

The Subject-Object Problem in “Aligned with Nazca” : Remarks on the Phenomenology of Robert Morris

In his essay “Aligned with Nazca”, published in October 1975 in *Artforum*, Robert Morris writes: “Our encounter with objects in space forces us to reflect on our selves, which can never become the objects for our external examination. In the domain of real space the subject-object dilemma can never be resolved.”¹ It is with this admission of failure that we would like to start, and remark that if this was indeed one of the main issue at stake in the artist’s activity since the middle of the 1960s, its formulation in his writings was partly delayed.

A famous point in the historiographical doxa of American Minimal art consists in arguing that the work and the spectator unfold in the same space, that is to say that they both share the same conditions of existence. The sense minimalist works make is due in large part to the knowledge the spectator himself possesses, thanks to the experience of his body, of the physical conditions of existence on which this type of sculpture plays: weight, spatial extension, proportions, etc. From this point of view, and with regard to historiography again, it was reasonable to insist upon the role played by the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the formulation of such a proposition. The philosopher’s project was to return to the world, to return to a pre-reflexive consciousness of the world prior to its idealization or conceptualization, in order to unveil the unreflected life that supports human being’s behavior and thoughts. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty sought to make a description of the world based on the experience of the body, this experience being the only way by which human being has access to it. This led Merleau-Ponty to approach the human being as implicated in his environment and to study the ways his thoughts and reflections on the world find their basis within the experience of the world, and not in a retreat outside the world as the Cartesian model would posit it. We can therefore understand the interest artist and critics would have had in such a mode of thinking, willing as they were to return to the fundamental experience of sculpture². Yet, what we would like to suggest is that if this spatial continuity and thereby this contiguity of object and subject constituted a major issue of “Notes on Sculpture” in 1966, its understanding was still partially hampered by the formalist modernist theoretical framework prevailing at the time. We then would like to venture the hypothesis that it is in later texts that this issue was achieved, and notably in “Aligned with Nazca”, an essay in which Morris retrospectively criticizes the “Cartesian” mode of thinking at stake in his own minimalist pieces, as the artist himself wrote it. Then would we find in this later text the formulation of an art whose mode of appearance of the form would not be separable from the spectator; there would be expressed the idea of an object that could no longer be separated from the subject.

This issue of the subject-object relationship was particularly in phase with the debates that shook the New York art world from the 1960s onward. Indeed, such model positing the sharing of existential conditions could only made sense if confronted to another model based,

¹ Morris, Robert, “Aligned with Nazca”, reprinted in *Continuous Project Altered Daily : The Writings of Robert Morris*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1993, 165.

² Robert Morris would have learned of this work by Merleau-Ponty from its translation into English in 1962. E-mail addressed to the author, November 12, 2007.

for its part, on a caesura. This of course alludes to the sculptural model proposed by the modernist critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. To put it succinctly, this aesthetic model rests on the premise of an *optical* and *immediate* experience of sculpture. It tends, then, to postulate a discontinuity between the optical, weightlessness and immediate conditions of the work of art, and the physical, tactile, and durable world to which the viewer belongs. This leads to the autonomy of the work vis-a-vis the viewer, who is considered as the remote exegete of the sense produced by the play of formal elements composing the work. According to this model, the formal qualities of the work never seems to be affected by the contingency of the particular and partial point of view adopted by the viewer³. Whereas the conception of sculpture proposed by Morris in 1966 is diametrically opposed to this model. On the contrary, the artist asserts the fundamental tridimensionality and tactility of the medium and insists upon the formal autonomy and upon the “literality” of the relationships established in-between the elements of a sculpture: the space, the light, and the materials.⁴ The sculptures in which the artist perceives the most eminent accession to this nature are unified geometrical shapes whose plastic economy enables the unveiling of the extrinsic factors that actually affect the form of a work as perceived by the viewer⁵. Among these elements are the space, the scale, the light, etc. The form of the work, and thus, its meaning, cannot be separated from its conditions of perception, i.e. its meaning does not precede its experience. Yet, Morris’s use of the notion of *Gestalt* when referring to these unitary shapes seems to be partially hindering the interdependence between the form and the perceiving subject.

This notion of *Gestalt*, borrowed from *Gestaltpsychologie* with which Morris was familiar since the middle 1950s⁶, refers to the dynamic process through which perception is organized. Wolfgang Köhler or Kurt Koffka argued that an object is directly perceived as a whole and not reconstituted *a posteriori*. They stated that the whole shape possess greater properties than the sum of its parts. What’s more, beside this unitary quality, this notion allows us to point out two more remarks. First, it allows to insist upon the fundamental interaction that exists between the perceived object and the perceiving subject. Indeed, *Gestalt* psychologists no longer dealt with phenomena *per se* but rather with the way they appear during the perceptive experience, since stimuli alone do not suffice to explain the perception of forms.⁷ For instance, the rays of light that hit the retina being independent from one another, one cannot infer from the unity or the homogeneity of an object the unity of its retinal image except thanks to a process of primary perceptive organization. Second, the notion of *Gestalt* also enables to refer to the causal relationships that exist between the parts composing the form and between the parts and the whole. A *Gestalt* is a *structure* whose unity results from the parts it totalizes. Yet, in turn, these parts occur only by the whole they

³ Greenberg writes, “The human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space in either pictorial or sculptural art ; now it is eyesight alone [...]” Greenberg, Clement, “The New Sculpture” [1948-1958], *Art and culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, 143. In addition, he writes that the modernist work must be “grasped only in an indivisible instant of time” like a “sudden revelation”. “The Case for Abstract Art” [1959], Greenberg, Clement, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4. *Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969*, ed. by John O’Brian, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 80-81. Fried speaks, in his turn, of the sense of modernist sculpture delivered wholly in each moment. Fried, M., “Art and Objecthood” [1967], in *Art and Objecthood : Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 167.

⁴ Morris, Robert, “Notes on sculpture, Part I” [1966], Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art. A critical Anthology*, New York: Dutton, 1968, 223.

⁵ Morris, Robert, “Notes on sculpture, Part II” [1966], *Ibid.*, 232-233.

⁶ Meyer, James, *Minimalism art and polemics in the sixties*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, 161.

⁷ Köhler, Wolfgang, *Gestalt Psychology*, New York: Horace Liveright, 1929, 3.

compose. Therefore, the parts and the whole occur simultaneously at the moment of perception—form and meaning occur at the moment of experience. But as far as he is concerned, Morris wrote: “Even its most patently unalterable property—shape—does not remain constant. For it is the viewer who changes the shape constantly by his change in position relative to the work. Oddly, it is the strength of the constant, known shape, the gestalt, that allows this awareness to become so much more emphatic in these works than in previous sculpture. A Baroque figurative bronze is different from every side. So is a six-foot cube. The constant shape of the cube held in the mind but which the viewer never literally experiences, is an actuality against which the literal changing, perspective views are related. *There are two distinct terms : the known constant and the experienced variable.*”⁸ Indeed, this piece of writing constitutes a penetrating description of the viewer’s encounter of a work such as *Untitled (Battered Cubes)* (1965) which causes a tension between the mental anticipation of its shape and the deceptive nature of its experience. Nevertheless, it seems that his critical claim against modernism might have benefitted from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of the *Gestalt* in order to make it even more consistent. In fact, this kind of oscillation between what is “inalterable” and what “does not remain constant” and, what is more, the scission between “the known constant” and “the experienced variable” are at odds with this second hermeneutic tool used by the artist in his analysis.⁹ Two examples will highlight this point.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explains that the perception of the world does not consist in making a choice between an empirical mode according to which the thing coincides with the raw stimuli, and an idealist mode according to which the thing perceived must conform to the characteristics of a mental model known in advance. Perception consists neither in limiting oneself to physiological informations nor in comparing actual fact with an object of consciousness. To take an example common both to the philosopher and to the artist, when one sees a cube, just because the perspective deformations of its sides are not raw data doesn’t mean one sees all the sides of the cube simultaneously.¹⁰ As far as he is concerned, Merleau-Ponty refers precisely to the Gestalttheory which shows that perception itself, and not the intellect, “generalizes” the singularity or the particularity of experience. The identity of the perceived squares and circles to a conceptual category, he argues, does not happen *a posteriori* by an act of the intellect but at the very moment of perception. *Gestalt* is not a projection of our consciousness on the world, but inheres in its experience. Merleau-Ponty writes: “But although the Gestalt may be expressible in terms of some internal law, this law must not be considered as a model on which the phenomena of structure are built up. Their appearance is not the external unfolding of a pre-existing reason. It is not because the “form” produces a certain state of equilibrium, solving a problem of maximum [...] that it enjoys a privileged place in our perception; it is the very appearance of the world and not the condition of its possibility; it is the birth of a norm and is not realized according to a norm; it is the identity to the external and the internal and not the projection of the internal in the external.”¹¹ Thus Morris’s formulation, while permitting to insist upon the constant changes that happen at the moment of experience, seems to preserve the dualism, or this “idealism” as Hal Foster has remarked.¹² *Gestalt* or the “known constant”, as Morris put

⁸ Morris, Robert., “Notes on sculpture, Part II”, *Ibid.*, 233-234. Our emphasis.

⁹ Tensions which had already been raised by Lizzie Borden in “The New Dialectic”, *Artforum*, New York: March 1974, 44-45.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], tr. Colin Smith, London: Routledge, 1989, 204-205.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

¹² Foster, Hal., “The crux of minimalism” [1986], *The Return of the Real : The avant-garde at the end of the century*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1996, 47.

it, seems to be similar to a model of the mind, as bearer of the truth of the shape, against which the perceived appearance or the “experienced variable” is checked. Whereas for Merleau-Ponty, *Gestalt* enabled to avoid this dualism, and no less for a cube than for a Baroque figurative bronze. There is thus a kind of caesura occurring in the structure of the experience as described by Morris, between the form in itself and the mode in which it appears to the spectator. A caesura whose origin would have to be found in the modernist theory and that the will to counter perhaps too frontally forced the artist to preserve implicitly.¹³

Our second remark on the use of this notion by Morris concerns the organization of the perceptive field. The essential principal upon which *Gestalt* perception rests is its structuring in a ground and a figure. It consists in a discrimination that operates with regard to the qualities of the field: homogeneity, regularity, and the eventual symmetry of one zone in contrast with another more heterogeneous and undefined one. Thus, a figure on a ground can only appear insofar as they determine *one another*, the same way the whole or the parts of a form do not precede one another. This is a fundamental characteristic of the notion upon which Merleau-Ponty would insist as soon as 1945. Perception, he said, is not based on absolute terms but on *relationships*, that is, on a differential mode. He writes: “The perceptual “something” is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a “field”.”¹⁴ This is to say that *Gestalt* does not so much designate a form as a *figure-ground structure* that is not assured once and for all. *Gestalt* quality is not an exclusive and positive quality of the object but rather depends upon the relations established by the perceiving subject, according to his temporary perceptive interest. There is no world, Merleau-Ponty writes, “without an existence that sustains its structure”¹⁵. That is to say that there is no world without a gaze focusing on a portion of the perceptive field and thus instituting it into a form on a ground at the same time. For his part, Robert Morris, close to the common understanding of Gestalttheorie notably accentuated by its vulgarization by Rudolf Arnheim¹⁶, tends to identify the notion of *Gestalt* to simple geometric forms, forms that are considered to be stable. Morris refers to the *Gestalt* as the “strength of the constant” and writes that “once it is established it does not disintegrate. [...] it remains constant and indivisible”¹⁷. But to base the quality of *Gestalt* upon formal geometry or upon the material unity of the work, and to consider this quality to be immutable once established, still partially consists, it seems, in considering the shape of the work to be independent from the perceptive act that isolates it from its environment.

In any case, these remarks would seem quite unfair, had Morris himself not been aware of them. This fact appears notably in his essay “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects” published in 1969. In this essay, Morris criticizes the somewhat geometrizing understanding of the phenomenon of perception that had formerly been his own. By now, he clearly states the fundamental condition of perception, according to which “Without the concentration of a figure, any given sector of the world is a field. Objects are *distinct and differentiated more*

¹³ See also Potts, A., *The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, 244-246.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice., *Ibid.*, 4. See also Barbaras, R., « Merleau-Ponty et la psychologie de la forme », *Les Études philosophiques*, Paris: Number 2, 2001, 159.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Ibid.*, 432.

¹⁶ Arnheim, R., *Art and Visual Perception. A psychology of the Creative Eye* [1954], Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1971. Robert Morris wrote that he had “probably” read this work during the period that he wrote “Notes on Sculpture” in 1966. E-mail addressed to the author, July 3, 2008.

¹⁷ Morris, Robert., “Notes on sculpture, Part I”, *Ibid.*, 234, 228.

according to this or that local interest rather than according to any general characteristics.”¹⁸ Thus, while Minimal art “took the conditions within individual things—specific extension and shape and wholeness of one material—for the project of reconstituting objects as art”¹⁹, Morris continues, “some new art now seems to take the conditions of the visual field itself (figures excluded) and uses these as a structural basis for the art”.²⁰ Then, “a shift from a figure-ground perceptual set to that of the visual field” would have occurred, a shift that is “closer to the phenomenal fact of seeing the visual field.”²¹ From now on, this kind of “figure-ground” organization is inevitably associated in Morris’s mind with a simplistic understanding of the phenomenon of the perception of a work of art. In that regard, Morris appears to be close to Anton Ehrenzweig’s *The Hidden Order of Art*. In this essay, Ehrenzweig criticizes the simplistic comprehension of the phenomenon of vision of the Gestalt theory. He accuses this theory of having decreed general rules based on specific cases characterized by regularity, homogeneity and the unity of the object of perception.²² Against such a model of viewing, which breaks the field into pieces and decisively takes meaningful figure apart from the unmeaningful ground, Ehrenzweig claims for a “syncretistic” or “dedifferentiated” vision. That is, a vision grasping the totality of the structure of the field of perception. It is a phenomenon of “scanning” thanks to which the environment is simultaneously apprehended as a whole as well as by parts, impartially embracing figure and ground.²³ This mode of vision is like an unresolved dialectic between the grasping of the whole and local focuses. Morris himself would refer to it, a few months later, in terms of a “rhythmical alternation”, which is to say, in terms of a permanent oscillation between order and disorder, between differentiation and dedifferentiation, between containment and scattering.²⁴ According to Morris, this understanding of visual perception is more conform to the *actual* conditions of perception. And as the artist advocates, this leads from now on to the necessity of carrying on, in sculpture, the kind of *immersion* in matter or in the field that is characteristic of the actual phenomenological mode of confrontation between the spectator and his environment and the objects that compose it. This means then to reconsider the immersed standpoint from which perception takes place, a situation to which the artist testifies in his essay when he speaks about a field that exceeds peripheral vision, and about the “wholeness” of the field that is no longer “perceived as an image” but rather “sensed”.²⁵ The mode of visual perception that results from this situation is fittingly designated by the artist by the notion of “landscape mode”.²⁶ A mode to which Morris would bear witness at length in his essay “Aligned with Nazca”.

This article describes a trip the artist took to Peru in order to visit the famous archeological site of the Nazca geollyphs. The first part of the text consists of a personal account of the discovery and visit of the site that Morris undertook by car and then on foot. Sensations, impressions, and anecdotes on the region are mixed together in this account.

¹⁸ Morris, Robert, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4 : Beyond Objects”, reprinted in Morris, Robert, *Continuous Project Altered Daily : The Writings of Robert Morris*, *Ibid.*, 53. Our emphasis.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²² Ehrenzweig, A., *The Hidden Order of Art* [1967], Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995, 21-22.

²³ *Ibid.*, 55-66.

²⁴ Morris, Robert., “Some notes on the phenomenology of making” [1970] ; reprinted in Morris, Robert, *Continuous Project Altered Daily : The Writings of Robert Morris*, *Ibid.*, 79-81.

²⁵ Morris, Robert., “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4 : Beyond Objects”, *Ibid.*, 57 and 61.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

Then, the singular experience of these lines is reported in details. In fact, Morris discovers that the perception of the lines blurs the orientation order on which space is usually, or rather *a priori*, organized. It is from afar, he notices, that the lines, or the “gestalts of linearity”, emerge most clearly. Lines are only perceptible at distance. They are thus a function of distance.²⁷ Yet, by virtue of this extension, the horizontality of lines is troubled insofar as they are no longer only perceived as inscribed on the ground but also on the vertical plane at the horizon. “The horizontal becomes vertical through extension,” Morris writes.²⁸ Thus, the orthogonality of the vertical and horizontal planes that usually organize objects in space is blurred here—a traditional spatial framework also to be found in the Occidental artistic tradition. Indeed, all perceptive experience of art, Morris explains, is traditionally reduced to the frontality of the plane in which paintings and sculptures stand, parallel to the body of the viewer and perpendicular to his gaze. He writes, “All twentieth-century art seems compelled by a type of Cartesian projection that will net every visual experience by a vertical plane interposed between the viewer and the world.”²⁹ But beyond the mode of perception, what is at stake in such an orthogonal organization is an *a priori* way of thinking. Morris writes, “The Cartesian grid of rectilinear room space involves *a mental as well as a perceptual focus* [...]”³⁰ Morris cites as evidence the recent art, including Minimal art, whose geometric, serial and analytic characteristics reveal the logical sequences that have led to the information of these works. These are mental operations which belong more to the domain of writing and of notation than to the field of manipulation of matter in space: “Systems of notation are used by us at the distance that makes them intelligible; they are extra-spatial.”³¹ From this point of view, Morris’s critical claim against Minimal art becomes clear: “Minimal art’s diagrammatic aspect was derived from plans generated by drawings on flat pages. Most Minimal art was an art of flat surfaces in space.”³² What is here problematic for Morris is that these shapes were determined and known prior to their concrete realization, “diminishing the density of the physical”³³ as he writes. Such conditions of creation presuppose that the plastic forms were determined in advance and that they could be embodied in material and transposed into physical space without apparent modification, *as though their physical and spatial nature were contingent*. However, Morris now insists that “neither space nor consciousness is a medium in which objects or thought are constituted. For we know space by the objects in it [...]”³⁴—the corollary of this assessment being that there cannot be objects except in space. Therefore, unlike Minimal art, an artistic form can no longer be imagined independently of its mode of appearance—despite Minimal art constituted an attempt to mediate between the surface and the issue of space.³⁵

In order to explain this shift of artistic sensibility he has just analyzed, Morris propose an interesting conceptual couple. He writes: “The physical world divides for us between the flat, where notational information exists perceptually outside of space, and the spatial, *where perceptual relativity is the constant*”, continuing, “fixity is a function of notational systems,

²⁷ Morris, Robert., “Aligned with Nazca”, *Ibid.*, 150-156.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 158. Our emphasis.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

³² *Ibid.*, 164.

³³ *Ibid.*, 159.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 169. Let us note that the continuity between the world and the space of the self supposes a more pronounced interest for physical space rather than for psychological space, following the distinction proposed by the artist himself. The pieces of the artist at stake here are the ones close to earthworks and Land art rather than works like *Hearing, Voice*, etc.

and notational systems exist in the flat world of surfaces”³⁶ Two models are thus brought to tension. On the one hand, there is the mode of flatness, convention and writing, through which things are thought in their fixity and objectivity. The function of notation, Morris insists, is to record the facts, to control, but also to “shut out the physical world.”³⁷ Whereas, on the other hand, the spatial mode designates the immersion in the sensitive world and the willingness to “venture into the irrationality of actual space.”³⁸ That is, two models mediated by the singular site of Nazca, a site that is both a landscape and support for inscriptions. In fact, this way of thinking recalls two modes of apprehension of space well described by the phenomenological tradition: the “geographical space” and the “space of landscape”, which the eloquent example of the labyrinth mentioned by Morris renders perfectly explicit. We read, “A labyrinth is comprehensible only when seen from above, in plan view, when it has been reduced to flatness and we are outside its spatial coil.”³⁹ What is thus at stake is the distinction between the apprehension of objects in space by the spectator inserted in this space, and the understanding one gets of the same objects from the plan view, from an overhanging point of view.

It is the German neuropsychiatrist Erwin Straus who coined these two concepts in his book *Vom Sinn der Sinne* (1935)⁴⁰, quoted by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. The “geographical space” designates a modality of space by which space is apprehended as a closed and finite ensemble, a space in which each element possesses a well identified and coordinated position. Every position is constantly determined by its situation in the ensemble and related to a zero point. The “geographical space” is a space that is already known, translated onto a neutral and symbolic mode.⁴¹ By analogy, it is similar to a plan or a map. Merleau-Ponty writes of this spatial mode that it is the “being [...] which we know”, “the network of facts subject to laws.”⁴² It belongs, as its etymology echoes, to the domains of writing and flatness that Morris has conceptualized. The “space of landscape”, on the other hand, designates the lived space, the space experienced by the spectator inserted in it and surrounded by a horizon constituting the limit of what he can see. This is to say, a space whose limits are traced by its own perception of it. The space that opens is organized around the observer, it unfolds from his position and shifts as he shifts; a shift of horizon to which Morris testify when he realized the deceptiveness of distances in this immense space, and how space stretched away as he tried to approach the lines on foot.⁴³ Merleau-Ponty writes about this “space of landscape” that it is that “through which the world impinges upon us, and by means of which we are in vital communication with it.”⁴⁴

The essential point lies here in the insistence that this last mode of perception, the “space of landscape” or the “spatial”, brings to bear on the relation that exists between the way objects appear and the standpoint of the perceiving subject. A relation Morris testifies to when he writes, for example, that “After an hour or so of walking and observing, one becomes very aware of how one’s behavior as an observer affects the visibility and definition of the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 166. Our emphasis.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 165. On this subject, see the commentary by Tiberghien, Gilles, *Ibid.*, 188-189.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁰ Straus, E., *Du sens des sens. Contribution à l’étude des fondements de la psychologie* [1935], Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2000, 378-383.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 378.

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Ibid.*, 341.

⁴³ Morris, Robert, *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Ibid.*, 341-342.

lines,”⁴⁵ or again, when he affirms that the perception of lines is a “function of distance,”⁴⁶ which is to say a function of the distance between the object of the gaze and the viewer. The shape of the objects of the gaze, and thus space, are a *function* of the particular point of view adopted on them by the viewer. Besides, it is symptomatic that the concept of the “spatial” forged by Morris here is soon articulated in his essay with the notion of “depth”, a notion that is absent in the artist’s earlier texts.⁴⁷ This notion allows the artist to put even more the emphasis on the link between the point of view of the perceiving subject and the object’s mode of apparition, insofar as depth refers to the very situation of the spectator *in* the world from which the distance of surrounding objects is counted. Morris writes: “The perception of things in depth returns us to our consciousness of our own subjectivity [...]. An object has no stable perceptual place or size or relation to other objects. For these are a function of our own positions as perceivers.”⁴⁸ This reference to the notion of depth is not unlike Merleau-Ponty’s use of this same major concept on which the philosopher based his thoughts on space. As Merleau-Ponty put it, depth is not impressed upon the object of perception itself, it does not belong to it the same way height and size do. Depth can only be equated to a “breadth seen from the side”, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, by a spectator who has abandoned his point of view on the world; like the spectator who can see the labyrinth in the plan view in Morris’s text. On the contrary, depth is established *by the subject*. It is the sign of distance at which an object is found by a subject situated *in the same space*. It refers both to the situation of the perceiving subject *in the world* and to his relation to objects. Merleau-Ponty writes : “[depth] is not impressed upon the object itself, it quite clearly belongs to the perspective and not to the things. Therefore it cannot either be extracted from, or even put into that perspective by consciousness. It announces a certain indissoluble link between things and myself by which I am placed in front of them.”⁴⁹ Depth is thus a clear sign that the way an object unfolds in space and its formal characteristics are in fact *inherent* to the way it appears to the spectator. That is to say that they are inseparable from the spectator himself and from his place in the very same space, a space of which depth constitutes the primary experience—one only knows space by the objects in it, writes Morris. Depth designates the mode of perception of objects by a subject *in the same space*: that is the “spatial” mode described by Morris.

To conclude, we might suggest that it was this experience of the Peruvian site, of horizontality and of depth, which led Morris to question the issue of the relation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object one more time. From this experience, he learnt that the lines on the ground, their shape, cannot be separated from the movements of the spectator. The reason is that these things do not appear to a spectator withdrawn from the world but rather to a spectator implied in the coil of the labyrinth, perceiving the world in a “landscape mode”. The neutral and objective model, the plan or the diagram upon which every sides of a thing appear as though seen simultaneously, *no longer structure the experience* the same way modernism would have previously led to understand it. Such objective model can only be designed after the wandering, afterwards, as the act of writing always implies, as Morris would insist⁵⁰. And in his opinion, that is what compels him to

⁴⁵ Morris, Robert., 151.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁷ Unless we are mistaken, we found only one other occurrence of the term in the group of texts that address this question of perception, in “Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making” (*Ibid.*, 89) in which it is not expanded upon.

⁴⁸ Morris, Robert, “Aligned with Nazca”, 166.

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Ibid.*, 256.

⁵⁰ Morris, Robert, “Aligned with Nazca”, 166-169.

consider the site of Nazca and its lines both as concrete landscape and as symbolic abstraction⁵¹. As we can read in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, in order to close the parallel, “To return to things in themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.”⁵² To argue then that it is impossible to resolve “the subject-object dilemma in real space”, as Morris did, means that there is no object or form independent of the way they appear. But this also refers to the proximity in which things stand around us. Indeed, at the end of “Aligned with Nazca”, the artist stresses the centripetal and intimate nature of the site, in spite of its immensity.⁵³ Because if the site seems close or familiar, it is doubtless because it is from the one who discovers it and according to his standpoint that it unfolds.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, ix.

⁵³ Morris, Robert, “Aligned with Nazca”, 171.