

# BODIES IN DELIBERATE MOTION: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF COMPLEX EMBODIMENT

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“The body is our general medium for having a world.”

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945)

Inspired by the 2015 XVII Pan American and Parapan American Games and the work of the philosopher of phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Flesh of the World* is an exhibition presenting diverse and complex views of the body, which might deepen qualities associated with competitive sports and games, such as the relationship between the body and technology, and how the senses might offer new forms of knowledge to corporeal performance and potential. *The Flesh of the World* pushes the limits of the body, and challenges dominant culture’s understanding of normativity and embodiment through the works of twenty-four Canadian and international artists who use the body as a medium. The artists critically inquire and experiment with the shape and forms of bodies, proving that, within the context of both the exhibition and the field of athleticism itself, the body is unfixed and indeterminate. The exhibition also makes important connections between the language of complex embodiment and the language of sports, given that many of the issues relating to endurance, physical limits, failure, pathos, and the human psyche, inform both these fields. It is within the confluence of these two worlds—sometimes playful, sometimes reflective—that we can radically expand our ideas of the corporeal apparatus as a whole. The works span across various media, including film and video installation, sculptures, photographs, drawings, paintings, and several performances. The exhibition aims to emphasize how visitors might engage with this work across multi-disciplinary, multi-modal platforms. Just like the Pan Am and Parapan Am Games, this project offers up the artists’ work to the audience through a wider fulcrum of knowing the contours of our flesh.

Merleau-Ponty emphasized the body as the primary site of knowing the world, a corrective to the long, philosophical Cartesian tradition of placing consciousness as the source of knowledge, and that the body and that which it perceives could not be disentangled from one another. The primacy of embodiment led him away from phenomenology towards what he called “indirect ontology” or more famously, the ontology of “the flesh of the world” as articulated in his text, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1969). To Merleau-Ponty then, perception was not a channel that simply filters information in from a separate environment, but rather it is a kind of interconnected interaction of body, object, and environment. With Merleau-Ponty’s ideas in mind, the artists in *The Flesh of the World* open new channels for thinking about how the body might become uniquely malleable and innovative in its engagement with objects and the environment. The artists also challenge our assumptions about our own ostensible

“normative” embodiment, where, as Madeline Schwartzman suggests, they actually “skip such norms to cut to some alternative truth about sensation and movement.”<sup>i</sup> Bodies and their multi-sensorial contact with objects—whether it is with a wall, a footpath, a blindfold, an auditory walking cane or a mound of debris—are integral parts of thinking and learning about the capacities of the body. In the work of the artists in this exhibition, then, they each present the body as a sponge, a surface, and a horizon of experience simultaneously in their deliberate motions and engagements with objects.

In Merleau-Ponty’s text, *The Structure of Behavior* (1983), the philosopher provides astute analyses of concepts such as “nature,” “normal,” “form,” and “behaviour”—some of the words that correspond with the preoccupations of this exhibition and the rhetoric of the Pan Am and Parapan Am Games.<sup>ii</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that “physical form” is an object of perception only. It is not the supposed “real foundation of the structure of behavior.”<sup>iii</sup> Further, “perceived objects” or forms change properties when they change position through the lens of vision and perception. There is not necessarily any “fact” or “truth” to form. According to Merleau-Ponty, we might surmise that the complex body, which is often classified as pathological in medical as well as social and cultural contexts, is a mere human manifestation, a construction of consciousness. There is no “truth” to the supposed reductive nature of the complex corpus. Merleau-Ponty has also written much on “behaviours,” and he suggests that there may not be one right or wrong way of behaving. He questions why certain types of behaviour are preferred over another. Similarly, we might ask why certain more so-called normative ways of moving, walking, dancing, listening, talking, spinning, turning one’s head, getting up after a period of sitting down, and so on, might be considered more preferable over other forms. This has consequences for complex embodiment because, most often, it is the way that the complex body moves through space that is considered the least desirable, difficult, and imperfect. This is because the complex or atypical body typically takes longer to undertake actions that most others would consider “simple.” Is an objective way of doing things inherently obvious or mandatory, prescribed to a certain object, form or body? Merleau-Ponty points out that, in actuality, there is no objectivity to a method of doing things, and that there is no one structure of behaviour. An ostensible “structure of behaviour” is true only insofar as humans have predicated that there is a most desirable and so-called best way of behaving, particularly if that behaviour takes the least amount of time, and takes up the least amount of space (this is similar to how there might be a so-called ideal way of appearing, in terms of aesthetics in the tradition of art history). But the “best” way should not, and is not, our only possible solution at all. There are options, which widen the scope for the structure of behaviour as enacted through the contemporary work in this exhibition. Indeed, the body is no longer autonomous—it is effected and affected by other bodies and spaces, which infuse our definitions of “body,” “normal,” and “nature” with new meaning. All of this dynamic thinking opens up the possibilities for the diverse capacities of the human body, some of which may have previously been considered as reduced, imperfect or slow. The capacities of complex bodies bring with them subjugated knowledge that needs to be pried open and explored, where we continue to ask the question, what are

the phenomenological and sensorial experiences of one who is blind, deaf, or who has autism tell us about corporeal perceptions? Merleau-Ponty's discussion on the structure of behaviour suggests that there are myriad structures for a plethora of behaviours, deliberate or otherwise, and the subjectivity of complex embodiment forms one critical part of this framework.

Ultimately, the artists in *The Flesh of the World* are creating a new episteme, because the complex embodiments of arthritis, autism, blindness, cerebral palsy, deafness, prostheses, one arm, one leg, hearing aids, and tinnitus, those who use wheelchairs for their mobility, and much more, provide us with a palette of new information for the phenomenology of complex embodiment. This information is new insofar as it has rarely been explored in exhibitions of contemporary art, particularly where we might see unique and strategic juxtapositions. For example, new meanings are brought to bear upon canonical works of art by high profile artists such as Bruce Nauman's seminal video work from the 1960s in dialogue with a contemporary video work by Noemi Laikmaier, or where we see drawings of prostheses by Louise Bourgeois rubbing up against a video about the sidewalk adventures of his auditory walking cane by non-visual artist and learner Carmen Papalia. I am excited about the potential curatorial, phenomenological knowledge that might surface within these new artwork configurations, where pieces that were once stamped within a certain "normalizing" discourse can not only be unhinged from safe frameworks, but can also be unbounded, rearticulated, and reformulated within radical politicized arenas, breathing new life into their original conceptions and discourses.

The artists in *The Flesh of the World* cannot help but consciously or unconsciously represent their lived experiences, which feed into other ways of being. These artists remind us that the subject is always discovered, created, invented, and re-invented, and always being constituted, and they also instil a sense of discomfort from their viewers—which perhaps takes over from a typical empathetic positionality—in order to achieve disorientation. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed asserts that, "moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground."<sup>iv</sup> While disorientation is, of course, unsettling initially, eventually, in these liminal spaces of being, we may come to a better understanding of ourselves. In these moments of re-orientation and disorientation, as Ahmed says, "they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope."<sup>v</sup> The artist's imagination may give us a heightened, personal testimony into their embodiment that is close, and devoid of distance or detachment in all variety of representation. I offer the contemporary work of the artists in this exhibition as a starting point, and as a way of working through this often-ambiguous territory. With a phenomenology of complex embodiment at our helm, it is time for us to see what the artists see more multi-sensorially, as there is insight to be gained from their fleshed-out points of view.

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<sup>i</sup> Madeline Schwartzman, *See Yourself Sensing: Redefining Human Perception* (London: England: Black Dog Publishing, 2011).

<sup>ii</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behavior* (Paris, France: Duquesne University, Paris, 1983).

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-145.

<sup>iv</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Disorientation and Queer Subjects" in *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 157.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.