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## Art and Embodiment: Biological and Phenomenological Contributions to Understanding Beauty and the Aesthetic

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## Art and Embodiment: Biological and Phenomenological Contributions to Understanding Beauty and the Aesthetic

*Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin*

### Abstract

Increasing awareness of the crucial and complex role of the body in making and experiencing art has led to a diverse range of biological and phenomenological philosophies of art. The shared emphasis on the role of the body re-connects these contemporary theories of art to aesthetics' pre-Kantian origin as a science of sense-perception (*aesthesis*) and feeling. Tracing some of the current positions in such diverse thinkers as Dissanayake, Langer, and Merleau-Ponty, this paper will examine their shared interest in art as a pre-reflective, non-discursive mode of knowing, symbolizing, and being-in-the-world. This paper argues that while some biologically based theories have drawn legitimate attention to the potential role of art in human evolution, their reductive tendencies need to be corrected and complemented by both a phenomenological and a 'symbolic' approach, which situates art in a web of culturally mediated affective encounters with the world in the context of a broader horizon that lends it its meaning.

### Key Words

art, embodiment, biology, phenomenology, Baumgarten, Dissanayake, Langer, Merleau-Ponty

### 1. Introduction: The Body as Site of the Senses

Although the body and its 'objects': saliva, urine, hair, nails, and so forth, now have a prominent place in contemporary art and art theory, they are still largely ignored in philosophical aesthetics. This is somewhat surprising, since aesthetics as a discipline was originally conceived by its founder, Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762), as a science of sense perception, to be considered as a source of knowing, a *scientia cognitionis sensitivae* (a science of knowledge by means of the senses).<sup>[1]</sup> Indeed, the father of aesthetics was eager to show that such 'cognition of the senses' was not, as Spinoza and Leibniz believed, subordinate to logical knowledge, but possessed an autonomy and perfection of its own.

Poetry, as Baumgarten argued, with a nod to Descartes, was able to give us clear and 'con-fused' knowledge, the latter not to be taken in the sense of 'muddled' or 'fuzzy,' but as 'fused,' condensed or converging. On his account, poetry has both an intensive clarity, to the extent that it takes concrete objects or images as its focus; and an extensive clarity, in so far as it is able to evoke a wide range of allusions and associations.<sup>[2]</sup> Because of these characteristics, poetry and, by extension, all art is able to provide us with a form of condensed knowledge that captures our concrete and lived experience in ways that escape discursive prose.

However, as Richard Schusterman correctly points out, despite his emphasis on sense-perception Baumgarten did not in fact take the body seriously. This is because he considered the

higher senses of sight and hearing as not primarily belonging to the body but belonging to the mind.<sup>[3]</sup> For him, as it was to be for Kant, sense perception was first and foremost associated with mental operations. Working within the rationalistic, anthropological, mind-body hierarchy of his time, the body belonged to the inferior realm, pertaining to the lower needs and appetites, clearly distinguished from the higher, mental faculties. Whereas the body with its needs and drives worked according to so-called 'natural' laws, the mind, including the putatively higher senses of sight and hearing, belonged to the realm of freedom and imagination. Therefore, despite his re-evaluation of sense-perception as a legitimate form of poetic or artistic knowing, Baumgarten still remained trapped in a dualistic anthropology and never developed a proper aesthetics of the body.

A similar separation between the body and the mind can be found in Kant's distinction between a liking for the agreeable, which is rooted in our sensuous bodily nature, and a liking for beauty, which is the result of the contemplative mind's reflection. The liking for the agreeable is 'a liking that is conditioned pathologically by stimuli' and 'holds for non-rational animals too.'<sup>[4]</sup> It gratifies our bodily needs and desires. By contrast, a liking for the beautiful transcends those bodily desires and is always devoid of interest.

In recent years this attitude to the relation between art, the senses, and the body has undergone significant changes. Many of those changes have been informed by recent developments in cognitive science and evolutionary psychology. Part of that research consists of an exploration of the link between our cognitive make-up and the making and appreciating of art. The underlying assumption shared by these scholars is that, despite immense historic and cultural diversity, there is a universal biological basis for these phenomena. Art, both as a practice and as an experience, belongs, as it were, to the hardware of human nature.

Philosophers and theorists of art, however, have been slow and reluctant to follow suit. As Noël Carroll observed in a recent article, "for over two decades, researchers in the humanities have resisted universalizing modes of analysis, such as evolutionary psychology and cognitive science, preferring, almost exclusively, to historicize artistic phenomenon in the conviction that, as they say, 'it's culture all the way down.' "<sup>[5]</sup> Yet, as Carroll concludes, it is high time for the humanities and the sciences to come together and recognize each other's significant contributions to the understanding of art and aesthetic experience.

In this essay I want to examine three philosophers, Ellen Dissanayake, Susanne K. Langer, and Merleau-Ponty, who, each in his or her own way, have drawn on the empirical sciences in order to develop a theory of art and embodiment that takes the body seriously. Even though they deal with very similar issues, because of their very different philosophical traditions and backgrounds these thinkers are rarely considered together. I will therefore attempt to create a dialogue among them that brings out each other's strength and weaknesses. After a brief exposition of the theories of Darwin, Edward O. Wilson, and sociobiologists Brett Cooke and

Frederick Turner, I will first look at the work of Ellen Dissanayake, who has drawn on anthropological research to develop an evolutionary based philosophy of art based on the notion of 'making special.' I will then turn to Susanne K. Langer, who, drawing on geology, physics, and biology, developed a biologically based cognitive philosophy of art and mind rooted in the notion of 'symbolization.' Finally, I will examine the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, who, as a practicing psychiatrist, drew extensively on medical science and empirical psychology in order to develop a theory of art as a mode of doing phenomenology. I will then conclude with a comparison of their respective theories, with respect to the extent that they are able to enrich our understanding of the embodied nature of art.

I suggest that while sociobiological and Dissanayake's theories of art draw legitimate attention to the potential role of art in human evolution, their reductive tendency needs to be corrected and complemented by the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty and the 'symbolic' approach of Susanne K. Langer. Art, I argue, is not merely a symptom of human need but a symbolic articulation of our embodied experience and understanding of the world.

## **2. Darwin, Sociobiological Theories of Art, and Ellen Dissanayake**

Before discussing Dissanayake's approach to art, it is important to consider some biological theories of art prior to her, as her own theory is both informed by these and a response to them. Writing well over a hundred years ago, in 1885, Charles Darwin was arguably the first to draw an explicit link between art and biology. Indeed, as he observed, there is "a widespread pleasure which [the men of all races] take in dancing, rude music, acting, painting, tattooing and otherwise decorating themselves."<sup>[6]</sup> For him, the pleasure in the ornamental display of the body went hand in hand with the development of a sense of beauty, not only as seen in humans, but also in animals. In both cases, the display and appreciation of bodily beauty is linked to the ability of the male to charm and attract a suitable female partner, and thus form part of the process of sexual, rather than natural, selection.

Indeed, features that may initially have served as benefiting natural selection, such as the deer's antlers in fighting with other animals, may eventually serve as objects of beauty meant to impress and attract a female. However, this should not be seen as a reduction of beauty to sexual or natural selection. As Wolfgang Iser rightly argues against later sociobiological interpretations, "even if one assumes that beauty means fitness in a hidden way and that this is ultimately the reason why the beautiful is esteemed, in no circumstances can one get around the fact that what the female appreciates in the first place is the beautiful as such. . . . It is precisely these aesthetic characteristics that produce the attraction."<sup>[7]</sup> In other words, not only is human aesthetics irreducible to natural selection; so is animal aesthetics.

Almost a century later, evolutionary zoologist Desmond Morris picked up Darwin's theme in his *The Biology of Art*, written five years before his much better-known *The Naked Ape*,

arguing that artistic activity is not limited to people. However, rather than focusing on ornamentation for the purposes of display and attraction, Morris was intrigued by the pleasure chimpanzees can derive from the drawing of elementary patterns and configurations. According to Morris, the animals became so engrossed in their activities that they even preferred creating art to being fed. Seeing no real difference between the chimpanzees' products and the creations of various forms of abstract art, he concluded that, in principle, there was thus no difference between human and animal art making.

Taking this as his cue, Edward O. Wilson, the founder of sociobiology and author of *Sociobiology: the New Synthesis*, concluded that this tendency to manipulate objects and to explore their uses must therefore be a "a special manifestation of their tool-using behavior" and, as such, have an adaptive advantage.<sup>[8]</sup> And, if so, Wilson argued, the same must be true for the origin of art in man. Since for more than 99 % of their history as hunter-gatherers humans made their own tools, the appraisal of form and skill in their execution must have played a significant role in the struggle for survival, as well as have brought social approval. As such, Wilson claims, both forms of success paid off in greater genetic fitness: a well-crafted tool is beneficial for survival, and so, of course, is social approval when it comes to opportunities for reproduction.

Having made this claim for the skillful production of forms and shapes, Wilson then applied a similar logic to rites and myths: By engaging in rituals and by listening to stories and myths about the origin of the world and other significant events, the individual experiences a sense of belonging and loyalty to the community he is born into, thus enforcing his will to contribute to and, in extreme cases, sacrifice his life for the good of the whole. To Wilson this proved that rituals and myths have adaptive value and are essential in the human quest for survival.

It is this basic theory that both art and beauty play a significant role in both sexual and natural selection that forms the basis of two important collections of essays, both published in 1999: first, *Sociobiology and the Arts*, edited by Jan Baptist Bedaux and Brett Cooke, and second, *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts*, also edited by Brett Cooke, but this time in conjunction with Frederick Turner. Sociobiology, as Marcel Roelke and Jan Wind define it, following Wilson, in their introduction to the first book, is "the study of the biological basis of social behavior, with special emphasis on the evolutionary points of view."<sup>[9]</sup> Both books contain numerous variations and elaborations on the same theme, from studies of the functions of rock art as enhancing hunting success, encoding social structures and sacred beliefs, marking territorial boundaries and so forth, to the aesthetic preferences of finches, bowerbirds, and humans.

According to one contributor, philosopher Ellen Dissanayake, one can broadly identify three main approaches within sociobiology to providing an account of the role of art in human evolution. In her article, "Sociobiology and the Arts: Problems and Prospects," she helpfully summarizes these as

follows:

"The first approach follows Darwin and focuses on aesthetic attraction and preferences. It operates on the assumption that throughout evolutionary history, humans tend to be more attracted to those kinds of features in members of the opposite sex which, in their view, signal vitality and fertility than those which do not. Conversely, people will go at great lengths to beautify themselves in order to attract suitable partners thus guaranteeing themselves the necessary offspring for the survival of the species. Likewise, people tend to be more attracted to landscapes sceneries which combine land with lakes, rivers or coastlines than those without. These, arguably are also beneficial for their biological health and well-being and thus for the survival of the species as a whole.

"The second approach, also referred to as 'biopoetics,' differs from the first in that it tends to focus on the use of particular themes in art. It points out that most art works 'reflect and articulate the vital motives and interests of human beings as living organisms,' such as birth and death, rites of passage, marriage and so forth. Defenders of biopoetics suggest that this heightened attention for significant moments in human lives guarantees the species' ongoing concern with matters of life and procreation.

"The third approach, finally, focuses on the process of the production of art and considers the cognitive and physical educational benefits of artistic creativity. In the same way as, for instance, the playful behavior of young animals can be considered as learning ground for later hunting and fighting, the skills learned in doing art, including manual dexterity and cognitive ordering and problem solving, might serve other, more 'serious' survival behavior in adult life. Interestingly, we may add, this argument is also often enlisted in educational discussions on the value of music in the school curriculum: rather than demonstrating its intrinsic worth, the inclusion of music in the curriculum is often defended on the grounds that it improves children's mathematical skills."[\[10\]](#)

Although Dissanyake does not deny the value of these various approaches, she does point out that on the above accounts, there is no *single* rationale for seeing art as adaptive. In other words, it is not possible to identify one particular feature shared among all the arts that could be considered as serving adaptive behavior. Conversely, according to her, most of the above selective benefits could also be achieved by means other than art. For example, people could do sports or build things in order to improve their manual dexterity or cognitive ability, or to impress others for competitive selection.

As she argues extensively in her books, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Come From and Why* and *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*, there is nevertheless one feature in art that *does* stand out and cannot be substituted by anything else: this is the fact that all art involves the 'making [something] special,' or rather the 'marking of something as special.' According to Dissanayake, this feature is specific to humans. Unlike other animals, humans deliberately "artify, by shaping, embellishing and otherwise fashioning aspects of their world with the intention of making them more than ordinary."[\[11\]](#) Every act of art, whether dance, poetry, or song, can thus be

viewed as ordinary behavior made special or *extraordinary*. By devoting special attention to important objects and life events (whether tools, weapons, birth, marriage, death, and so on), they are thus being treated with care and consideration, and, because of that, they help ensure that they will be successfully achieved. Art thus functions as a kind of message-enforcement: Make sure you treat these objects, events, and beliefs with care and consideration, because if you don't, it will only be to your lasting detriment and eventual demise!

Although some of these activities may contribute to *individual* competitive advantage, Dissanayake is convinced that the arts have even more to contribute in promoting important concerns of the group, and that this, in turn, enhances the survival of the species. One such concern, for instance, is the social cohesion of communities. In Dissanayake's view, ceremonies which involve dancing and singing, for instance, tend to inculcate group values and also promote cooperation, cohesiveness, and confidence. This, in turn, will also enhance a group's chances of survival. By their ability to promote cooperation and solidarity, the arts can contribute to a general sense of belonging and to the important task of community building. It is these kinds of benefits for humans' individual and social well being which, *in their particular and unique way*, only the arts can bring about.

Therefore an integral dimension in this process of making special is the benefit it brings to physical and bodily well-being. Whether directly, as in the form of a better coordination of the body through the rhythmic movements of dance, or indirectly, in the form of a better sense of identity and belonging through reading stories, both physical and psychosomatic well-being enhance the chances of survival, both for the individual and the group. Put differently, the arts, whether individual or collectively, promote better well-being all around.

### **3. Susanne K. Langer and Symbolization**

Some of these views had also been expressed earlier by the American philosopher Susanne K. Langer (1895-1985). Although mainly known for her *Philosophy in a New Key* and *Feeling and Form*, Langer's later work, in particular her three-volume *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967, 1971, 1982), contains an extensive and substantial theory of art approached from an evolutionary biological perspective. Art, for Langer, plays an important role in the emergence of human feeling and consciousness. It is a thoroughly bodily affair, which is fundamentally rooted in sense perception. Aesthetic awareness is linked to the body's sensory apparatus as it has evolved from animal sense-stimuli-instinct to human sense-perception.

For Langer, the shift from an instinctive reaction to a perceptual response parallels the shift from the occurrence of a sign or symptom to the presentation of a *symbol*.<sup>[12]</sup> On her definition, signs, whether natural or artificial, are part of a causal network, in which one image, event, or gesture evokes another, whether by means of association or convention. Whereas natural signs, such as scars signifying a past wound, smoke signifying a burning fire, or clouds signaling coming rain, are symptoms of past, present, or future things or conditions, artificial signs, such as bells, arrow markings, and



whistles, are humanly constructed signals which indicate commands, warnings, or things about to happen. Both tend to elicit a conditioned reflex and are generally meant to be acted upon.

Symbols, by contrast, do not require a response or action. Instead, they present *conceptions* of things. Unlike signs or signals, symbols are an end in themselves. As she says, "it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly mean."<sup>[13]</sup> Names, words, and images are vehicles for the conception of things in the world and are part of a symbolic and semantic world that is not primarily instrumental but conceptual.<sup>[14]</sup> Commenting on the pleasure young children experience when learning their first words, she says: "Young children learn to speak . . . by constantly using words to bring things into their *minds* not *into their hands*."<sup>[15]</sup>

Although this understanding of symbol as a vehicle for mental conceptions at first seems to defy a biological understanding of them, this is not really the case. Especially in her later work, *Mind*, Langer was at pains to explain symbols as a product of the evolution of the mind as it is rooted in bodily sense experience. But even in *Philosophy in a New Key*, she had already stated that even the relatively and seemingly passive *appreciation* of meaning is a form of symbolic activity: "The earliest manifestation of any symbol making tendency . . . is . . . a mere *sense of significance* attached to certain objects . . ."<sup>[16]</sup> This can be conceived as the consolidation of an initial association of a particular visual or audible phenomenon with something of significance, either internally, such as a sensation or feeling, or externally, such as a person or a kind of food, so that future encounters with that phenomenon recall the latter. In time, this consolidation leads to a fusion of sensuous phenomena with their association, whether a verbal name with its object or a visual expression or gesture with its meaning.

In general, Langer did not consider words or names but *images* as the most prone to becoming symbols or vehicles for conceptions. She explained that in a brain where the imagination was just beginning to take on the function of symbolization, there would be a very lively production of images that would mingle with each other in a variety of different ways, so that different images that share some features fuse into one single image, with an emphasis on those features, these being stressed while others are being suppressed. This process allows images to modify each other and become more simplified. It is precisely this simplification that forms the basis for the natural process of abstraction. Indeed, the power of abstract symbolic thinking is ultimately rooted in the visual image. It is the eventual capacity to remember and voluntarily recall such mental representations which, in conjunction with remembered vocal sounds, contributed to the origin of speech and language.

In *Mind*, Langer attributed this link between symbol and symbolized not only to incidental associations between name and object, but to the way in which a person projects certain bodily sensations onto an object. Drawing on various anthropological studies by scholars such as Freud, Margaret Mead, Mircea Eliade, and Levi-Strauss, and recalling empathy



theories such as those developed by Wilhelm Wundt, Theodor Lipps, and Robert Vischer, she explored the ability of humans to project [their] bodily feelings onto physical objects, whether real or imaginary. From this, she developed the theory that "projection" is a typically human form of "objectification" of bodily, sensuous awareness onto external objects, and that this, in turn, is a prototype of "symbolization":

"The mental act of "projecting" . . . lets the subjective element . . . be perceived as an external datum, i.e., as a quality belonging to an independently existing object; and that object, which thus presents our own sensory feeling to us, is a primitive symbol . . . Bodily feelings may be the first thing man projected and thus, all unwittingly, projected to everything he objectified as material bodies in his world."[\[17\]](#)

Although Langer does not specifically address art in this chapter, there are, of course, significant implications to be drawn for aesthetic theories dealing with expression and empathy: humans project bodily feelings upon the forms they meet in the world, which then, in turn, take on the "objective image" of such feelings. This, in short, is precisely what endows them with "meaning."

The objectification of the subjective sense of balance -- and, perhaps, of physical tensions generally -- has a natural counterpart, the subjectification of the protosymbolic object as an image. . . . On the same principle all other kinesthetic, thermal, tactual, in short, corporeal feelings are "seen" in the shapes that meet our eyes, and give such shapes the meaning of spatial entities . . . [\[18\]](#)

In other words, certain objects contain a "sense of significance" merely by virtue of their visual appearance. The same is true, however, for certain sounds. And this, in turn, forms the basis for speech. As she explained, "[a]esthetic attraction, mysterious fear, are probably the first manifestations of that mental function which in man becomes a peculiar 'tendency to see reality symbolically' and which issues in the *power of conception*, and the life-long habit of speech."[\[19\]](#) Langer held that mere sounds, and in particular vocal sounds, can hold *a sense of significance* for humans, which leads to particular affective responses.[\[20\]](#)

Finally, the same idea can also be applied to the sense of touch. As she points out, the value of the gradual freeing of the hands from its motor duties does not, as one might expect, lie in their increased manipulative powers, but in their gradual specialization as a sense organ. Providing us with an evocative description of this new role of the hands she writes:

"the sensory reactions of the skin and underlying structures are engaged together in the tactile perception of substances: feelings of pressure and release of pressure, of warm and cold impingements, pin-pointed encounters with resistance, oiliness, wetness, and mixtures like sliminess, hairiness, stickiness. The result is that we have not only a report of surfaces and edges, but of volume imbued with multimodal, often nameless qualities."[\[21\]](#)

In other words, in humans, the tactile sensations of, or 'reactions,' to these various substances develop into a typically

human form of sense-perception, which allows those sensations to stand for more than purely physical encounters framed in the context of meeting primary needs, such as food, shelter, or procreation. Rather, it is these reports of 'often nameless qualities' that make the tactile sensitivity of the hands the basis for a range of experiences which are typically referred to as aesthetic:

"like all . . . aesthetic perceptions they meet and merge with emotional elements which are not current sexual, maternal or hostile feelings toward other beings, but modes of consciousness, felt attitudes, which motivate the earliest artistic expressions, dance and vocalization."[\[22\]](#)

Different sensations of touch create a variety of different experiences that correspond with subtle nuances of experiences outside the realm of touch.

The same dynamic also forms the basis for the use of metaphor, whether in language or in visual imagery. Symbols, whether words, pictures or gestures, used for tactile sensations of physical objects can thus be transferred to non-physical entities, such as character or mood. In other words, the physical experience, for instance, of warmth or brittleness can evoke an emotional mood so that the name we use for the physical experience can be transferred to other realms of reality, such as persons or moods.[\[23\]](#) It is merely a way of ordering life so that it can be held and understood. In the process of symbolization physical, mental, and emotional aspects of consciousness come together: "Language is born of the need for emotional expression," says Langer, and it is meant to "hold the object of feeling," rather than communicate it.[\[24\]](#)

Through habitual communal appropriation of particular sounds, the original affective associations fade into the background while the sounds themselves fuse with their newly acquired representational meaning. This eventually leads to the functional and instrumental uses of language that have been the focus of most communication theories of language. Since most of our day-to-day language is instrumental, it is only its poetic use which can prevent people from forgetting the originally integral connection between name and object. Langer warned us against such forgetting: "Speech becomes increasingly discursive, practical, prosaic, until human beings can actually believe that it was invented as a utility, and was later embellished with metaphors for the sake of a cultural product called poetry."[\[25\]](#) The challenge that art and poetry faces is to remind people of the original and authentic connection between the representation and what is being represented, and to keep alive the awareness that our representations are ultimately symbolic transformations of human perceptions and experiences.

#### **4. Phenomenological Theories of Art: Merleau-Ponty**

This coming together of the physical, mental, and affective, or the body and consciousness, links Langer's philosophy of art with the phenomenological aesthetics of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). Influenced by Heidegger's notions of 'being-in-the-world' and 'facticity' in *Being and Time* (1926), Merleau-Ponty developed a fresh

understanding of the 'body-subject's' primordial contact with the world, rooted in a distinctive notion of 'perception.' As he explained in his seminal *Phenomenology of Perception* of 1945, perception is not a question of deliberately taking up a position or engaging in a particular act, but a holistic and integrated pre-reflective experience. It is "the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them."<sup>[26]</sup> We never merely perceive isolated sense-impressions, which are then formed into mental representations or ideas. We can't even perceive such atomic, isolated sensations because we can only see things as "figures" against a "ground" and in relation to other "figures." This ground is part of our embodied experience, prior to any mental representation. It is the horizon which consists of our previous experiences and future expectations.

This can be illustrated with the numerous Gestalt theory visual experiments, where we experience certain properties of shapes or colors differently from the way they are when being measured "objectively." Drawing on his psychiatric practice, Merleau-Ponty tried to illustrate this with the phenomenon of a phantom limb. According to Merleau-Ponty, neither purely physiological nor purely psychological accounts can ever explain such a phenomenon. This is because they do not allow for the presence of things other than in terms of representation. They have, as he says, "no middle term between presence and absence." In the case of a phantom leg, however, there is no representation of the leg, but the ambivalent presence of it in our body schema. It both *is* and *isn't*. In other words, the body is fully present with us before we have a representation of it.

Merleau-Ponty's point is to show that these perceptual "mistakes" are not perceptual anomalies, but disclosures of the way perception and consciousness normally work. Perception is never a static affair, but an active, bodily involvement with the world we live in. Intentionality, too, is not something confined to consciousness, but goes "all the way down." Reaching out my hand to pick something up does not consist of two actions, first my thinking about the action and then my arm responding to perform the action; it is one integrated bodily performance. "Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body."<sup>[27]</sup> The body-subject stands in an ongoing living dialogue and reciprocal relation with her existential environment of which the symbols of science are merely "a second-order expression."

For Merleau-Ponty, abstract science stands to the lived world as geography stands to our rich, first-hand experience of the fields and forests.

"My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colors, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams."<sup>[28]</sup>

Consciousness does not need to imply language. Merleau-Ponty held that "my body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my 'symbolic' or 'objectifying function.'"<sup>[29]</sup> Driving a car, playing an instrument, and so forth all testify to the body's capacity to

find its way in the world, to judge distances, speed, touch, pressure, positions, etc., without resorting to lingual or other symbolic representation. Even speech should not be seen as a separate act. It does not *translate* ready-made thought, but *accomplishes* it. The speaker's speech *is* thought.

For Merleau-Ponty, this unity of the mental and the physical in perception is exemplified in a work of art. Just as expressions and gestures of the body are indistinguishable from what they are perceived as expressing, so works of art or music cannot be separated from what they express. In a picture, "the idea is incommunicable by means other than the display of colors" and in a piece of music "[t]he musical meaning of a sonata is inseparable from the sounds which are its vehicle."<sup>[30]</sup> There is no "idea" behind the work of art. The painter thinks with his brush and paints. A paint brush or musical instrument functions like a walking stick for a blind person, that is, as a "bodily auxiliary, an extension of the bodily synthesis."<sup>[31]</sup> Both language and painting are rooted in the primordial, expressive gestures of the human body. I do not have a body, "I am my body."

The artist lends his body to the world in an expressive gesture in order to recapture that rich ambiguity that is present in pre-reflective experience and allows us to see the world afresh. For Merleau-Ponty any theory of the body is, as such, therefore always "already a theory of perception."<sup>[32]</sup> The philosophical challenge is to give a proper account of this bodily perception. For instance, when discussing the perception and affective meaning of colors he notes: "We must rediscover how to live these colors as our body does, that is, as peace or violence in concrete form."<sup>[33]</sup> As mentioned earlier, such perception is never a matter of discrete sensations but is always tied to the character of the bearer of the color. A color is never merely a color but always a color *of something*: "It is impossible to completely describe the color of the carpet without saying that it is a carpet, made of wool, and without implying in this color a certain tactile value, a certain weight and a certain resistance to sound."<sup>[34]</sup>

In other words, even if the red of the carpet "objectively" reflects the same color as that of blood, we would nevertheless experience the two kinds of red very differently, both in terms of texture and, of course, in terms of association. Conversely, we experience an object such as a fountain pen as having the same color (black) even if the reflection of the light gives certain parts a whitish radiance. The real, what Merleau-Ponty interestingly calls the "moral" color, remains constant despite these changes. Such a unity of style has a synaesthetic value: "The brittleness, hardness, transparency and crystal ring of glass all translate in a single manner of being."<sup>[35]</sup> Quoting Cézanne, he observes: "A picture contains within itself even the smell of the landscape."<sup>[36]</sup> What all these observations from *Phenomenology of Perception* make clear is that, for Merleau-Ponty, there was a strong analogy between phenomenology and art. This analogy centers around the embodied nature of the perceiving subject. There is no split between thinking and expressing or (re)presenting, or, in the case of the artist, of thinking before painting. Painting *is* thinking. Both perception and artistic expression are thoroughly bodily affairs.

This same theme returns in a variety of forms in his three essays on painting, "Cézanne's Doubt" (1945), "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (1952), and "Eye and Mind" (1960). Merleau-Ponty recognized in Cézanne a similar fascination with the realm where the self and the world fuse in an embodied encounter. When he quotes Cézanne as saying: "The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness," this reflected his own emphasis on the unity of the subject and the object. This is evident in his still-lives: Since we normally perceive the world by moving around instead of from one fixed point and by means of monocular eye, as does a camera, Cézanne's objects are to be seen from angles not normally perceived together. However, these paintings render visible how we actually do experience things in our lived encounter with them, something which is often taken for granted.

In *Eye and Mind*, his last work before his death, he explained how such paintings can help us relive that holistic, dynamic way of perceiving the world: Unlike science, which has given up living in things, painting, as much as phenomenology, "draws on the fabric of brute meaning."<sup>[37]</sup> In the same work, he observes: "From Lascaux to our time, pure or impure, figurative or not, painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility."<sup>[38]</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, both phenomenology and art thus aim to offer an account of space, time, and the world as we *live* them. For him, both make vision *itself* visible.<sup>[39]</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

As we have seen, both biologically based and phenomenologically oriented theories have made substantial and insightful contributions to our understanding of the role of the body in the making and receiving of art. Darwinian and socio-biological approaches to art are valuable corrections to those theories that aim to explain art exclusively in terms of their particular cultural-historical context. They are a salutary reminder of the fact that, despite their immense historically and culturally mediated diversity, art making and appreciation, and the appreciation of beauty in general, have been and continue to be an integral feature of almost every society and can be considered a fundamental, if not universal dimension of human existence. There are what Paul Crowther calls a set of "flexible constants" in the long history of the making of art that have their roots in a shared human nature, including its biological dimension.

Turner and Cooke go so far as to argue that, like science, the arts constitute an international language that can unite diverse cultures because they deal with universal human values, such as identity, justice, duty, social order, conflict, and peace.<sup>[40]</sup> They also argue that, since artistic composition is an alternative form of cognition, our aesthetic sensibility is closely intertwined with our cognitive and moral capacities, if only, they say, "because it is a useful guide to reproductive success of the group."<sup>[41]</sup> Therefore, they see a close link between truth, beauty, morality, *and* biological viability, a link not normally encountered in traditional modernist aesthetics. In that sense, aesthetics is still thoroughly dominated by a Baumgartian and Kantian mindset, in which the so-called higher senses of sight and hearing are traditionally considered

to belong to the mind rather than to the body.

In his book *The Naked Artist: Art and Biology*, the late British Marxist art critic Peter Fuller described how, in the early eighties he, together with a range of other Marxists, such as Sebastiano Timparo and Raymond Williams, had come to realize that where it concerned fundamental rhythms, shapes, and colors, there can be "no reduction to simple [sic] social and historical circumstances" and that "the material processes of the making of art involve biological processes which can be, and often are, the most powerful elements of the work."[\[42\]](#)

Fuller fully accepted Darwin's view that both animals and humans have an innate and instinctive sense of the beautiful, and that in animals this plays a significant role in courtship. However, unlike Darwin and more like Langer, he stressed that, although one can detect certain rudimentary versions or proto-forms of this in animals, in humans these aesthetic responses have undergone a particular process of symbolic transformation. This transition reflects a difference between a purely functional and an expressive role of the shapes, forms, etc., as they are being responded to. In the evolution of species, certain movement and patterns, for instance, lose their specific practical function and can turn into expressive, ritual, or ceremonial activities merely *suggesting* their original functions.

Some workers' blues songs, for instance, might involve stylized versions of rhythms and movements originally belonging to the repetitive work on the fields. Even though these rhythms have lost their original functional connection with the task at hand, they nevertheless still resonate with and suggest or "represent" the mood in which such practices took place. Such suggestion and representation (depiction, articulation, etc.) always involves a symbolic world. Put differently, as symbolic phenomena, representations and depictions always possess an "aboutness" character in which some form of meaning is being articulated. This difference between symbolic and non-symbolic entities also underlies the difference between the scribbles of Morris' chimpanzees and those of a child. Whereas at some stage a child can make the surprise recognition that the circles, dots, and lines he or she has been drawing can suddenly be perceived as a face, an ape is unlikely ever to make such a leap.

This emphasis on the symbolic is, as we have seen, also typical for Langer. In line with many psychoanalytic theories, Langer not only recognized what Wollheim famously referred to as humans' "seeing-in" capacity, but also realized that we can project our own bodily feelings, whether fears, repulsions, hopes, or desires, onto objects and shapes. Especially touch and taste are telling in this respect, as humans seem to have strong emotional reactions to certain kinds of textures - slimy, sharp, etc., or tastes - sweet, sour, etc. Thus there is a much closer affinity between our inner mental and outer sensible worlds than traditional subject-object epistemologies generally tend to allow. This, in turn, connects to Merleau-Ponty's views of the body-subject. As he has shown us, human embodiment is more than just biological functioning and surviving but involves a complex web of culturally mediated embodied encounters with the world, in the context of a perceptual field

and horizon that lends it its meaning. And this, finally, brings us back to the role and nature of the arts.

Although Merleau-Ponty held that the body understands the world *without* symbolically "objectifying" it, his notion of art as an expression of the silent qualities of the *Lebenswelt* came very close to Langer's notion of art as a non-discursive *symbol* of such bodily understanding. Art, whether in Lascaux or the Louvre, can capture this affective primordial contact with the world that tends to get lost, both in the usual hum-drum character of our day-to-day affairs, as well as in scientific abstraction. However, in the aesthetic experience, humans respond to forms, shapes, and colors in such a way that they begin to take on a life of their own and open themselves up to metaphoric meaning. For Merleau-Ponty, a style is a way of inhabiting the world. Such a mode of being is the habituated response to the nuances and secondary qualities offered by the allusive logic of the world itself. Although Merleau-Ponty did not use the term "aesthetic" in this context -- he did so only twice in the entire *Phenomenology of Perception* -- his notion of style seemed to come close to what one might call the "aesthetic dimension" of life, i.e., the realm of what Langer referred to as the "multimodal, yet nameless qualities" and nuances. A painting can express such silent qualities only indirectly and allusively.

Notwithstanding my great admiration and indebtedness to Merleau-Ponty, I would nevertheless like to conclude with a word of caution. As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty there was a close analogy between phenomenology and painting. For him, the phenomenological attitude as adopted by philosophers involved "the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world" as can be found in writers and painters such as Balzac, Proust, Valéry and Cézanne.[\[43\]](#) Elsewhere he states: "Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being."[\[44\]](#)

By thus emphasizing the deep similarity between phenomenology and art, he tended to absorb artistic vision into the broader realm of pre-reflective, bodily sense-experience. However, and this is where my caution comes in, not all embodied, lived experience is necessarily aesthetically qualified: We can also have pre-theoretical experiences of justice (fair and unfair), ethics (right or wrong), space (near or far), and so on. To suggest that everything that escapes discursive language or scientific formulation and articulation therefore belongs to the artistic or aesthetic realm and vice versa, merely perpetuates an unhealthy view of art versus science and, by implication, a feeling or emotion versus thinking dichotomy. In order to do proper justice to the artistic and aesthetic, we will need a more nuanced and fine-grained approach which, while building upon Merleau-Ponty's insights on the role of the body in our encounter with the world, will also be able to differentiate between different modes of such encounters. Such a model will, while building on the insights of the above thinkers, still have to address the ongoing question of what, if anything, constitutes the unique and arguably irreducible nature of the artistic or the aesthetic.



I have already hinted at some answer to this question by drawing attention to Langer's emphasis on the way forms, sounds, or textures can lend themselves to metaphoric meaning. This is something neglected both in Darwinian inclined socio-biological theories and in Merleau-Ponty. Making vision itself visible is *not necessarily* an aesthetic project, although it may very well be that too. We need to specify what aspect of vision is thus made visible. I suggest that this needs a further specification, one that has to do with such things as affect, nuance, suggestion, and empathy. I propose that it is the unique role of art to be able to articulate or symbolize the world to the extent that it is affectively experienced. Put differently, art responds to the shapes, forms, and rhythms in the world to the extent that they can carry expressive meaning that resonates with the way we affectively experience the world .

In conclusion, Merleau-Ponty may well be right in saying that art parallels phenomenology in being a means to "re-achieve a direct and primitive contact with the world."<sup>[45]</sup> But that does not mean that, *as* philosophy and *as* art, they are the same as *having* such contact. Although using a paintbrush may well feel the same as using a car clutch or a walking stick, in that they are all experienced as extensions of our body, using a paintbrush does not necessarily constitute being involved in the process of producing art. Indeed, we may well be varnishing our doors or fences. Driving a car and varnishing a door are not *as such* symbolic actions; they are not meant to articulate meaning or invite other people's interpretation (leaving aside what my neighbor might think!). They are just certain actions leading to specific ends. By contrast, art and philosophy are symbolic practices; they have an 'aboutness' character that driving a car lacks. Whether implicit or explicit, unlike painting houses or bridges, symbolic practices always invite to a hermeneutic response. In addition, painting pictures and creating sculptures are specifically *aesthetic* modes of symbolic transformation; they are articulations of the world as affectively experienced and lend themselves to metaphoric interpretation and understanding.

In summary, both biological and phenomenological theories can make a significant contribution to a better understanding of the embodied nature of art on the following two conditions: First, even if art contributes not only to general human well-being but also to sexual and natural selection and thus to the biological continuation of the species, its role and importance in life should never be reduced to meeting biological needs. Second, even though the making of and responding to art can involve habitually embodied actions and reactions, nevertheless these should always be recognized as symbolic practices and therefore as open to human interpretation and metaphoric understanding within the context of a broader horizon that lends them their meaning. With those two provisos, I suggest that both biological and phenomenological philosophies of art can continue to open up promising new avenues for a deeper understanding of the embodied nature of art.

#### Endnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> Alexander Baumgarten, "Kollegium Über die Ästhetik,"

*Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*," ed. by Hans Rudolf Schweizer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983), pp. 79.

[2] Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 42, 43.

[3] Richard Schusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 263-267.

[4] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987,) pp. 51, 52.

[5] Noël Carroll, "Art and Human Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62.2 (Spring 2004), p. 96.

[6] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1885), second edition (London: John Murray). Quoted in Ellen Dissanayke, "Sociobiology and the Arts: Problems and Prospects," in Bedaux, Jan Baptist, and Cooke, Brett, *Sociobiology and the Arts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p. 27.

[7] Wolfgang Welsch, "Animal Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics* Vol. 2 (2004), III.6.

[8] Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, abridged edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 289.

[9] Jan Baptist Bedaux and Brett Cooke, eds., *Sociobiology and the Arts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999); Brett Cooke and Frederick Turner, *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Art*. (Lexington, Kentucky: ICUS, 1999). For the definition of 'sociobiology,' see Marcel Roele and Jan Wind, "Sociobiology and the Arts: An Introduction" in *Sociobiology and the Arts*, p. 9.

[10] Ellen Dissanayke, "Sociobiology and the Arts: Problems and Prospects," in Bedaux, Jan Baptist, and Cooke, Brett, *Sociobiology and the Arts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 28-32.

[11] Idem, pp. 35, 36. Dissanayake's use of the word 'art' clearly transcends the conventional notion of 'fine art' as it emerged in the modern era. As she comments, "It seems faintly ridiculous to look for an evolutionary origin and function for something that being made and revered by the few is rare, elite, and by its own stipulation removed from practical utility." p. 29.

[12] In this distinction, Langer has been influenced by the German neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer. See Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Vol. I: Language (1950); Vol. II: Mythical Thought (1955); (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); Vol. III: The Phenomenology of Knowledge (1957) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), and Vol. IV: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms, John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

In her emphasis on symbol, she differs from Dissanayake. Dissanayake herself comments on this difference with Langer

as follows: "Langer's 'forms of vital experience' (1953) and her other writings (1942, 1967) could be integrated smoothly into a biologically based view of aesthetic experience. Despite her expressed wish to elucidate biological bases for the arts, however, Langer does not consider art as selectively valuable behavior in human evolution. Also, her interest in demonstrating that art is a product of a distinctly human symbolizing 'mind' is quite unlike my claim that art need not depend upon the presentation or transformation of symbols." *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), p. 242.

[13] Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). p. 61.

[14] It should be noted that Cassirer and Langer do not restrict the term semantics to the study of linguistic meaning but also apply it to images, sounds, gestures and anything else which lends itself to hermeneutical interpretation.

[15] *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 121.

[16] *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 110. Langer's emphasis on 'significance' recalls the Greek roots the word 'semantic' as the adjective 'semantikos,' meaning 'significant.'

[17] Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 48.

[18] *Idem*, p. 49.

[19] *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 110. In contrast to her position in *Mind*, Langer claimed in this earlier work that some apes also respond to "certain [visual] objects and gestures [which] appear to have this phenomenological, dissociated character." However, for unspecified reasons, Langer does not believe that they can also respond in that way to sounds. See *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 117.

[20] This "sense of significance" or "associated meaning" belonging to the pure sounds of words is, of course, long recognized by poets. It is also exploited and reflected upon by, for instance, Mallarmé and later by Derrida and Kristeva. Although meaning roughly the same as Langer's 'symbolic realm' for Kristeva these meanings belong to the "semiotic" realm.

[21] Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Vol. II, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), p. 258.

[22] Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Vol. II, p. 259.

[23] For a later approach of the same idea, see, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

[24] "On Cassirer's Theory of Language and Myth," *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston IL: The Library of Living Philosophers, Inc., 1949), pp. 385, 386. Although Langer wrote this about Cassirer's view of

language, it also reflects her own.

[25] *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 142.

[26] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith. (London: Routledge, 1962), p. xi.

[27] *Idem*, pp. 138, 139.

[28] *Idem*, p. x.

[29] *Idem*, pp. i 140, 141.

[30] *Idem*, pp. 150, 182.

[31] *Idem*, p. 152.

[32] *Idem*, p. 1203.

[33] *Idem*, p. 1211. For a comparison with Langer, see his essay "Eye and Mind" in Galen A. Johnson ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 125, where he writes: 'Since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow come about in them; or yet again, their manifest visibility must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility. . . . Quality, light, color, depth, which are therefore before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them. Things have an internal equivalent in me.' pp. 125, 126.

[34] *Idem*, p. 323.

[35] *Idem*, p. 319.

[36] *Idem*, p. 318.

[37] "Eye and Mind" in Galen A. Johnson ed. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, p.123.

[38] *Idem*, p. 127.

[39] For a more extensive version of this account of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics, see Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, "Phenomenology: Merleau-Ponty and Sartre," in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 159-171. See also Paul Crowther, "Merleau-Ponty: Vision and Painting," Chapter 6 in *Art and Embodiment: from Aesthetics to Self-consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 102-118.

[40] Frederick Turner and Brett Cooke, "Committee 3: Human Universals and the Biological Foundations of Art." Website [www.icus.org](http://www.icus.org).

[41] *Idem*.

[42] Peter Fuller, *The Naked Artists: Art and Biology* (London: Writers and Readers, 1983), p. 4 .

[43] Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xxi.

[44] *Idem*, p. xx.

[45] *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. vii.

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