; the work itself can engage in the process of questioning its frames. Painting in the contemporary condition is playing with the limits and borders of perception, as well as with its own frame and possibilities.

## 5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I argued for my approach to contemporary painterly practices and its possibilities, when painting no longer adheres to the idea of having a stable essence. If painting has the capacity to transgress its own conceptual and physical borders, there is a need for an approach to think about painting that on the one hand does not suggest painting is lacking all specificity, while on the other hand does not restrict painting's ability to question and transgress its own borders and limits. I have argued for an open-ended approach to painting emphasizing the process of decision-making and selection as a constant reevaluation of painting, dependent on the embodied working process of the painter.

I have given an account of both Merleau-Ponty's and Derrida's approach to painting, and evaluated to what extent their theories are applicable to understand painting today. I argued that painting has the capacity to question and transgress its own physical and conceptual borders, as well as the ability to question our habitual manner of perceiving. The close connection to the embodied working process of the painter, as became apparent by drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, brought to the fore that there are several ambiguities pertaining to the inside of the painting. The sense of movement, and the co-constitutive process of visibility and invisibility as expressed by the painter, can present the perceiver with the process underlying the habitual manner of perceiving, and how selection renders things both visible and invisible simultaneously. Merleau-Ponty's account represented a move away from thinking about painting in terms of representation, toward an understanding of painting as expression. This opens up the possibilities to focus on the working process of the painter, arguing for a more autonomous approach to painting, instead of focusing on representation and resemblance.

By following Derrida's approach to the *parergon* (1978/1987), I emphasized the ambiguity between the inside and the outside of a painting, as a process of co-constitution, and not as a binary opposition or strict border. By turning to the *parergon*, several presupposition about what we think a painting is, and what is included and excluded in the work came to the fore. By following Derrida's approach, I maintain painting must necessarily lack an essence in order to be able to question its own borders. By leaving these boundaries undecided, the painting in the contemporary condition questions itself via a marginal engagement with itself. Thinking in terms of the *parergon* enabled me to focus on the lack of

essence in contemporary painterly practices, which in my approach constitutes the possibility for painting. Painting questions painting from within, and can exceed or transgress its own borders, without losing all specificity. Derrida's *parergon* enabled me to critically engage with Merleau-Ponty's ideas about what a painting is, and what constitutes its borders.

Derrida does not take into account the embodied working process of the painter, and Merleau-Ponty presupposes an essence to painting. Taken together, it becomes clear that the processes Merleau-Ponty highlighted on the inside of the work, are equally at work on the borders of the canvas. The interplay between visibility and invisibility constituting a painting is not only brought forth by a subject, but by the material object of the painting itself. By drawing on several contemporary painterly practices, I have highlighted ways in which a painting questions its own borders, in addition to questioning the borders of perception. Due to the embodied relation between the painter and the work, a similar relation between the eventual perceiver and the work comes about. Painting brings to the fore the processes of selection inherent to our normal vision, as well as to what falls beyond our frame of vision.

By questioning the essence of painting, I have argued for my approach to contemporary painting and its possibilities to question itself from within. There is an ongoing need to discuss painting, as it is a process of reevaluation that is open to change. Painting remains marginally engaging with itself, which therefore calls for an understanding of its underlying processes, in order to be able to speak about what constitutes a painting, and analyze the possibilities of painting in the contemporary condition. By questioning the borders, frames and limits of painting in the contemporary condition, I argued for an open-ended definition of what a painting might be, and what it might become in its transgression of its own limits. Painting, by relying on its own denouncement of having an essence, invites a process of doubt and undecidability. Therefore, I must underline that my approach to painting does not include a definitive answer as to what it is. I highlighted the importance of relying on the painter's process of decision-making and framing, as it cannot be known beforehand whether or not something will become a painting. Without presupposing anything, the painter can engage in a radical questioning of the possibilities and limits of painting, as well as with the way these processes are at work in perception.

The implication of my account of painting is that there is an ongoing need to question

what belongs to painting, and how painting might change in the future. Following my approach, painting has the capacity to deal with technological, political or cultural developments, and incorporate an adjust to changes. By denouncing an essence, it becomes an open ended process. If painting keeps challenging its own limitations, there is an ongoing need to analyze its possibilities.

Both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida focused on Cézanne as a painter, and took note of his letters. Merleau-Ponty focused on his artistic practice and the role of embodiment, and Derrida drew attention to Cézanne's promise. As for the promise of articulating a truth to painting: in the contemporary condition painting's truth might lie in the process of questioning and circling around its own lacking essence. However, painting must keep engaging with this promise, as it can never be wholly without borders or frames. After both Cézanne and Derrida have underlined that the debt is still owed, I owe it to keep the promise unanswered. The unfulfilled promise provides a frame for contemporary painting, and contemporary painters have to continually promise to break it.

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