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**THE INCARNATED LANDSCAPE. Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of
Wildness, Memory and Selfhood in Nature through the work of Justine Kurland,
Ori Gersht and Luisa Lambri
Montero Sanchez de Corral, Paula ⁽¹⁾;**

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Abstract: We are confronted with an increasingly defiled condition of Nature, where we dwell and build enmeshed in an occularcentric culture in progressive alienation from its cycles. Our behavior in Nature is conditioned by our perception and full awareness of its qualities. Hence, if a change in behavior is required, we are compelled to a fresh perception, one that widens our scope into further dimensions of the real and that enables a renewed intersubjectivity (me-the others-the world).

In order to elude the unsolvable debate between empiricist and constructivist points of view to explain Nature –both of which deny it an intrinsic meaning- we suggest a phenomenological approach to the ‘incarnated’ landscape from the ‘thickness’ of the artistic gaze, in the terms proposed by Merleau-Ponty.

Through the oeuvre of three contemporary photographers whose ways of expressing Nature emerge from their bodily linkage to it (Husserl’s *Leib*), we discover the transcendent, untamable dimension of Nature’s alterity within the nomadic dwelling of Justine Kurland. The house becomes a perceiving body in the ‘homes’ by photographer Luisa Lambri, its openings acting as sight organs. Finally, Nature depicted as ‘house of memory’ in the pictures of Ori Gersht, delves into the symbolism of natural elements and registers Nature’s inherent cycles of creation and destruction.

Keywords: Landscape dwelling, Artist as phenomenologist by Merleau-Ponty, Justine Kurland, Luisa Lambri, Ori Gersht.

1. Introduction

The perceiving body as the place of knowledge, *chiasm* as the locus of epiphany, expression as the outpouring of the *chiasm*: Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical approach is provocative. Placing the body at the heart of Metaphysics and the theory of knowledge, he incarnates conscience (Garcia 2012).

The experience of my hand touching my other hand, where the hand that touches can be felt as touched and vice versa, though not simultaneously, lead us to the reversible dimension of my flesh, where the crossing over (*chiasm*) of the sensible and the sentient takes place.

It is ‘this “reversibility” that Merleau-Ponty picks out as the essence of *flesh* [...].It shows us the ambiguous status of our bodies as both subjects and objects’ (Baldwin 2004). In order to renew our perception of the world we are invited to reconsider our double belongingness to both orders.

Through our body, we are compelled to return to **experience**, ‘to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system “self-others-things” as it comes into being’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945), to become children, as they are essentially ‘beings of perception’. Fink ‘spoke of a “wonder” before the world’ (cit. Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012). ‘To return to the thing themselves is to return to this world prior to knowledge’, to go back to a forest, a meadow or a river as if we had never learned them in Geography (ibid.).

Since ‘phenomenology involves describing, and not explaining or analyzing’ (ibid.), Merleau-Ponty will suggest us that it will be through artistic expression—one that involves our whole self in movement—that Nature will be somehow disclosed to us.

Within contemporary art works where Nature constitutes the unifying ‘horizon’ of experience (Husserl cit. Merleau-Ponty 1964), we have selected the oeuvre of three photographers- Kurland, Gersht and Lambri. From it we will essay to clarify through phenomenological premises, both existential and hermeneutical- the meaning of Dwelling in Nature, a shared one, as a primordial act of the human being.

2. Art, Nature, and Knowledge in Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology

Artistic intuition as a unique/singular mode to Nature knowledge, one apprehended through the senses and 'analogum rationis', belongs in a long tradition within modern European thought. Drafted by Baumgarten in 1735, posed by Kant's third critique (*Critique of Judgement* 1790), it will find full expression in Merleau-Ponty's later ontology (1964).

Goethe conceived of Nature in terms of wholeness and lived experience, as a productive force whose creative capacity could be equated to that of a genius and which was accessible only through sensible intuition, its wholeness only captured by artistic approach (Corbera 2014).

Citing Schelling, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that 'we are the parents of a Nature of which we are also the children' (1995/2003).

Wrathall (2011) explains how, first shyly Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (1882) and later the phenomenological postulates in full clarity claim the power of art –even above philosophy– as a force capable of 'not just altering our beliefs about the world, but, more importantly, our dispositions through which we encounter and evaluate the world' for "all art exercises the power of suggestion over the muscles and senses [...] inflames desire" (Nietzsche cit. Wrathall *ibid.*).

Since, in principle, our perception of an object is just a 'one sided' one, in order to obtain an ampler perception we are censed to move around it. Husserl speaks about a 'system of kinesthesia', analyzing the profound relationship between body mobility habits and world perception (García 2012). To gain a new perspective of the landscape we will have to change our 'habitual commerce' with the things in the world (Husserl cit. Kisiel 2002).

In *Walking*, Thoreau recalls his climbing of a white pine on the top of a hill that he had walked by for many years and how it paid off in a double dimension, for he 'discovered new mountains in the horizon which I had never seen before –so much more of the earth and the heavens' as well as 'a few minute and delicate red cone-like blossoms, the fertile flower of the white pine' that 'no one had ever seen the like before, but they wondered as a star drop down. Tell of ancient architects finishing their works on the tops of columns as perfectly as on the lower and most visible parts!' (1862)

The phenomenologist aims to describe Nature from within, not to explain or analyze it (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2014). Since all considerations regarding Nature necessarily take place from within, they will forcibly include a blind point, an internal flaw. That fact, far from being deemed a limitation, should be regarded as the precise condition for its achievement, what enables our thinking and feeling the world. He neither denies the existence of something outside himself and different from him/ nor considers his cultural and subjective conditionings as a lens distorting an 'objective' Nature. 'Nature, therefore, is precisely what discloses itself *through* our expressive acts and, as requiring such expression for its disclosure' (Toadvine 2009).

Merleau-Ponty equates the works of the phenomenologists to those of certain artists such as Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne. As painstaking as them, it requests 'the same kind of attention and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to grasp the sense of the world or of history in its nascent state' (1945/2014). Scientific thought, according to him, constitutes a second step to going back to the things themselves, where the root of true knowledge grows (*ibid.*). Merleau-Ponty cites Klee's famous formula that opens the *Creative Credo* (1920): 'Art does not reproduce the visible, it rends visible'.

Merleau-Ponty's later ontology, incomplete due to his untimely death, turns out to be his most suggestive in terms of Nature and artistic expression –*Eye and Mind* (1964), *Sense and Non-Sense* (1966), and especially *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964).

2.1. Art as Hyper-reflection

When we stop considering reflection as a distinct, independent 'act of recovery' of the world, we 'catch sight of the necessity of another operation [...] a sort of *hyper-reflection*', one that takes also into account our belonging 'into the spectacle' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968).

In accordance with phenomenological methods, our perception is involuntary. It comes as a bodily answer prior to reflection when a demand is placed on my body from the outside. Our manner of being becomes invaded by an alterity, where 'the "core of reality" is as much withheld from sensing as disclosed to it' (Toadvine 2009). Hence the natural being appears as irreducible before our senses, we are faced with its transcendence. Merleau-Ponty thus suggests hyper-reflection, to read in the world 'the route it has followed in becoming a world for us', to 'plunge into the world instead of surveying it', to 'descend into it instead of working its way back up toward a prior possibility of thinking it-which would impose upon the world in advance the conditions for our control over it' (1964/1968). Hence, *dialogue* emerges as the appropriate figure to relate to Nature. (1945/2014)

Genuine artistic expression can be identified with hyper-reflection –a merleau-pontian second order of reflection. To him, 'the expressed is inseparable from its expression' (Toadvine 2009). Perceived

things are correlative to my body, and within this perceptual dialogue, the 'miracle of expression' takes place (1945/2014). An internal reality is externally revealed; a meaning descends into the world and begins its existence there (ibid.). As Toadvine has noted, *Hyper-reflection* enables us to approach the world according to a triple characterization: as revealing a 'natural time', as a creative operation, and as depository of a *primordial faith in Creation* (2009).

'Natural time' alludes to a 'time outside of time', to a 'past which has never been a present' (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2014). The world we perceive through our senses possess a pre-reflexive dimension, prior to the existence of thought. Its historicity can be explained as a perpetually reenacted experiment, as a meditation on Nature and on the repetition of its immemorial time occurring within the heart of each perceptive moment. Merleau-Ponty holds that original art is that capable of apprehending this sense of the world in its origin (ibid.).

Secondly, hyper-reflection is characterized for showing that what was perceived before going through the filter of thought. That what was perceived is thus presented 'only creatively, not in transparent immediacy but in transformation or becoming', sharing in the actuality that it reveals.

A third attribute to hyper-reflection consists of an 'originary faith' in the world, an attitude absent from methodological doubt and skepticism in favor of a primordial certitude in the world as it is given to us. This attitude is consonant with the phenomenological stance impelling us to stand in wonder before Nature. The classical question posed by philosophy –what do I know?– 'is not only "what is knowing?" and not only "who am I?" but finally: "what is there?" and even: "what is the there is?"' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968):

Within the artistic expressions, I have chosen photography due to its ambiguous ontological condition as an objective and/or subjective means of rendering Nature.

Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, though succinctly, reflected upon the photographic phenomenon at some point within their work. Hubert Damisch, in *Five notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image* (1978) would be the first to carry a proper phenomenological analysis of the photographic image (Chan-Fai 2009) claiming that it is 'a cultural object, whose essence is constituted historically', requiring an eidetic phenomenological analysis.

Pondering over the ontological status of a photographic image, from a first approach it appears as an 'objective' means of registering the world. They seem acts of 'natural perception', sustained by a 'perceptual faith' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968), where we believe that what we have seen in the picture is not only real but that it has happened beyond all doubt. Roland Barthes (1980) holds that 'photography never lies', or to put it another way, it may lie in terms of the meaning of the thing -for it is biased by nature- but never about the existence of the thing, for each photography is a 'certificate of presence'.

According to Brough (2015), photography could be equated to phenomenological reduction (epoché), for photographic perception pulls us out from the world so we can see it.

Within the actual debate about the ontology of nature, new approaches are needed to end the deadlock brought about by opposing constructivist and naturalist positions. Relying on the previous reasoning, I propose a renewed perception of Nature from phenomenological postulates through the eyes of artist photographers. The 'come to being' of Nature in their expressive work can help us disclose some aspects of Nature that I sustain could modify our understanding and value accrued to it. I have selected some works in the oeuvre of artists Justine Kurland (Warsaw, NY 1969), Ori Gersht (Tel Aviv, 1967) and Luisa Lambri (Como, 1969). All of them use photography as their expressive means focusing on the 'thickness of the gaze', and although landscape does not constitutes its main aim, it becomes the unifying matter within their oeuvre, the merleau-pontian 'horizon of all horizons'. They all share a unique bodily linkage with their production in accordance with the phenomenological postulates as described by Merleau-Ponty, in an attempt to perceive the world from within as 'flesh given to flesh' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968).

2.3. Phenomenological Intersubjectivity: an Inhabited Nature

Drawing on the notion of intersubjectivity in phenomenological terms and applying it to the chosen photographic works, we would try to probe the role of the Other in its double dimension –transcendent, irreducible on one side and empathic on the other- in order to disclose some aspects in Nature, and vice versa, the role of Nature as the 'common horizon' of experience enabling mutual understanding – Husserlian 'Einverständnis' (Duranti 2010)- or at least, mutual awareness.

According to Zahavi (2001) 'the three regions 'self', 'others', and 'the world' belong together; they reciprocally illuminate one another, and can only be understood in their interconnection'. Whereas Sartre and Levinas reject any possibility of 'mutual understanding' (ibid.), we will focus on the discourse of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty regarding this subject.

For Husserl, intersubjectivity constitutes 'the most basic quality of human existence, which is constitutive of the subject and of the very notion of an objective world' (cit. Duranti 2010). He will go even further suggesting that intersubjectivity was 'the sine qua non of humanity', 'through which [...]

our surrounding world can be experienced and given meaning' (Schutz cit. Duranti 2010). Husserl claims that when I discover that the object I am currently perceiving is also perceived by others, when I experience that the others experience the same objects as myself, only then I experience those objects as objective and real (Zahavi 2001). Since I cannot simultaneously perceive the object from the same place occupied by another –the same side of the table-, the possibility of 'Platzwechsel' or 'place exchange' appears as inherent to the notion of intersubjectivity (Husserl cit. Duranti 2010).

Within this experience of the world we are faced with a singular situation: when I perceive the other perceiving me, that is, *when I experience myself as Other*. 'When I realize that I can be an alter ego for the other just as he can be it for me, a marked change in my own constitutive significance takes place [...] As a consequence, I come to the realization that I am only one among many and that my perspective of the world is by no means privileged' (Zahavi 2001).

Husserl anticipates the phenomenological two-sidedness of our body, its dual nature as subject/object. When my hand touches my other hand, the touched hand 'is not given as a mere object, since it feels the touch itself'. This conscience that is arisen in us, one discovering the interiority and the exteriority of our own body as different manifestations of the same reality, becomes 'a crucial precondition for empathy' according to Husserl (ibid.).

Merleau-Ponty will push further Husserl reflections and come to the conclusion that 'subjectivity is essentially incarnated'. Thus, 'to exist embodied is, however, neither to exist as pure subject nor as pure object, but to exist in a way that transcends both possibilities' (Zahavi 2001).

Zahavi explains with acuity this revolutionary notion of subjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's terms when he writes that 'subjectivity is not hermetically sealed up within itself, remote from the world and inaccessible to the other. Rather, it is above all a relation to the world' (2001).

From the anthropological approach to phenomenological intersubjectivity proposed by Duranti (2010), we have selected four dimensions of intersubjectivity and we have analyzed in their light the works of Kurland, Lambri and Gersht.

2.3.1 The experience of a shared world –it does not imply necessarily 'mutual understanding' or agreement, though at least a Husserlian 'mutual being for one another'. This shared world in its 'natural' dimension existed before conscience. Husserl acknowledges in the genesis of conscience the existence of an **innate primary instinct** (García 2012) composed of particular correlative ones -as self-preservation, association- shared with animals. Our landscape perception remains linked to this unconscious, ineffable and ever-renewed instinctual dimension. This instinctual, existential dimension can be inferred from within Kurland's oeuvre, most apparently in her series *Of Woman Born* (c. 2005-2007).

2.3.2 The experience of a world transformed into a cultural one (**Kulturwelt**) through the agency of humans. A world of 'places' instead of a world of 'spaces' (Casey 1993/2009). Husserl notes that 'one has been together with others for as long as one can remember', therefore 'one's understanding and interpretation are structured in accordance with the intersubjectively handed-down forms of apperception' (cit. Zahavi 2001). Esteban A. García (2012) invokes Merleau-Ponty to underscore how we cannot possibly claim a phenomenological perception based on experience in exclusively present and personal terms.

Our transcendental conscience discovers its multilayered structure of past habits acquired by me, my parents and further back affecting my present perception. We live in a world that others before us have already loaded with significances. Landscape perception is thus personal and socio-culturally conditioned. This dimension of experience requires a hermeneutical approach, a comparative epistemology enabling us to interpret phenomena in context. The symbology of natural elements (i.e. olives and cypresses to Palestinian and Israeli eyes), or Nature's given ideas (i.e. Nature as Wilderness in North America and the evolution of this conception in time) are present in the work of Gersht and Kurland.

2.3.3 The experience of a world inhabited by others through the **objects and artifacts** we encounter. The Heideggerian world is 'not a private world, but a public and communal one'. Dasein cannot be understood except as 'inhabiting a world which necessarily shares with others', as *mitsein* (being-with) (Zahavi 2001). The series on windows in the 'homes' photographed by Luisa Lambri make reference not just to those projecting and constructing them, but to those inhabiting them. Kurland's registering tangent patches of asphalt on the surface of earth tell the stories of superimposed projects and conflicting interests.

2.3.4 The experience of a world of **direct personal encounters**. Those encounters, as consequence and condition of human nature, are subjected to a practical, moral and aesthetic evaluation (Levinas cit. Duranti 2010). These encounters with others can even take place in different

historic times (Fabian cit. Duranti 2010). In *The Forest* (2005) Gersht meets his ancestors as trees anthropomorphized in the forest where they hid escaping war.

On the basis of these phenomenological postulates we have approached the works of Kurland, Lambri and Gersht from existential and hermeneutical analysis, as well as from a phenomenological intersubjective point of view.

3. Justine Kurland and Nomadic Dwelling. Wilderness or the 'Flesh' of the North American Landscape

Justine Kurland (Warsaw, NY 1969) is an American photographer that has been on the American road in westward journeys in search of 'the ghost of America' (Kurland 2014).

I have selected Kurland's work for its unconventional and compelling images translucent of an integral and vital involvement with the American landscape. The fact of being a woman in what has been 'traditionally a boy's club' (Wolff 2014) also accounts for the singularity of the landscape rendering. Her photographs are not just the travel shoots of a New York artist. For more than fifteen years she has been on the road, living in her van, enmeshed in the woods and intertwined with what she was photographing, dwelling on both sides of the images. Her son has been brought up travelling.

Her involvement with the landscape goes further than esthetics. It is a vital one, woven through experience, where there is no dualistic approach: no body-mind, no work-life, no private-public; In that sense it can be deemed phenomenological. The interpretation of her work I will essay here does not intend to be complete or exclusive. Rather, I aim to delve into the *Wild*, 'Id' dimension of Nature from an phenomenological interpretive frame in order to –somehow- disclose and recognize its Alterity and thus the ethic consequences derived.

Wilderness in her work appears as an inhabited one, an intersubjective dynamic 'place', a repository for both the actual and the ideal.

A particular landscape history of the Republic has been coincidentally reenacted through Kurland's oeuvre through images densely loaded. Within Justine's production, 'ontogeny repeats phylogeny' (Leopold 1949): to describe it in biological terms, the sequence of events involved in her history as individual reenacts the environmental history of the Republic.

In Kurland's work, universals such as the processes in life cycle, otherness, freedom, loss, the settling of humans in nature, and the meaning of gender and wealth are invoked through incarnation –subjects living at the onset of the second millennium AD in the United States.

The idea of **Wilderness**, as defined by the 1964 Wilderness Act, is an American cultural creation. We could claim that in America, Nature can be equated with wilderness in an ampler sense. Throughout its history it has held varied connotations, from a new Eden whose commodities had to be named and subdued but also cared for, to a place of danger and evil to be exerted dominion upon. The American Frontier, the actual locus where the battle was waged to build Utopia, upon its disappearance gave way to the myth of wilderness as untouched ecosystem (oblivious of American Indian management) and lead to the creation of National Parks and other figures of Nature preservation. Wilderness became the distinctive brand of America, the place where its monuments were located and visited, and the wellspring of American ethics and religion.

I will reference to three main interpretations of the notion of wilderness in Kurland's work. They somehow admit historical sequencing. The first one delves into the utopian identification of the American wilderness as Garden of the world in a twofold way. Later, the agrarian myth gives way to an idealized technological coexistence of garden and machine (Marx 1964). A final stage deals with those contemporary 'bits of wilderness on the edge of town' (Kurland 2010) and industrial wilderness. Overall, wilderness as a state of mind, oozing from its Nature and inseparable from it, discloses a dimension of Nature distinctly American.



Fig 1. Kurland (2004) Baby



Fig.2 Kurland (2005) Pine Forest

3.1. After the settlement of the English colonists, a first interpretation of the New World as Promised Land contained two major -and contradictory- ideas of plentiful Nature. They have since coexisted in differing ways. The first one is related to the pastoral mood, in a sense of the middle landscape, human-made abundance by means of tending the land: the garden through **civilization**. The second one relates to the **primitive**, 'naked nature', that in the case of Beverly's *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705) becomes identified with the instinctual, lighter ways of living on the earth pertaining to Native Americans (Marx 1964/2000). Evil was absent from the last view.

This sense of Pre-columbine America as a factual Garden of Eden (sinless, joyous), one derived from an inherited European frame of mind, pervades most of Kurland's *Of Women Born* (2005-2007) body of work. The partially staged pictures give witness to an imposed view on Nature. On the other hand, the pastoral mood is present in a former work, *In Commune/Blue Sky* (2002). Utopian societies in the form of religious and secular communes have been a staple of American history, with a particular flourishing in the mid-19th century and from 1966 to the mid-1970s (Miller 2012). She photographed the commune members in a twofold way: in colored staged pictures, tending the garden, undressed, and in black and white ones, dressed, as group portraits, confronting us with the simultaneous existence of utopia and reality, of myth and actuality.

3.2. In Leo Marx's illuminating book *The Machine in the Garden* (1964/2000), he notes how two voices as distinctly American as those of Emerson (1844) and Whitman (1864) hail the paradoxical combination of Nature and the machine –geography and technology- as the trademark of America. Emerson praised the railway and the steamboat, though not cities or mills, fostering unity. The machine was endowed with mythical (Promethean fire) and organic connotations, for according to Nash Smith (1950/1978), the character of the American empire was defined by a relation between man and nature, consistent with the yeoman myth. The machine was the force enabling 'instantaneous civilization' and the one facilitating the new egalitarian and free society of democratic America. The yeoman utopia political discourse of Republicans at the time of the civil war was 'aborted by the land speculator and the railroad monopolist', in the end because 'it was incongruous with the Industrial Revolution' (ibid.).

Due to her son Casper, Kurland photographed trains as configuring elements in the American landscape. In *This Train is Bound for Glory* (c.2007-2009) named after Woodie Guthrie's theme, triply focuses on the vestiges of the railway system –'now bringing everything from China' as a snake on the land, the train hopper and hobo culture -that off-the-grid, wild America-, and finally, Casper playful relationship with them.



Fig. 3 Kurland (2013) Sparrow Road Kill



Fig.4 Kurland (2008) Prospecting the South Fork of the Platte River

3.3. The crumbling of the American automobile industry as well as America's aging infrastructure constitute a third chapter in the wilderness history of America through Kurland's eyes. The car -the Ford T as reference- became an emblem of freedom and egalitarianism. But it will be from the 'On the Road' literature onwards that the westward-car-trip would be tied to wildness and wilderness. As the floating raft downstream Mississippi in Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), the car on the highway becomes the moving home on the liberating landscape.

However, from the free-flowing water of idyllic cascades and bath holes in the mom's series, we now face water as a puddle in cracked asphalt (*Watershed* 2013). While wildlife appears but imprinted in bath towels hanging from a pick-up (*Tigers on César Chavez* 2011), the apparently persistent human longing for Eden –a contemporary version of Adam and Eve picnicking under a tree oblivious of the inharmonic surroundings- is also captured by Kurland's lenses (*Picnic on Off-Ramp* 2013).

On the other hand, the permanent strain between these two conceptions of the Garden utopia in America –the Garden as Art and the Garden as Nature- throughout the history of the Republic offer an interpretation, not just of the American landscape history, but of every generation reenacting that conflict in Freudian terms, equating a tended garden with civilization, and this to repression, and feeling compelled to break free enmeshing themselves in the Wilderness.

Kurland has referred to Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929), the *Ego* as the arena where the wild *Id* and the Super Ego struggle in search of 'a conception of life which would combine 'a high level of instinctual gratification with those refinements of civilization based on performance –work- hence a degree of repression' (Marx 1964). The collision between these two 'modes' of Nature have evolved at some points to polarized positions. The 'civilized' one through mechanization, intensive farming, pesticides, and genetically modified species has hyperbolized abundance –objectivizing Nature. The primitive position has in some cases equated the ambiguous term 'pristine' to uninhabited, excluding the human species from Nature.

4. Luisa Lambri and the Pre-Reflexive Body of Architecture.

Luisa Lambri (Como, 1969) photographs 'homes' (Lambri 2010). She places herself in between the inside and the outside, homothetically becoming house, where windows turn into eyes. Lambri is widely known for her photographic series depicting infinitesimal light variations on architectural elements –mainly windows- of emblematic houses built under the umbrella notion of the Modern Movement style. The intuitive selection made by Lambri within this group of houses belongs in a particular chapter of domestic architecture revisited in the twentieth century by architects as Neutra (Strathmore Apartments, Sten-Frenke House); Schindler (Schindler House), Lautner (Sheats-Goldstein House); F.L.Wright (Kentucky Knob, Darwin D. Martin House, Hollyhock House); Niemayer (Casa das Canoas); Barragán (Casa Barragán); Mies (Casa Tugendhat, Barcelona Pavillion) among others. An architecture that eluded being registered photographically as an object of science, one that we could refer to as 'phenomenological' since its spatiality could only be grasped through direct bodily experience. It could be named 'spatial' architecture, as referred to by Rudolf M. Schindler.

The socio-economic and cultural changes taking place in Europe, as well as the development of new building technologies demanded a new house, neither the primitive hut nor the palace (Bachelard 1945), but the modern house. This architecture born in the scientific, rational realm –lighting, air circulation, hygiene, economy, democratic values, prefabrication, etc.- was confronted with ‘the prejudice of the objective world’ as Merleau-Ponty puts it. This prejudice affected both idealist and naturalist stances, for both intended a reconstruction of Nature from pre-established mental assumptions, entities of conscience or scientific entities in each case. However, both positions within this ‘prejudice of the objective world’ broke the ‘pre-reflexive’ unit –before human thought- between the body and the world, replacing this unity with a thing in itself (*Ding an sich*) juxtaposed to raw conscience, devoid of flesh (Toadvine 2009).

Confronted with this ‘prejudice of the objective world’, some architects gave designed and built answers that not only complied with the new rational and scientific demands but transcended them in their intuitive search for a sense of dwelling -what did it mean to settle in Nature and live with others under a modern gaze.

This phenomenological intuition in search of the modern house led some architects to the Japanese domestic architecture –to F.L. Wright and Bruno Taut, but also to Schindler, Neutra and Mendelsohn through Wright, to Gropius, etc. to cite some in a long list.

This pre-reflexive unit between the body and the world present in these houses –‘homes’ as Luisa Lambri refers to them- revolves around the first steps in the relationship between the house and Nature, in the promise of an outer clarity and the vestiges of a vegetal world. It is this elusive unity what Lambri tries to apprehend through her images.



Fig. 5 Lambri (2007) Sheats-Goldestein House #6



Fig. 6 Lambri (2007) Sheats-Goldestein House #7

If we translate Le Ricolais’ words (1997) about the structural paradox of architecture –according to which the structural art consisted of placing the voids- to the work of Luisa Lambri, her art would consist of photographing that which being not proper architectural materiality could only be defined through it. The remains of light left on the surfaces, the varying illumination in time, and what we adumbrate of the world. She places herself in front of the openings communicating house and Nature, and without leaning out, she patiently waits. Lambri listens to houses with her camera, to document their particular geometry of echoes (Fogle 2011).

Thus, when she photographs a series of window frames –the incarnate window- of these iconic buildings, what she is recording is the air generated around them, the unique atmosphere built by that air, the background of the figure of matter, the ‘invisible’ of Merleau-Ponty (1945).

Bachelard (1957) in a text from Rilke (*Letters to Benvenuto*, 1951) recognizes the implicit epistemology brought about by the body in the day to day caring of domestic objects. He will go even further deeming the phenomenological epistemology a creative act.

He will claim how the cared for objects are born again in an intimate light, how they ascend to a higher level of reality than those objects indifferent to us, those just defined by their geometry and not being looked after. According to him, the domestic cares weave the past with the new day , and it is the housewife who awakens the dormant furniture (1957).

This ‘civilization of wax’ linked to the feminine, according to Bachelard ‘re-builds from the interior’ this luminous home of cares. This statement enables an analogy between the ‘civilization of wax’ and the

phenomenological gaze of Luisa Lambri. Through her photographic gaze, Lambri 'envelopes, palpates, spouses visible things' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/68), thus turning houses into homes.

5. Ori Gersht. The Persistent Memory of Landscape

A third approach to dwelling in Nature from a phenomenological stance, one that incorporates historic time refers us to the work of Gersht (Tel Aviv 1967). From his oeuvre the impossibility to understand the human being in the void, without landscape and a community, can be inferred. Inversely, Nature is but Landscape, a repository for subjective knowledge and its reiterations.

We would delve into the dialectic tension between the 'Visible' and the 'Invisible' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968) in Gersht images, amid sense perception and the constitution of meaning in human experience: the 'thickness of the gaze' (ibid.). According to him, titles in photography alter our cognitive experience, the space in between the visual and the lingual, amid what one sees and what one knows (2011).

The dialectic between Nature and Culture, where Nature is conceived as the means and sensual materiality where the human being struggles to imprint his/her image (Culture), becomes a recurring subject in his work (*Liquid Assets*, 2012). The ambiguous quality in between photographic and pictorial displayed by Gersht (Tel Aviv 1967), oeuvre is present in the etymology of the term 'photography' –to draw with light. Fox Talbot defines photography as Nature's pen (cit. Chan-Fai 2009). Chan-Fai refers to photographic images as phenomena revealing phenomena, by virtue of which a part of the world's merleau-pontian 'invisibility' is disclosed to us.

Nature, commonly identified as a wellspring of life, associate life to movement, to change. The oxymoron –both in Spanish and English as 'Naturaleza muerta' or 'Still Life'- is pondered over in Gersht tridimensional recreations of paintings of that genre where an alien agent instills perpetual movement (*Pomegranate* 2006, *Falling Bird* 2008).

Cyclic reiterations of process leading into Creation and Destruction are depicted at the exact moment of transition, the expanding instant of violence –*Pomegranate* (2006), *Blow Up* (2007), *Big Bang* (2006), *On Reflection* (2014). Ori incorporates to that critical instant both the ambiguity of the scale and the blurring limits between organic and inorganic.

In a society habituated to explicit images of violence as 'objective' registers of history, Gersht challenges viewers by using the same recording devices 'to question the ability of technology [...] to deliver the truth' (Miner 2012).

In the same way that American Transcendentalists looked for God's epiphany in Nature, we could claim that Ori Gersht looks for the epiphany of history in the landscape, fighting the anesthetic effect of time.

5.1. Technology and Perception. Pushing the Limits of Technology for a Renewed Phenomenology

Gersht claims that the limits of reality are continuously expanding and changing in accordance with, among other things, our visual experiences (2014). Currently, technology is constantly redefining the way we perceive the world, since 'although the camera is supposed to be an objective tool, when pushed out of its comfort zone, it begins to warp reality and present alternative ways of seeing' (2012). So pushing the technological limits of the camera becomes an instrument for subjective perception through Gersht lenses.

In his production, these limits have to do with the absence of light, light excess and the use of stroboscopic light.

Nature devoid of light was paradoxically recorded by Gersht in his series of Japanese cherry blossoms at 4 am –*Chasing Good Fortune* 2011. The non-intentional result was a group of highly pixelated images in the RGB palette, in a simultaneous wink to both science and culture: to the Lumiere brothers' auto chrome as to Seurat pointillist perceptual investigations.

Light as source of destruction is worked up by connecting overexposure and violence. In his series of centennial olive tree specimen photographed in Galilea (*Ghost* 2003-2004) –where local culture anthropomorphize trees- Gersht bear witness to the violence on the landscape not through actual subjects but by means of the production process of the image.

I wanted to photograph these silent and beautiful trees, but I wanted the process to relate it the violent environment they grew in. My intention was to destroy the film by flooding it with light, so I overexposed the photographs in the heat of summer days. When I processed the film, I got dense, black negatives [...] and I attempted to save the traces of information that I had registered [...]

The same light that originally registered information begins to erase the film, and new information s record on top of old information. The film becomes a plane on which simultaneous processes of recalling and erasing are

taking place. Metaphorically, this process can be compared with recollecting and forgetting (Gersht cit. Baer 2012)

In *Pomegranate* (2006), *Big Bang* (2006), *Blow Up* (2007), *Falling Bird* (2008) y *On Reflection* (2014), Gersht employed the technology developed by MIT scientist Harold Edgerton (*Bullet Piercing Apple*, 1964). By synchronizing a camera with a strobe light, he was able to photograph speed with sharpness, generating images outside the human range of vision. 'While normally a camera films at 25 frames per second, ours filmed at 1,600 fps. So when you play the film at 25 fps, it becomes very slow' (ibid.), thus allowing the human eye, the phenomenological eye, to perceive unusual images – introducing us in Walter Benjamin's domain of 'optical unconsciousness' (Gersht cit. Baer 2012) and pondering over the distinction between chronological time (Cronos) and meaningful time, the critical now (Kairos).

5.2. Phenomenological Intersubjectivity and Past Mitsein. Nature and Memory

In Gersht work, human beings moving about in Nature within time become the agent converting Nature into Landscape. Whereas time behaves as a mist blurring past images, Nature becomes a repository for history. From his oeuvre can be inferred that the human being cannot be understood outside this natural-cultural arena where we can also relate to 'past' others. As we live we keep on altering the landscape, adding layers of both mental and material substance, one on top of the other. However, Gersht do not concentrate in decomposing matter or building skeletons to record past violence or research on death. He questions living Nature in its processes, those reflecting that enigmatic natural time and alterity to delve into violence and destruction.

In *The Forest* (2005), a projection of nearly fifteen minutes we witness a compressed cycle of ecosystem life and death. The horizon is placed half way of the tree heights. The camera moves in a quasi-mechanical way across the forest, everything is arcane (Gersht 2012). The vibrant sound of the atmosphere is broken from time to time by the noise of a falling tree. 'The film is very immersive [...] the viewer can almost get lost in this tranquil experience and, out of nowhere, a tree falls [...] it becomes a very traumatic experience, but since the camera never celebrates this moment [...] it is quickly forgotten [...] once again, physically we are in this Arcadia' (Gersht 2012)

These forests between Poland and Belarus became a refuge for Jewish population escaping persecution during WWII. He establishes a simile with the remaining holocaust survivors, how the disappearance of each one of them is equitable to the falling of a tree, carrying with them in their demise a piece of memory, both as individual and as collectivity.

In the same manner, the dual projections constituting both *Evaders* (2009) y *Will You Dance for Me* (2011) are turned into a metaphysical-historical register. A simultaneous horizontal projection conjugates human experience in natural metaphors. Both productions, stemming from individual holocaust stories, open up to incorporate wider, universal reflections on pain, resilience, and the human condition.



Fig. 7 Gersht (2006) Pomegranate (detalle fotograma)



Fig. 8 Gersht (2003) Olive 06

<https://vimeo.com/113897887>

In *Pomegranate* (2006), Gersht stretches before us the instant where a bullet hits a suspended pomegranate. Based quasi mimetically on *Membrillo, repollo, melón y calabaza*, a still life by Juan Sánchez Cotán (c.1602) who aimed at perfection in composition through mathematical calculus, in the

tridimensional reproduction the quince has been substituted by a pomegranate. According to Gersht, that perfect equilibrium's moment equates death (2014).

When the bullet impacts the pomegranate, this one starts oscillating and breaks in two. It was filmed at 1600 fps but projected at 25 fps, enabling us to witness the process of destruction. The images could be just read from a 'scientific' point of view - that's a way a pomegranate breaks up when pierced by a bullet-. However, epistemologically, this reading accounts for a minimal part of the phenomenological experience in front of those images, where the pomegranate forcibly evokes blood and human flesh being torn apart in pendulous agony.

Here art, through scientific means, has turned into an amplifier of knowledge, reaching further than the 'objective' universe, from subject to subject. What Ori Gersht is offering us from Nature is an incarnated reality presented to other -as 'flesh offered to flesh [...] whence vision is both question and response' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968). In this piece of art, what he is offering us is 'the world, the flesh not as a sum of facts, but as the locus of an inscription of truth' (ibid.).

6. Conclusions

Within the current debate about the ontology of Nature, new approaches are needed to end the deadlock brought about by opposing constructivist (Berleant) and naturalist (Carlson) positions, enabling us to develop new ways of intersubjectivity where the three regions 'self', 'others', and 'the world' can belong together. Distancing ourselves from dualistic epistemologies, we propose a renewed perception of Nature from phenomenological postulates deeming the body -in accordance with Merleau-Ponty- as gnosiological tool and placing concrete artistic expressions at the core of knowledge.

The come to being of Nature in these artistic expressions of 'existential art' we sustain- can help us disclose some aspects of Nature that could modify our understanding of it and the value accrued to it.

I have selected some works in the oeuvre of three artists photographers -Justine Kurland (Warsaw, NY 1969), Ori Gersht (Tel Aviv, 1967) and Luisa Lambri (Como, 1969)- for their quest for the world and for their focusing on the 'thickness of the gaze', in an attempt to perceive the world from within as 'flesh given to flesh' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968). They all share a unique bodily linkage with their production -existential, historical, oneiric. The three of them represent different aspects of European thought, which used to be the leading interpretive frame to Nature. Landscape does not appear as finality in itself, it becomes however the unifying matter within the oeuvre of each one of them, the merleauPontian 'horizon of all horizons'. Employing Humboldt's terminology, in their works Nature is displayed/depicted before us as Landscape. Through an exercise in comparative epistemology, the North American landscapes photographed by Kurland, those in Europe, Israel and Japan by Gersht, and the domestic landscapes of Lambri become expression of the moral geography present in Nature, as well as of the recovery of a 'home' in Nature, of a world of 'places' (Casey 1993/2009), and of an intermediate territory allowing us to reconcile Nature and Culture.

Architecture, understood as expressive acts in the Landscape emanating from phenomenological stances, could thus disclose some of Nature's 'invisibility' (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1968), so long as we start this dialogue from a renewed perception -one that grants Nature its living, incarnate essence and one that recognizes its alterity.

7. References

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