

The impressed touch

Ólafur Gíslason, from the book: *Touching*, Reykjavík, 2004, p. 54-59

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I am having trouble naming my body. If I, for example, name it with the words “my body”, then I am at the same time distinguishing it from myself as if it was some kind of a “thing” that belonged to “me”. Who is this “me” that owns my body? Is he somewhere outside the body, or does he have an independent ethereal existence somewhere under my skin as a noncorporeal being or idea? Or is this “me” the body itself of flesh and blood, and “my body” only an idea without any material existence?

The truth is that “my body” is at the same time two things; a material thing, and as such a part of the material world as a whole, and a living and sensing being which perceives the world but senses itself at the same time in a different way from all other bodies of the world. My body and my selfconscious being can not be separated without losing their ground. As soon as I name “my body” it has become something different from what it was, and its image which is implicit in the word belongs to time past as a dead object, a corpse that doesn't exist anymore except as an idea or image. As soon as I distinguish my thought and my selfconsciousness from my body it becomes an abstract idea which now starts thinking itself thinking.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty has pointed out¹, our body is both seeing and visible. And what is more, it is visible to itself, at least up to a point. Just like it touches the world around and touches itself at the same time. Just like it hears the noise of the world and at the same time hears its own voice and the beat of its veins. The words I give to my body kill their signified object in a certain sense, just as the picture I paint of it. The living body really discloses the contradiction implicit in the division between the subject and its object, between thought and the thing it is thinking, the contradiction which was the premise of Descartes' whole philosophical thought: “cogito, ergo sum”; I think, therefore I am.

According to this primary premise the body exists as an idea of the thought, a thought without any physical or corporeal premise which thinks its own body as an extraneous object, *res extensa*.

By separating completely the thought and what it thinks, as if they were two unrelated phenomena, modern science has taken things as hostages of a thought which defines itself unrelated to the body. Using these premises Mankind has created its spectacular world of technology but is at the same time on its way of losing its connection to its body and to nature as a living being which forms our thoughts in a mutual and undivisible communion through the space and time our body is filling with its consciousness, intention and being in the world.

This problem becomes more evident if we try to liberate us from the fetters of linguistic traditions and focus on vision and visual perception instead. As I open my eyes I have the world within reach and become a visible part of it at the same time, also towards myself. As soon as I turn around I get a new perspective on the world and the world sees me from a different point of view as well. My image of the world is tied to my intention and my movement and it is my intention and my movements which create the everchanging image I have of the world. Open, my eyes are constantly moving as is my heart and the blood in my veins. So is the world too. The things of the world do not have an unmutable image, only temporary, as Plato rightly said. But the mutability of things is dependent on my movements and the positions of my body towards them.

On this Merleau-Ponty has made the following statement: "The body is the space which gives birth to the soul and it is the matrix of all other existing space. Thus vision becomes double: we have the vision I can reflect and which I can't think but as a thought, inspection of the Spirit, judgement and reading of signs. And there is the vision that takes place, a honorary or institutionalised thought, closed inside one's body, of which we can not have an idea without exercising it, a vision that introduces an autonomous rule of soul and body in relation to space and thought. This doesn't eliminate the enigma of vision, but transfers it from the "thought about sight" to the vision in action."²

It is the vision in action which is here and now, just like my body. It is nowhere else but here and now. This is one of the reasons why I have difficulties in naming it. As soon as I have mentioned it, it has become a thought about sense, a thought about what I saw, felt or touched.

Hoc est enim corpus meum (Here you have truly my own body) were Christ's words to his disciples at the last supper when he broke the bread and gave them to eat. These are also the first words in the remarkable essay *Corpus* by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, where he is insisting on the impossible task of writing the human body of flesh and blood – instead of writing *about* it as any common thing or a corpse, as we have been used to. It is no coincidence, says Nancy, that these words of Christ have been repeated every day and repeatedly every day in all Christian churches from the beginning of Christianity. Our western culture is permeated by the thought of the body of God. It is in this offering of the body, in this bread and wine, that God predicts his imminent disappearance and his absence and his unspeakability at the same time as he offers us to join him in this metamorphosed body of bread and wine. Nancy is of the opinion that few things are as important as continuing the discussion on the unspeakable. No discourse is more important. That is why he insists on writing the body, not in order to describe it with the adjectives of anatomy or to define it with the measurements of height, volume or circumference. To write the body is something like touching it directly with the language so that we become physically touched. It demands a new type of writing which lies beyond all traditional philosophical discourse and regards direct perception, the touching of a body already touched by its own touch.

The heroic undertaking of Jean-Luc Nancy to insist on the impossible task of writing the body with his scripture opens for us the abyss of a black hole and invisibility which connects mind and body, subject and object in a sensible way. This undertaking has it in common with the art of painting that Nancy puts his own body into the scripture like the painter puts his own

body into the act of painting. The work of the artist is a physical work and with Nancy his scripture is intended, like in the painting, to become the incarnation of the word. His intention is to touch the keyboard of his computer with the same physical generosity we can feel from the painter touching his canvas with his brushstrokes and his hands: *Hoc est enim corpus meum*.

“The sign of the self is the self-being of the sign: this is the double formula of the body in all its knowable states and possibilities... the body signifies itself as a body of the sensed interiority: we only have to see everything that is said concerning the human body, its erect position, its resistant thumb, its “eyes where flesh becomes soul” (Proust). Thus the body presents the self-being of the sign, the completed communion of signifier and signified, the end of exteriority, the sense of the sensible – *hoc est enim*.”³

The touch of this sign of the body, which is its own self-being, becomes a mysterious action which disappears into itself just like the material world disappears into the all-reaching black hole the astrophysicists have told us marks the end of the world. Just like the black hole swallows matter, its form and light, thus the painter touching the surface of the painting discloses the void created where matter disappears into its signification in a sensible way. It is, I believe, this mysterious touch of the eyes and the hand with the surface of the canvas that we can experience in the paintings of Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson in his exhibition at Gerðarsafn.

Ólafur Gíslason

1 See: Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, Paris 1964, and *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris 1964.

2 *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, here quoted from Italian translation by Anna Sordini, *L'occhio e lo spirito*, Milan 1989, page 39.

3 Jean-Luc Nancy: *Corpus*, here quoted from Italian translation by Antonella Moscati, Naples 2001, page 61.