



Touched by beauty: a qualitative inquiry into phenomenology of beauty

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Abstract

Philosophy of aesthetics and beauty has traditionally prioritized the sense of vision while deprioritizing the more basic-bodily and thus less “noble” sense of touch. This paper examines bodily aspects of how beauty appears in the experience of visual art and motivates the view that touch is fundamental to such experiences. We appeal to Merleau-Ponty to show the relevance given to touch in his phenomenology of aesthetics, to unfold the meaning of touch as “reversible,” and to understand how vision can be conceptualized as a form of touch. Further, we present four cases of feeling touched by beauty in experiences of visual art collected through interviews with art museum visitors. The descriptions of these experiences show that when people open themselves to an artwork they also open themselves *to themselves*. Based on the qualitative descriptions, we discuss how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of touch is revelatory of the meaning of feeling “touched” in experiences of beauty.

Keywords Beauty · Aesthetic experience · Phenomenology of touch · Phenomenological psychological interviews

1 Introduction

“That we are touched by beauty is beyond doubt,” philosopher Gernot Böhme states in the essay *On Beauty*.¹ The riddle, he continues, is that while beauty is accessible experientially, these experiences are notoriously difficult to capture in language. We are *touched* by beauty in the world without having a clear concept of what meaning

¹ Böhme (2010, p. 22).

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it seems to convey. The metaphor² of being “touched by beauty,” which has been dated back to the early eighteenth century,³ is common not only in English but in German, French, Spanish, Italian, and Japanese, amongst other languages.⁴ The starting point of this article is to take the meaning of being “touched by beauty” into phenomenological consideration. The fact that the expression “touched” in relation to beauty appears in many different languages could be a sign of a structure of the experience of beauty that we should try to make explicit by means of phenomenological clarification.

It was not until the phenomenological accounts of “the lived body” in writings by Husserl and other phenomenologists of the twentieth century that the body was placed at the center of subjectivity and that the sense of touch was elaborately discussed as a key component of the aesthetic realm.⁵ When the body is conceptualized not merely as an extended entity but as a lived-through locus of meaning, our conception of touch changes radically. Even though Maurice Merleau-Ponty successfully and influentially applied his analysis of the body to the sphere of aesthetics,⁶ and while an interest in the body is emerging in the field of aesthetics,⁷ the phenomenology of the lived body has not been systematically applied to the phenomenon of beauty.⁸

It is possible to find some phenomenological features of beauty in Böhme’s approach: “Beauty cannot be completely objectified...because the involvement of the participating subject is always intrinsic to it.”⁹ Philosopher Galen A. Johnson deepens this phenomenologically oriented perspective on beauty when he says, “The experience of beauty is relational between subject and object, self and thing, and its presentation depends upon the life and history of the perceiver brought into relationship with the colors, lines, shadings, and excellence of the well-made

² Throughout this article, I use the term “metaphor” to refer to how bodily based, yet intangible or diffuse experiences enter into language by referring to other types of experience.

³ For example: “a Heart truly touched, values nothing in comparison with the Toucher” from Mrs. Manley’s *Memoirs of Europe* from 1710. The “toucher” implied in the “touchedness” can manifest in various ways. We can, for example, be touched or struck by the beauty of a person, as when the British novelist Mary Anne Hardy in an 1888 piece writes “Her beauty struck him in a new light,” or by words or colors as John Dryden observes in *Fables, Ancient and Modern* from 1700: “Words indeed, like glaring Colours, are the first Beauties that arise, and strike the Sight.”

⁴ When something is beautiful, we say that we feel touched. French-speakers feel “touche,” Germans “gerührt,” Spanish speaker’s “tocado,” Italians “toccata,” and Japanese “kanndou” (感動).

⁵ As scholars point out (e.g. Alloa (2015), Chrétien (2004), Kearney (2020), Moran (2015)), Aristotle may be an exception as he is recognized as the philosopher who discovered the deeper meaning of touch and its role as fundamental to all types of sensing in Ch. 2–3 of *De Anima* (Aristotle 2018) which is later revitalized with the emergence of phenomenology.

⁶ See the essays *Eye and Mind* and *Cezanne’s Doubt* in Merleau-Ponty (1993a, b).

⁷ Korsmeyer (2007) points toward a “bodily turn” in the field of aesthetics giving rise to for example Shusterman’s *Somasthetics* (1999).

⁸ Aesthetic experience has been studied empirically in non-reductive ways involving the body. See e.g. (Moeskjær Hansen and Roald 2022; Roald 2015) for a phenomenological approach to art experience and e.g. Gallagher (2022) and Noë (2016) for an embodied-enactivist approach to aesthetic experience.

⁹ Böhme (2010, p. 22).

object.”¹⁰ However, this preliminary delineation of beauty does not specify the quality of the relationship between the perceiving subject experiencing beauty and the well-made object experienced as beautiful and, moreover, how the body is involved in this relationship.

To say “I am touched” carries an apparent affective meaning, but the expression also suggests that such experiences are a *bodily* affair. As philosopher George Lakoff and linguist Mark Johnson have shown, bodily metaphors are far from arbitrary; metaphors are conceptualizations of experiences based on other types of experiences.¹¹ With this in mind, our assumption is that the bodily experience of “touch” itself carries meanings that are significant to the phenomenon of beauty.

It is our suggestion that a phenomenology of feeling “touched” will reveal something about beauty’s way of appearing, which the aesthetic tradition has largely overlooked.¹² By consulting central writings on the lived body by Merleau-Ponty, we want to conceptualize the meaning of touch to get closer to understanding the bodily way in which beauty appears.

In the first section of this paper, we aim to identify a “phenomenology of touch” in Merleau-Ponty’s writings. The goal is to understand touch’s role in Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of aesthetic perception. By studying how Merleau-Ponty’s conception of touch developed from the *Phenomenology of Perception* to his writings on aesthetics, we show how Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the phenomenon of touch entails a revelation of one’s bodily existence to oneself.

In section two, we describe an investigation of experiences of beauty in visual art. The descriptions show how bodily feelings of touch are inherent to the phenomenon of beauty.

In section three, we discuss how Merleau-Ponty’s concept of touch in aesthetic perception is revelatory for the meaning of the experience of being touched by beauty in visual art as it appears in the empirical descriptions. We try to answer the question of what it means to be touched by beauty according to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological conceptualization of touch. Finally, we discuss the challenges and implications of combining empirical and theoretical accounts.

2 Phenomenology of touch

Merleau-Ponty introduces the idea of understanding aesthetic experience by means of the notion of the lived body. Merleau-Ponty’s starting point is Husserl’s distinction between having a(n) (objective) body [*Körper*] and being a (lived) body [*Leibsein*]. By studying how the lived body constitutes and is constituted in experience, Husserl realizes the reversible nature of how touch appears in relation to objects: “Necessarily bound to the tactual perception of the table is a perception of the

¹⁰ Johnson (2010, p. 39).

¹¹ Lakoff and Johnson (2008).

¹² See also Korsmeyer (2018) who makes a similar point as she emphasizes touch as a “seldom-noticed aspect” (p. 43) of encounters with aesthetic objects such as artworks.

Body.”¹³ That is, when I lay my hand on the table, the act of touching reveals not only the table but also the body that is performing the touching. The same touch sensation reveals both the smooth wooden surface and a light pressure at the edge of my skin. Like a piece of fabric, the act of touching is reversible in the sense that it is capable of being turned inside out and of being used with either of its two inter-linked yet different sides exposed.¹⁴

Husserl further realizes that if touch happens by means of another part of one’s body, the sensation is doubled. He calls this phenomenon of self-touch double sensation [*doppelempfindung*]. When the right hand touches the left, both hands appear reversible: Both can appear as toucher and touched according to how I shift my attention. Husserl’s purpose in highlighting this concept of *double sensation* is to point to a key aspect of *Leib*. *Leib* is *leiblich* insofar as it is able to sense its own appearance as exactly that, *leiblich*. “My Body as touched Body is something touching which is touched.”¹⁵ That is, the touching body experiences its own quality as touchable—or reversed, the touched body experiences its own quality as able to touch. Touching one’s own body, in other words, reveals the body’s reversible character to itself.

As for this analysis, we should note that the concepts of reversibility and double sensation are deeply interlinked: The latter cannot occur without the former. For what is doubled in double sensation is the reversible nature of the body. Yet, it is possible for an experience to be characterized as reversible without being doubled, that is, in the case of the hand touching the table rather than in the case of self-touch.

According to Husserl, the phenomenon of self-touch reveals more about the lived body than the case of touching the table. If I could touch the table but I couldn’t, with the other hand, touch my own hand while it is touching the table, a crucial layer of *Leib* would be lacking; that is, the experience of my own body’s exteriority. If our touching instrument were untouchable, it would not be *Leib* because *Leib*, according to Husserl, is to experience our own body’s interiority and exteriority simultaneously.¹⁶

It is broadly recognized that *Ideas II* left a strong mark on Merleau-Ponty’s thinking¹⁷ and that he remains interested in the implications of what Switzer calls “the passivity-in-action and the vulnerability summed up in the realization that all touching is also a being-touched.”¹⁸ In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, his main reason for describing tactile phenomena is to demonstrate the idea of body as *Leib*. A key argument is that since the body can play the part of the toucher and the touched, it can never be reduced to a mere physical thing [*Körper*]. “What prevents it [the

¹³ In *Ideas II*, Husserl (1989, p. 154) characterizes the reversibility of the body as a shift in direction of attention.

¹⁴ See Oxford English Dictionary under the entry “reversible” (accessed 01.03.23).

¹⁵ Husserl 1989, p. 155. One should note here that body spelled capital B refers to *Leib*.

¹⁶ See *Merleau-Ponty and Nancy on Sense and Being* for this understanding of touch in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (Morin 2022).

¹⁷ Moran (2015).

¹⁸ Switzer (2016, p. 263).

body] from ever being an object or from ever being “completely constituted” is that my body is that by which there are objects.”¹⁹

However, Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of touch go beyond the *Phenomenology of Perception*; they appear in variations throughout his oeuvre. Here, we will examine his descriptions of the role of touch, not only in relation to ordinary perception but especially in relation to the realm of aesthetics.

The first point we want to make is that while Husserl distinguishes between reversibility and double sensation as two distinct aspects of touch, Merleau-Ponty tends toward blending them into one. As he examines the case of self-touch (two hands touching each other), rather than pointing to the phenomenon of double sensation, he stresses how perception alternates when the touching-touched relation is reversed: When our two hands come together, the two touching parts “can alternate between the functions of “touching” and “touched.”²⁰ This “alternation,” essentially, denotes the concept of reversibility. As he arrives at the notion of double sensations,²¹ he continues to stress firstly the reversible character of touch (“When I touch my right hand with my left hand, the object ‘right hand’ also has this strange property, itself of sensing”), and secondly the ambiguity and momentariness with which the body catches a glimpse of itself in the act of touching.²² Because of the reversible character of touch, neither of the two hands can ever simultaneously touch and be touched. Rather, it is, he stresses, a question of “an ambiguous organization where the two hands can alternate between the functions of ‘touching’ and ‘touched.’”²³ So, why does he continue to highlight “alternation” more than he explores how doubling allows for simultaneity between the constitutive and constituted character of *Leib*?

This question brings us to our second important point. Presumably, Merleau-Ponty is prone to blending the concepts of reversibility and double sensation because his understanding of touch departs from Husserl’s with regard to the subject of sense modalities and especially with regard to the unique quality Husserl ascribes to touch. “I do not see myself the way I touch myself,” and this is why the lived body “can be constituted originally only in tactility.”²⁴ Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty seems to question this idea as he goes beyond touch and into the realm of vision. He raises the question: When seeing oneself in the mirror, does one see one’s own vision? “I can of course, see my eyes in a three-faced mirror, but these are the eyes of someone who is observing, and I can barely catch a glimpse of my living gaze when a mirror on the street unexpectedly reflects my own image back at me.”²⁵ Here, Merleau-Ponty seems to provide a negative answer to the question of whether vision can be seen. Vision does not, like touch touching itself, see itself.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty (2012, 94).

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 95).

²¹ Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 95) The notion of “double sensations” is here ascribed to “classical psychology.”

²² Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 95).

²³ Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 95).

²⁴ Husserl (1989, §37).

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 94).

I always perceive my body, he says, yet I never *observe* it. However, the expression “barely” in the above quotation creates a sense of uncertainty.²⁶ It brings about an urge to ask for clarity: Is vision visible to itself, or is it not? Thus, even as he seems to argue Husserl’s case, he does not cease to characterize vision as appearing with a sense of ambiguity, similar to how he described touch as ambiguous.

This ambiguity is revisited in later works, in which Merleau-Ponty experiments with the application of Husserl’s thesis of touch to the lived body as a whole.²⁷ He examines how the idea that reversibility and double sensation, which Husserl identifies as pivotal for the experience of touch, applies to all sense modalities—that not only the tactile and the visual, but the gustatory, auditory, and olfactory too are principally reversible and subject to the phenomenon of double sensation. For, how would we be seers *in the world* if we could not feel *looked back at* by the world? The visible world reverses our vision of it. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty’s later works arrive at the understanding that “vision is a palpation.”^{28,29} Not unlike the tactile experience of touching and being touched, the experience of seeing and being seen is an experience of contact.

In his later works, Merleau-Ponty continuously and increasingly devotes time to reflect on the question of how the body perceives itself as lived. In particular, the ontological project of the chiasm in *The Visible and The Invisible* bears witness to this. We see here, Johnson says, “a close transition from hearing to touching and from touching to a certain mode of seeing.”³⁰ In this manuscript, the senses are conceptualized as unified in the lived body, and that is why Merleau-Ponty can suppose that we know the world “by palpating it with our look.”³¹ As we saw already in Husserl’s conceptualization of touch, self-touch makes possible a double sensation, that is, an experience of touching oneself touching, of catching oneself in the act of touching. The late Merleau-Ponty departs from Husserl’s idea that nothing similar to self-touch exists in the case of vision.

As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision be doubled with a complementary vision or with another vision: myself seen from without, such as another would see me, installed in the midst of the visible, occupied in considering it from a certain spot.³²

Here, he ponders something central to our investigation: how an understanding of vision as reversible implies seeing oneself from the outside. The essay continues:

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty uses the expression “a peine” which can be translated to almost, hardly or barely.

²⁷ Different scholars have different takes on this, see e.g. Moran (2015) and Kearney (2020).

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 134).

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty seems to be using the terms “palpation” and “touch” interchangeably. However, the medical concept of palpation refers to a type of touch that reveals not only the quality of a surface but allows the toucher to access volumetric and symptomatic information plus knowledge about shapes of the inside of the examined body. Merleau-Ponty may be using the term to highlight how tactile contact provides access not only to surface but to depth.

³⁰ Johnson (2016, p. 225).

³¹ Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 131).

³² Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 134).

“As many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by things.”³³ Just as the phenomenon of touch is reversible and similar to how the body reflects on itself in self-touch, diving into the seen implies an ambiguous sense of feeling seen.

This point brings us, finally, to what mainly interests this analysis: the role that touch and the concepts of reversibility and double sensation seem to play in Merleau-Ponty’s work on aesthetics. As Johnson points out, the manuscript of *The Visible and the Invisible* was not composed feverishly overnight but rather during a prolonged period in which the essay *Eye and Mind* was also written.³⁴ The two texts do relate to each other on many levels; for example, *Eye and Mind* continues to blend vision and touch: “We must take literally what vision teaches us: namely, that through it we touch the sun and the stars, that we are everywhere at once.”³⁵ What Merleau-Ponty’s poetic prose expresses here leads the reader’s mind in multiple directions and raises many profound questions, but in the context of our analysis, what he teaches us here is that, through vision, not only do we obtain information, we are in *contact* with the world.

In *Eye and Mind*, we find, again, references to the phenomenon of reversibility of vision. He re-states the observation that “I feel myself looked at by things” when he contemplates the painter’s vision of the world, quoting Andre Marchand and Paul Klee: “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me.”^{36,37} The artist’s gaze implies a shift from the ‘I’ to the ‘me’ That is, to the artist, the act of looking reverses and becomes a sense of looking at oneself from the outside.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the life and works of Paul Cezanne even more insistently draws our attention to the overlap between touch and vision, that is, the reversibility and double sensation belonging to both modalities. “We *see* the depth, the smoothness, the softness and hardness of objects; Cezanne even claimed that we see their odor.”³⁸

The reversibility of the artist’s gaze is also emphasized as he contemplates how Cezanne operates when painting: “Cezanne does not try to use color to *suggest* the tactile sensations which would give shape and depth. These distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception.”³⁹ The mention of tactility is repeated as he reflects upon the artist’s vocation. This reflection is an expression of the reversibility of lived body: Finally, as Merleau-Ponty depicts Cezanne’s case, in the experience of the beauty of the world around him, Cezanne becomes aware of himself thanks to the bodily reversibility that allows him to realize that he is being affected and grabbed by the touch of beauty. What Cezanne wanted his whole life,

³³ Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 139).

³⁴ Johnson (2010).

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1993a, b, p. 146).

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 139).

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1993a, b, p. 129).

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1993a, b, p. 65)

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1993a, b, p. 65).

says Merleau-Ponty, was “to portray the world, to change it completely into a spectacle, to make *visible* how the world *touches* us.”⁴⁰

3 Phenomenological psychological interview study

In this section, we adopt Amedeo Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological method; an approach to qualitative empirical research. Relying on Husserl, Giorgi states that the idea with the approach is to understand “how phenomena present themselves to consciousness” and emphasizes how *description* makes it possible to elucidate these processes.^{41,42} In line with Giorgi (2009) we aim to make the psychological meanings of lived experience explicit through analysis of interviews with subjects describing specific instances of experience with the phenomenon of interest.⁴³

Our qualitative inquiry into the bodily experience of beauty begins by defining the context in which we aim to study the phenomenon. In accordance with Giorgi’s approach, we choose a research situation that we assume will afford experience descriptions revelatory of our phenomenon of interest.⁴⁴ Namely, we chose to study the phenomenon of beauty and its bodily appearance in the context of visual art experience. Thus, phenomenological descriptions were obtained through in-depth interviews with visitors of art museums. Participants described experiences they have had, specifically with visual art, which made a strong and lasting affective.

The gathered material comprises seven descriptions of art experience obtained through interviews with art museum visitors. The participants were all frequent visitors of art museums who chose to respond to an open call announcing the need for interviewees for a qualitative study on experiences of art. In the interest of space, we will present four out of seven full descriptions of experience below.

Before each interview, the participant was asked to choose a specific experience with visual art and describe the experience in as much detail as possible. Although interviewees were not asked specifically to “describe an experience of beauty” or of “feeling touched,” each interview would eventually reveal the deeply affective quality of the experience. When asked directly, participants expressed that they felt touched by the artwork, which they found to be remarkable and remarkably beautiful.

Interviews were recorded. They lasted between 25 min and 81 minutes. The interviews were analyzed in accordance with Giorgi’s approach.⁴⁵ Within his modified Husserlian framework, the analysis aims to identify the features of experience that are revelatory of the phenomenon in question. One does so by carefully and repetitively considering each unit of meaning expressed by the participant, which

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty (1993a, b, p. 70).

⁴¹ Giorgi (2009).

⁴² Giorgi (2012, p. 6).

⁴³ See Giorgi (2009; 2012), Giorgi & Giorgi (2003) for elaborations of the steps of the analysis method.

⁴⁴ Giorgi (2009).

⁴⁵ Giorgi (2009).

eventually allows the researcher to identify the essential psychological meaning off of the experience. Generalizing based on a few rich descriptions is a complex maneuver that relies on systematicity and the researcher's psychological intuition.⁴⁶ Intuiting accurately is, as Giorgi⁴⁷ puts it, the trickiest aspect of this analysis approach, but also the part of the analysis that is most likely to bring about new insights about the phenomenon.

3.1 A field of sculptures

It was 1997, but the memory feels fresh. Joseph was young. It was the middle of the summer and the first day of his first trip to Europe. The flight from the US was long. He had landed late at night and had spent the rest of the night in a crummy hostel bunk bed. He feels sleep deprived as he jumps on the train taking him to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, but rather than tired, he feels high, almost euphoric. He is finally here.

He vividly recalls seeing the museum's collection of Giacometti sculptures, which take up an entire room. It is as if he were stepping into a *field* of sculptures. He remembers the feeling of being there with them. The room is quiet while the waves rage behind the glass walls. As he looks at the sculptures, he sees the light behind them. He watches the light bend around the narrow figures, and all his thoughts and expectations about the Europe trip and about the museum are pushed to the very back of his mind. It is just him and the sculptures. He sees them, but it is not merely a visual experience. "I know it is a visual experience. But overall, it's more ... full body." He feels the sculptures with his entire body, but the feeling isn't inside his body, but rather, on his skin. "Skin. The outer. The outer part." His whole body's skin and all of his senses are involved. It feels something like vibrations or waves. "There are waves. Light waves. Sound waves ... That's how you interact with this object. You're mostly *seeing* it. Through sight waves. Light waves. But you're also hearing it. And you're feeling the same ground as it ... You're on the same floor. The floor could be solid, or tilted, or soft, but in this case, it was very—angular, and hard, and, which feels like a direct connection."

In this moment of "extreme pleasure," he feels he is giving himself to the sculptures. "It's like there is no friction ... the giving of yourself; it's like you almost didn't have a choice. Like myself was just ... there. Whatever this statue wanted to take from me, it could take. It's like my guard didn't exist." He does not try to resist, he says. It is as if the wall is broken, and he does not try to build it back up. "I wanted to give myself to it anyway, and I had nothing to keep me preventing; there was *nothing* between me and this Giacometti." He feels open and vulnerable to the world. "I feel like there are fewer layers between me and the world. And this object is part of the world, and there's fewer filters or *barriers* between it and myself." He feels as if he will receive something from this artwork whether he wants it or not. "In this situation, I had no choice. I was open to everything." In this intimate

⁴⁶ We have also analyzed the role of intuition in phenomenological psychological method elsewhere (Kudahl and Roald 2021).

⁴⁷ Giorgi (2009, p. 154).

presence with the artwork, he remembers where he is, in Europe, travelling, and the future feels, all of a sudden, brighter. “Everything was coming *at* me and ... I was ... I was on a different continent for the first time in my life.” It feels like life has endless and amazing opportunities. Most people would not consider Giacometti’s sculptures “beautiful,” he says, but as he gave himself to them and got access to them in return, he experienced the pleasurable feeling of their beauty with his entire body. In giving himself to this group of sculptures, he comes to realize something: “This is this amazing thing, and this is this horizon beyond it, of endless, that’s endlessly filled with other amazing things.”

3.1.1 Post-interview reflection

What the reader of the above description should pay attention to is, first, the importance that Joseph gives to the bodily metaphors of touch and of the skin, and of being touched in a way that breaks down the barrier between oneself and the world. Secondly, notice how the experience of touch, ultimately motivates Joseph to reflect on the geographical and cultural context of his own life. It is as though the feeling touched-ness of this experience is what provides access to the artwork’s existential dimension.

3.2 Nighthawks

Euen-Young first saw Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks* when she had just moved to New York City. *Nighthawks* depicts a restaurant seen from the outside. The restaurant is, as Euen-Young describes it, really bright, while the outside is dark. She admires how the contrast makes the light appear with great clarity. “You can see the light so well,” she says. Watching the clear light against the dark night, she feels calm. “You immediately feel this very, very calm, dark night ... I could feel that, this is very quiet and silent, seeing all the light and space ... I don’t have to think anything ... I can relax my body, by watching this, I can breathe.” As Euen-Young describes this calming sight of the contrast, she continuously moves her hand in the air in a gentle, downward-facing movement, palm facing toward herself, as if miming the movement of a caress.

From somewhere in the dark, Euen-Young says, the painter seems to be watching people through the window. Euen-Young imagines being him, sitting there in the dark quietness. “There is nobody in the street; you can see only the people in the restaurant, so I, I assume it was probably 11 p.m. or 12 a.m. ... so ... I’m trying to get into the painting, and then, pretend that I’m him, you know, watching these people, and then just being in the moment, quiet.” Staring into the depicted situation, she feels its quietness. She feels her body relax. Her breath deepens. Her mind is calm. The street outside is empty and quiet. “There are people, but I feel like they’re talking very quietly.” She enjoys the empty street. She has escaped the noisiness of New York City and entered a quiet and spacious place. “I feel like I’m in *there*,” she says, pointing the hand forward toward an imagined canvas in front of her. While looking at the painting, she becomes aware of the contrast between this quietness and

her present-day life in noisy New York. “There is no noise; there are no cars going on, there are sirens going on, no airplanes going on, you know, it felt ... like a place where, you know, I’m not hearing *anything*, I’m just by myself.” She feels that looking at the painting has made her “separate from the real world;” “it brought me into the past, not like nowadays.” Unlike New York, in this separate, past world, there is space enough to move around and space enough to breathe calmly. “It feels really, you know, like I’m in the history, at the time. Kind of like I took the time machine, and just, being there.” Standing in front of the painting, she notices where she is and delights in it: She thinks to herself: “Wow, this is nice,” while she continues to enjoy the empty street, watching people. Euen-Young has a smile on her face when she thinks back at being there, in the dark quietness of Hopper’s painting.

3.2.1 Post-interview reflection

In the case of *Nighthawks*, the spectator does not make use of language relating to tactility such as we saw in the first description. However, she does speak of certain bodily ways of responding to the artwork. Looking at the painting also reverses her vision and allows her to notice herself and her felt bodily pleasure as she stands there. Moreover, this revision of the gaze sparks reflections on the historical context of her present day life as opposed to the painter’s life in the early twentieth century.

3.3 In the garden

A few years ago, Cecilia visited the Smithsonian Art Museum in Washington, D.C. By chance, she walks into a quiet, almost empty gallery with a collection of paintings by the American artist Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851–1938). She instantly notices the broad expanse of the green background of the painting *In the Garden*. There is a boldness to this green. It is as if it were jumping out at her, reaching out and grabbing her, telling her to stop and pay attention. Seeing it feels like “Wow,” like the sudden intake of a breath. “I think the color was what grabbed me first ... It almost struck me and kind of – pulled me over.” She walks across the floor to where it hangs. Standing there, with her hand resting near her heart, really looking, her eyes go to the figures, and she starts to wonder about them. She feels the painting is drawing her closer. Three women are standing in the center of the green field. The women are all wearing flowing gowns. They have their hair up. “The way they’re standing, they seem very graceful. And the way their clothes are kind of draping feels very graceful, and they just, they seem very poised.” As she looks at the three women, who “are so beautiful,” she notices that there is something aloof about how they look. They are fragile in their beauty. They seem, somehow, not obvious but mysterious. Their body language is ambiguous. She feels pulled in by the mystery. She wonders, “What exactly are they *doing* there; what’s their relationship to each other.” This “mysterious element,” she says, “keeps you a little bit—a little bit outside it.” The distance frustrates her yet draws her closer. “I really wanted to enter, to be absorbed into that world, and really be there,” she says. Standing there, really looking, she thinks to herself, “Wow, I’m here in this moment, and this is so beautiful.” She feels that she

has made a discovery; the gallery is almost empty; not a lot of people know of this place. Yet, they found it, and she is, at least partially, being let into the secret world of these mysterious women. “This beautiful moment is unfolding right here for me.” She thinks about her presence at this point in history. As a viewer of this painting, she feels as if she is standing in a relation to the painter.” This painter had this vision and took the time to put it down on canvas so that I could see it a hundred years later.” She feels fortunate to be here in this exact place at this exact time, receiving the sight of the beauty of the mysterious, fragile women.

3.3.1 Post-interview reflection

This description is driven by bodily impressions of tactile character such as being “grabbed,” “struck,” and “pulled.” Notice also how her vision reverses; as she looks at the painting, she also looks at her own life from the outside. Similar to the first description, this experience ultimately provides access to an existential dimension of looking at art as it makes the spectator reflect on how the painter lived, experienced, and painted, which now, a hundred years later, she is able to witness.

3.4 The shore of the turquoise sea

The Shore of the Turquoise Sea by the German painter Albert Bierstadt is the first painting Cecilia recalls as having affected her. She was four years old. More than thirty years has now passed since her parents took her to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.. Walking through the gallery, many paintings interested her, but this one made her stop, stand still, and look. “Kind of just the ‘wow,’ and then suddenly stopping, and standing still, and, almost standing at attention, and really looking.” As she describes the feeling, she takes in a sudden breath, as if to illustrate how it was as if the painting sprung up and surprised her, making her body respond with the sudden movement of breath.

The painting portrays a steep wave about to crash on the shore. As the wave lifts toward the sky, light streams through it and highlights the nuances of turquoise blue. As a child, turquoise blue was Cecilia’s favorite color, and in this painting, she sees a huge expanse of it. She searches with her eyes, trying to find the deepest and bluest of the blue. As she looks into the blue, a remarkable feeling arises: “It felt like I was being taken out of myself.” She remembers feeling like the painting was *huge* and “almost like I was going to get *overwhelmed* by this blue.” It is, however, pleasurable. She feels excited and delighted, not scared. She *loves* the feeling of being overwhelmed by turquoise. In this moment, looking into the blue, all other thoughts were obliterated. This turquoise blue wave is everything. “It was just like, ‘*wow, this painting,*’ like *that* was all that mattered, in that moment.” At age four, she knew that she was not allowed to touch the painting, but she strongly wanted to get close. “There was this longing, to somehow be, a part of the painting. Or be ... or have the painting be a part of *me*. To just kind of become one with the painting.” As she stands there, looking, something occurs to her: “This is just an extraordinary thing, and it’s right here, right now, in front of me.” She remembers telling her parents how

much she loved the painting, and they got her the exhibition catalog. She never got rid of it.

3.4.1 Post-interview reflection

Although the interviewee does not use the word “touch,” what is remarkable about this description, in the context of our analysis, is the spectator’s impression of almost being overwhelmed by the painting, that is, in her very near horizon there is the expectation of the complete impression of tactility: to be fully and totally immersed in a “material” (the material being the blue wave). As she stands there and reflects on this painting, her vision of the painting also reverses; she becomes aware of her own body as she sees herself standing there in front of the painting.

4 What is it like to be touched by beauty?

Our analysis of the empirical descriptions of visual art experience entail two types of “touchedness.” First, and most directly, the descriptions entail numerous mentions of the body. Looking at the artwork, the viewer feels its presence in a bodily way. That is, while the eyes are resting on the artwork, the viewer feels different areas of the body “act” correlatively with the act of looking. As is the case in the description of *Nighthawks*, the viewer feels the body relaxing into a deeper breath, or as we see in the case of *In the Garden*, seeing the artwork can feel as if the heart suddenly excites or skips a beat. In both cases, the bodily act overlaps temporally while looking intensely at the artwork and thus initiated by the artwork.

Feeling these sudden bodily occurrences while looking at the artwork, the viewer gradually begins to feel either as if something is coming *at* the body, that is, moving toward it, or as if something is grabbing it, caressing it, or touching its skin. The most vivid example of the former is given in the case of *The Shore of the Turquoise Sea*, in which the color of the painting is experienced as *overwhelming* the viewer. We should notice how the word “overwhelmed” involves a blend of bodily and affective meanings.⁴⁸

The descriptions of feeling touched by the artwork depict a variety of meanings of how touch qualitatively happens. While *Nighthawks* reveals a feeling of caress, *In the Garden* describes feeling grabbed. *A Field of Sculptures* displays yet another variation; here, the description specifies the qualitative experience not by naming the quality of the touching movement but by specifying which part of the body feels the touch (namely, the very exterior part of the body, the skin). In any of these experiential variations, the artwork (or part of it, for example, a color) moves toward and imaginatively comes into tactile contact with the art-observing body. This feeling of contact implies a sense of the breaking down of a barrier between the viewer and the artwork. The viewer feels like having been granted bodily-affective access to the artwork. In turn, it is as if the artwork has direct access to her body and her affective

⁴⁸ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *overwhelmed*, for example, means both to be “overpowered with emotion” and “buried beneath a mass of earth, water, etc.”.

world. We see such a sense of doubled access described in the case of *A field of sculptures*, in which the viewer feels the layers between himself and the sculptures being reduced. On the other hand, both *The Shore of the Turquoise Sea* and *In the Garden* describe a more ambiguous variation in which the viewer longs to become one with the scenery and yet feels that something is pushing her away or keeping her outside.

The second type of “touchedness” that the descriptions point toward is more subtle yet perhaps more profound as it has to do with the reversible nature of touch. While letting the eyes rest on the artwork, an awareness of herself appears to the viewer. The different descriptions present three different variations of such self-awareness. She feels aware of her own bodily relation to the artwork (*The Shore of the Turquoise Sea*: “I am standing right in front of this painting,” *In the Garden*: “This beautiful moment is unfolding right here for me”), the spatio-cultural reality of her world (*A Field of Sculptures*: “I was on a different continent for the first time in my life”), the temporality and historicity of her own existence (*Nighthawks*: “it feels ... like I’m in the history,” and *In the Garden*: “This painter had this vision and took the time to put it down on canvas so that I could see it a hundred years later”). In all of the above variations, the viewer sees herself from the outside and reflects on her bodily, spatio-cultural, or temporal-historical existence. She sees herself in the place and time where she exists. Suddenly, she knows more about who she is, what she wants, and what her options are. She knows more about what kind of a life she lives and about her life’s relation to the world around her.

Finally, two aspects reveal how the interviewee’s descriptions do in fact revolve around not just the phenomenon of feeling touched by something but around the phenomenon of interest, that is, the phenomenon of feeling touched by something beautiful. First, a sense of pleasure runs through the experience. We see this explicated in *The Shore of the Turquoise Sea*, in which the viewer describes an affective-bodily overlap in the experience of being overwhelmed by color (“She loves the feeling of being overwhelmed by turquoise”). Or as in the case of *A Field of Sculptures* in which the interviewee gets an “extreme” sense of pleasure from the sculptures. In the case of *Nighthawks*, the delight is expressed with a warm smile appearing on the face of the interviewee as she describes the feeling of seeing the artwork.

The second aspect relating directly to the experience of beauty has to do with the interviewee’s experience of the artwork as something treasurable or admirable. In all four descriptions, somewhere in the process of looking, the artwork achieves status of being a significant quality. For example, in *A Field of Sculptures* and *In the Garden*, the artworks come to be perceived with a sense of “amazingness,” and in *The Shore of the Turquoise Sea*, with a sense of “extraordinariness.” The significant quality is perceived as centralized in the “thing,” the artwork, from which it radiates out and shines upon the totality of the viewer’s being.

4.1 Touched and seen

According to Merleau-Ponty's idea that vision is reversible, I can only see because I can also be seen. Seeing and being seen are, in this way, two sides of the same act. Applied to the phenomenon of feeling touched in experiences of beauty in visual art, reversibility means that as viewers see the artwork ("stroke it" with the gaze), they come to experience the artwork as reaching out and touching them back. In this way, both seer and seen appear as part of the same touched-toucher relation.

At the end of these considerations, it appears that in the experience of beauty in visual art, tactile and visual phenomena can overlap or even blend. When the gaze touches the artwork, the artwork somehow reaches out and touches the body of the gazing subject. To feel touched, in this sense—and in line with Merleau-Ponty's visually oriented notion of tactility—is to feel seen.⁴⁹

As we have seen in our reading of Merleau-Ponty, doubled sensation—to touch oneself touching—applied to vision is to see oneself seeing, to catch oneself, from the outside, in the act of seeing. When our participants describe contemplating the artwork, they describe becoming aware of their own bodily, spatio-cultural, and/or temporal-historical existence in relation to the artwork. I stand here, looking at this artwork in front of me. I exist at a certain point in history, and the artist existed at another. I have traveled far, and now I am here, seeing this artwork. What seems to be at stake when the viewer sees the artwork is that a vision of their gazing self appears along with the experience of seeing the artwork. In this sense, the experience entails "seeing oneself seeing," that is, a doubling of the reversible nature of the visual-visible body. I catch myself, as if from the outside, in the act of looking at the artwork, and thus, I am brought back to a reflective awareness of myself. Nevertheless, when the viewer sees herself when seeing the artwork, it is not a matter of self-preoccupation but rather, as Johnson puts it, "a reversal of vanity and self-absorption: not to see one's own reflection always and everywhere in others and all things, but always and everywhere to find others and all things in one's own growth."⁵⁰

Some aspects of this study may need further analysis and clarification. While interviewees describe a sense of seeing oneself arising while looking at the artwork, the process by which such self-awareness is not made entirely clear by the interviewees. The question of whether we can identify either a clear shift in attention or a continuous sense of ambiguity between artwork and body in the empirical material is also a question of methodology. The fact that this question cannot seem to be answered by "going back" to the description of the phenomenon calls for a reflection upon our method. The uncertainty that arises here is, to what extent does our method allow the bodily aspects of experiences of beauty to become apparent in language? For example, in the case of *Nighthawks*, where the interviewee does

⁴⁹ A dimension to be explored in later work is the fact that affectivity plays a crucial role in this specific type of reversible phenomenon. To feel the artwork reaching out and touching you points toward a perceptive experience that is affectively charged. In the blend of visual and tactile, the sensing body is not clearly distinguishable from affective dimensions of experience.

⁵⁰ Johnson (2010, p. 192).

not say the word *touch*, her body mimes a caress while she speaks. It speaks to the importance of paying close attention to how descriptions of experience are often expressed in more than words.

We have reflected on the idea that the experience of being touched by the beauty of an artwork is that when you also open yourself to an artwork, you are also opened to yourself. Being touched by beauty is to reflect upon one's existence in relation to the beautiful object: When I see the beautiful object, I also see myself. This proposition leads us back to the question of the relationship between the experience of beauty and the experience of the self. As Galen Johnson points out, "Merleau-Ponty concurs that the desire for the repetitions of the beautiful also brings us back to ourselves."⁵¹ This return to ourselves is only possible thanks to the bodily structure of reversibility. Reversibility is inherent to the experience of beauty because when the beautiful thing appears, the body also appears: When we experience beauty, we become aware of ourselves in the encounter with something that reaches out and grabs us. In this sense, the experience of beauty demands to be turned inside out. When you turn the reversible around, the other side of the same thing appears. When turned inside out, the other side of the experience appears, and this feature of the experience exposes its bodily foundation. Our bodily foundation makes it possible to reflect upon ourselves and, thus, to *feel touched* by an artwork.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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