

Towards Vitality Semiotics and a New Understanding of the *Conditio Humana* in Susanne K. Langer

MARTINA SAUER

INTRODUCTION

In hindsight, it is primarily Susanne K. Langer's theory of *act*, and only secondarily her theory of art, that is central to the conception of Vitality Semiotics. It focuses on affective, semiotically relevant forms that constitute our world experience, human social interaction, and ultimately art experience. Thus, this somewhat unusual distinction between these two aspects of Langer's work is not only important for art and our understanding of the world, but can also be seen as fundamental to social interaction and, furthermore, to the universal formation of culture(s).¹ Underlying this broad perspective is the question (already shaped by early semiotic approaches such as those of Ernst Cassirer and Alfred N. Whitehead) of how we, as humans, come to make sense of our experiences with the world and to adjust our drive and determination accordingly. Everything we become attentive to only becomes significant through a process of symbolization that develops "images" (German, *Vorstellungsbilder*),² whose "forces"³ determine the immediate future. According to this tradition, we can identify two levels of orientation regarding how our experiences take on meaning: 1) the process of meaning-making is general, distanced and objective (epistemological term); 2) meaning-making caters to decisions and actions (action-relevant term). But how do both relate, and what is their common ground? Both must be embodied, as Langer suggests with her theory of act. Strictly speaking, this precedes cognition and action altogether.

In her later writings in *Mind*, vol. 1 (1967) and vol. 2 (1972), Langer hints at this but does not elaborate on its significance for social life, and beyond that, for cultural development.⁴ A closer look, however, reveals that these two dimensions are already inherent in Langer's *act* model. She argues that with respect to acts, understood as central units of experience, when the question of motivation—central to any theory regarding action—is raised, it is an "*effect of decision*."⁵ In this way, the "active" part of acts relative to experience becomes obvious. From this she concludes that acts themselves become the actors.⁶ Their "*decisions*" influence others: they result in processes of involvement and

individuation—in Langer’s words, “That structure is the agent’s body.”⁷ The act model developed by Langer is not only a vital process of concrete sense-making (epistemological term), but leads to conscious decisions and volitional actions which form the basis for social structures (communicative term).⁸ An expanded view beyond epistemology to a theory of communicative (and thus socially and culturally relevant) action is fundamental to Vitality Semiotics. On this basis, it can be presented as a new understanding of the *conditio humana*.

Essentially, taking this step entails the assumption that experience and therefore *all* act-relevant processes are based on this common foundation, namely the effect of decision, and must also concern the perception of artistic artifacts. Langer, however, did not draw this conclusion from her approach. Yet this insight is essential to Vitality Semiotics, for if it is followed through, the dominant understanding of art perception as being irrelevant for decisions and actions—valid for Langer, and commonly held to this day—has to be revised.

Subsequently, the question arises as to whether the assumptions upon which aesthetic theory is based are correct at all. This needs to be considered carefully, especially since according to Langer there is no difference between the experience of the world and the experience of art. She states that art “presents a form which is subtly but entirely congruent with forms of mentality and vital experience.” These are all based on an intricate network of dynamic acts. In the particular case of art, they are triggered by artistic means.⁹ Why does Langer nevertheless tie in with aesthetic theory?

A closer look shows that Langer speaks of the fact that in art, in contrast to design, there is no pursuit of an objective.¹⁰ This assumption of Langer, however, can only be defended if artists—in contrast to designers—are committed to this noble goal. No other explanation can be claimed upon considering her theory of experience based on analogies. This leads one to question, however, what the artistic means of artists (which correspond to those of designers) are used for, if not to fulfill an objective? The distinction drawn by Langer between art and design is rooted in her idealistic assumption that artists do not pursue personal, group, or third-party intentions in creating. Rather, they take their inspiration from the vividly felt forms or “living forms” of nature (“internal forms”) and implement these by artistic means (“external forms”). In this way, artists convey an *impartial image of feeling* or of “the movement of emotive and perceptive processes” of nature.¹¹ For Langer (and for Ernst Cassirer, as we will soon see), this implies that an artist is able to transform the perceptual values felt in natural forms into an artwork. He or she objectifies with the work what has been experienced. He or she thus *re-expresses* it with artistic means. The motif thus undergoes a process of subjectification, the expression of which can be perceived by the viewer. Hence, Langer concludes: “Art is the objectification of feeling, and the subjectification of nature.”¹²

Langer’s understanding of art as neutral is precisely the weakness of her reasoning, especially since Western artistic works up to modern art at the turn of the twentieth century were usually commissioned works. From this point on, it depends more or less on the artist which motif is chosen and why. The consequent expression essentially depends on which motifs are taken up and what possible purpose they serve. This is all the more significant because motifs can all be subjectivized by artistic means and their expression can be felt by the viewer. After all, it is the motif as a “motive”—in the double sense of subject and intention—that is fundamental to both art and design.

If we are to accept this assumption, it is no longer possible to speak of the “innocence” of art. What art presents must be critically reexamined to see whether it is actually free

from self-interest and the interests of others. This is all the more important because art in particular seems to have an unnoticed influence on others. However, it is Langer's consistently functional understanding of experience and meaning-making processes (as seen in her act theory) that can be used as a solid basis to describe the underlying social (and therefore cultural) effective processes. Thus, it is also true that the expression triggered via the artistic means in interaction with the motif not only affects the body, but also conveys a specific image (in German, *Vorstellungsbild*) of the motif. This means that only if this image is recognized as more than one of feeling, but also as a statement about something, the beholder can concretely refer to it and respond. He or she can accept or reject the presented viewpoint. If this recognition does not exist, however, the image, because of its double mode of operation, can subliminally influence the beholder's opinion and thus also their future decisions and actions, which are always part of social and cultural development. If this approach, presented with the concept of Vitality Semiotics, is taken seriously, it implies that both the creator and recipient of art should take responsibility for their actions. It also means that the habitual attitude of beholders to turn to art only as a *bon vivant* is questionable, for they should be aware of art's effects.¹³

LANGER'S (IMAGE-)ACT THEORY: IMPLICATIONS FOR VITALITY SEMIOTICS

It is subsequent (and contemporary) semiotically oriented, cultural-anthropological empirical research that confirms Susanne K. Langer's *embodied act* model. Her conception can be seen as a basis for the immediate evaluation of and response to everything we encounter. This encompasses our encounters with the world in all its diversity, from animate to inanimate nature, and also the human-made. This is why art should also be included. However, only in the extension beyond epistemology to a theory relevant to communication can Langer's conception also form the basis for any social and cultural development. Only in this respect can her (image-)act theory function as a solid foundation for a new empirical-psychologically-based conception of the *conditio humana*.

However, the extension of perceptual functions in the sense of a *conditio humana*, as proposed here, turns out to be possible only if one takes into account that *feelings* or *vital affects and vital effects* play a central role in the evaluation of all that we experience. This reveals an understanding of perception and its experience close to Langer's thinking. Remarkably, this approach is already found in Whitehead and Cassirer, as well as in empirical research in developmental psychology and neuroscience that runs in parallel, and picks up in the 1970s. For Vitality Semiotics (originally building on research from Visual Culture) empirical psychology is crucial,¹⁴ as it studies vital affects and effects, significant factors for evaluation and determination processes, as well as selection and (re)cognition, and, essentially, emerging decisions and actions. Accordingly, the first thing that constitutes an evaluation or judgment is not, as one might suppose, based on a logical weighing of the pros and cons that ultimately speaks in favor of one action over another. The type of research discussed here refers unanimously to the non-discursive aspects that provide the initial impetus for an evaluation of experience. According to this approach, any engagement will already contain a primary reaction. The subsequent action or "decision" is an effect, not a judgment as such. This means *a world experienced and felt as alive, as vital affect, is followed by vital effective responses*.

Although Langer's focus lies primarily in the epistemologically relevant process of meaning-making itself, she has developed with her act theory a model that simultaneously

provides the basis for an extension as a communication theory. This is because it is characterized by concrete, dialectical, and logical reactions towards what we encounter. That which is to be understood as reaction in perception turns out to be the product of a dynamic process of “tensions and resolutions.”¹⁵ This process involves numerous acts, whose effects are based on “decisions.” In order to demonstrate this connection, Langer’s first priority is to prove it with empirical research.¹⁶ This is all the more necessary because in everyday life, as she puts it, signs and discursive symbols serve as foundations for *conscious* “intelligent” adaptation to the world:

A form that is both sign and symbol ties action and insight together for us; it plays a part in a momentary situation and also in the ‘science’ we constantly, if tacitly, assume ... Yet all our signs and symbols were gathered from sensuous and emotional experience and bear the marks of their origin—perhaps a remote historical origin.¹⁷

However, the relevance of Langer’s act theory for decisions and actions, and thus also for social and cultural processes, takes a back seat to her self-imposed task of uncovering the non-discursive foundations of experience as the ground for meaning-making. With this in mind, she focuses on showing that the living processes of superordination and subordination of single acts form the basis for the comparability of artistic and biological acts.¹⁸ For Langer, the starting point is the fact that even the simplest interaction (comparable to artistic acts) is characterized by rhythms and a dialectical exchange of energies, forms, and qualities, and—to that extent—by non-discursive aspects. Accordingly, it is this structure of the acts that can be considered form-giving. It is characterized by an initial starting phase (impulse or energy change/discharge, also “potential act” or “event”) followed by an increase in complexity, guided by “tensions and resolutions,” to a turning point and a concluding phase (cadence).¹⁹ Each interaction has its own rhythmic pattern. The process, structured in this way, can be described as a sequence of events leading to a “transposition of matter in space.”²⁰ In this respect, the act can be regarded as the central functional unit of living form, which is vital to plants and animals, as well as to humans.²¹ Furthermore, Langer holds that it plays a crucial role for perception in general, and to art in particular:

Dialectic rhythms ... play such a major role in vital functions that their importance in the activity and even the physical existence of organisms makes them an essential mark of living form in nature, as their virtual images is of “living form” in art.²²

LANGER’S PREDECESSORS: IMPACT ON VITALITY SEMIOTICS

Langer follows an understanding of cultural form that was already introduced in the 1920s, in the early semiologies of process philosopher and mathematician Alfred N. Whitehead and neo-Kantian philosopher and cultural anthropologist Ernst Cassirer.²³ Both held the view that cognition does not emerge from a distanced relationship with the world, but from a sensually endowed world perception that is determined by expressivity and vitality, rather than pure factuality.²⁴

In Whitehead’s terms, human perception is essentially composed of sense data or *qualities*, such as colors, sounds, taste sensations, tactile sensations, and bodily sensations, that have spatial, temporal, and pragmatic terms, and are accordingly pursued with “vivid apprehension.”²⁵ Langer shares the view of “retreating from” and “expanding to”

impulses that determine our perception,²⁶ and in this way find their emotional equivalent in—and secure power over—other impulses.²⁷ Again, it is the structure of the “acts of experience”²⁸ that can be seen as an “*effect of decision*” as Langer calls it, or as “*causal efficacy*” in Whitehead’s words. For both, this is characterized by affective-emotionality that becomes central for the symbolic interpretation and modification of the environment, and therefore also for cultural development.²⁹ In their view, however, the original emotional stimuli are only attuned to an aesthetically pleasing, harmonious whole by means of the arts,³⁰ and insofar have no relevance for action.

Langer was influenced not only by her doctoral supervisor Whitehead but also by Cassirer, who she met during his last exile years in the United States in 1941. Cassirer, too, assumed that the human ability to grasp the world symbolically must lie in a particular mode of perception that is not merely objective. It is based on a strong instinctive substrate,³¹ which he introduces as “expressive perception” (in German, *Ausdrucks-Wahrnehmung*).³² According to this assumption, Cassirer states that the human being is basically not oriented towards factually differentiable forms. Instead, he emphasizes, following the research of two psychologists, Ludwig Klages and his colleague from Hamburg, Heinz Werner, that human perception is primarily oriented towards forms of motion and spatial forms. In this respect, they are not perceived by us as static, but as living. That which is perceived through expressive perception therefore turns out not to be a factual but a living form. This corresponds to a mode of perception that is consequently non-discursive.³³ Cassirer’s proximity to Langer is unmistakable. These experiences of the perception (the forms of motion and spatial forms) of the world only become significant because they are characterized by a striving for action. Again, the so-called “effect of decision,” which, according to Langer and Whitehead characterizes the acts of experience, is also described in Cassirer’s philosophy. However, according to Cassirer, the first impressions of the expressive perception are replaced in a second step by symbol-forming acts that are shaped by will. It is redeemed by a mythical, descriptive, and cognizant symbolic formation.³⁴ It is essential that this happens in a gradual process of externalization that eventually breaks with the original expressive world.³⁵

Eventually, both Cassirer and Langer develop an awareness of this unconscious primordial experience that materializes in art. Langer emphasizes this in her book *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), which Cassirer seems to pick up in 1944.³⁶ Yet for him, as for Langer, art has no relevance to action, since only the expressive form itself is experienced and felt as its “image.” Cassirer proposes a transformation process to have taken place, from originally non-discursive forms into artistic forms whose vital effects are consciously felt. Cassirer illustrates these effects with an example by describing his feelings upon viewing a landscape painting. Instead of grasping “*living things*” he engages with “*living forms*,” which are consciously experienced. Cassirer notes:

No longer in the immediate reality of things, I live now in the rhythm of spatial forms, in the harmony and contrast of colors, in the balance of light and shadow. In such absorption in the dynamic aspect of forms consists the aesthetic experience.³⁷

It is expressive perception as such that comes to light through art. Not only does the doing as an expressive function become conscious and comprehensible, so too does the process of the formation of symbolic meaning. At the same time, considered as an anthropological condition, this shows that “in the work of the artist the power of passion itself has been made a formative power.”³⁸ Here, Cassirer again coincides with Langer.

Whatever is experienced as expressive form undergoes a specific intensification with art: Cassirer therefore claims that art is an “intensification of reality.” It is a process of concretization.³⁹ Although Cassirer is convinced that the artist does not arbitrarily invent the form of things, he is in accord with Langer in that there is no connection to purpose.⁴⁰ “Since the art symbol is not a discourse, the word ‘message’ is misleading,” as Langer concludes.⁴¹ Instead, both draw a connection between truth (the *appearance* of nature in feeling) and beauty (the *experience* of nature in feeling).⁴²

With the founding of Hamburg University in 1919, Ernst Cassirer and psychologist Heinz Werner met for the first time and shared an office. With Cassirer and other researchers united in the so-called *Hamburg Circle*, Werner already specialized on issues of aesthetic and psychophysiological phenomena shared an interest in the extended processes of perception.⁴³ By comparing human development not only from an ontogenetic (individual) but also from a phylogenetic (mankind) point of view, he comes to a similar conclusion as his colleagues, which he published in *Einführung in die Entwicklungspsychologie* in 1926. It became a reference book for developmental psychology and was translated into English in 1933, after Werner’s immigration to the United States. He assumes that human perception—or rather, experience—can primordially be regarded as a syncretic and indivisible unity; a distinction between a sensorimotor, perceptual, and affective organization is not possible. Instead, he characterizes it as a *dynamic and physiognomic* apprehension of things.⁴⁴ The world is experienced as a vital network of actions. Consequently, a clear separation between object and subject, object and state, feeling and action does not occur.⁴⁵ Rather, it reflects an original view of the world that children hold and artists retain, but which the average adult lacks.⁴⁶

A specific context of how Werner’s primordial and direct way of accessing the world is relevant in social contexts was only elaborated in the 1980s by child psychologist Daniel N. Stern. His research in particular bridges the gap from a merely symbolically relevant interpretation of the world to one that concretely includes decisions and actions, and elevates their relevance for social interaction and thus for cultural development. He incorporates not only Werner’s psychological considerations on the development of human perception but also Langer’s act model and theory of art.

What is remarkable about Stern’s findings is that an organizing principle of perception can be observed in infants as young as two months old, inasmuch that “their social capacities are operating with vigorous goal-directedness to assure social interactions.”⁴⁷ It is these interactions that give rise to affects, perceptions, sensorimotor events, memories, and other cognitions. At the core of his research, as emphasized by his predecessors and now confirmed by Stern, stands the infant’s ability to develop abstract representations of perceptual properties at the earliest stage.

These abstract representations that the infant experiences are not sights and sounds and touches and nameable objects, but rather shapes, intensities, and temporal patterns—the more “global” qualities of experience.⁴⁸

According to this, it is abstract representations, concrete forms, degrees of intensity and time patterns, which are considered essential for perception as such, as well as for the perception of art, as Stern himself later points out. Extending his approach, the researcher also refers (as Werner did earlier) to the specific quality of this experience, which tends to translate perceptual qualities into emotional ones. Stern characterizes these as *vitality affects*. These are best described in dynamic, kinetic terms such as “surging,” “fading away,” “fleeting,” “explosive,” “crescendo,” “decrescendo,” “bursting,” “drawn out,”

and so on.⁴⁹ It is self-reflection and language that lead to forgetting or detachment from this global mode of experience between the fifteenth and eighteenth month of human life.⁵⁰

This kind of experience should be regarded as fundamental not only in the field of human development but also in the understanding of the arts. Essential to this assumption is the question—first sown by Langer and later continued by Stern—as to whether a reflection of this external experience is possible within. In this context, Stern formulates a promising research question that was specifically inspired by Langer’s research on art.

How, then, do we get from intensity, timing, and shape to “forcefulness”? This is the question that lies at the heart of understanding one aspect of how art works, and perhaps a look at how the question has been approached in the domain of art may be helpful in understanding it in the domain of behavior ... She [Langer] suggests that, in works of art, the organization of elements seems to present an aspect of life. The feeling that is presented is in fact an apparition, an illusion, a *virtual* feeling. [emphasis added]⁵¹

Following Langer, Stern points to the possible virtual feeling of three-dimensional space in painting, the virtual feeling of kinetic volume in sculpture, that of virtual time in music, and the virtual realms of power in movement and gesture in dance. Particularly his conception of activation contours (intensity in time), perceived in the overt behavior of another, and becoming a *virtual vitality affect* when experienced by an observer (within the self), coincides with the research questions of a group of Italian neuroscientists led by Giacomo Rizzolatti, who in 1996 linked their discovery of mirror neurons to the human capacity for empathy.⁵² In a joint research group with Stern, they pursued this question and published their evidence in 2013.⁵³ More recent research from 2020 and 2021 links again to Stern and coincides with the core hypothesis of Vitality Semiotics.⁵⁴ These modern researchers assume that vitality forms, mediated not only by gestures and actions but also by words, “characterize social interactions by providing information about affective states of the actors involved” and in this way communicate their mood.⁵⁵ These thoughts are currently being further developed in a joint research project on “art and multimodality” and on “art and atmosphere and mood.”⁵⁶ The starting point for this is again the connection to Stern and Langer and to their relevance regarding research on communicative processes by means of art. In agreement with Langer’s and Stern’s views that a painter’s style—that is, the way he or she deals with forms—corresponds to vitality affects:

The translation, then, from perception to feeling in the case of style in art involves the transmutation from “vertical” perceptions (color harmonies, linear solutions, and the like) into such virtual forms of feeling as calmness. The analogous translation from perception of another person’s behavior to feelings involves the transmutation from the perception of timing, intensity, and shape via cross-modal fluency into felt vitality affects in ourselves.⁵⁷

The difference between grasping vitality affects in social behavior and in art lies, as Stern puts it, in the contemplation and therefore awareness that the art experience unfolds what is usually considered impossible in daily life due to confinements and conventions. What consequences can be drawn from this for the question of the relevance of art for communication, and furthermore, for action?

LANGER'S CONCEPT OF ART VERSUS THAT OF VITALITY SEMIOTICS

The ability to become aware of one's own reactions, and thus of what is being reacted to and how, distinguishes humans from other living beings. The arts assist in making us aware of our reactions and what we react to. Engaging art does not necessarily trigger instant reactions, i.e., concrete decisions and actions, which makes it possible to free the mind and consciously experience the input. In this way, we feel the experience, reflect on it, and become aware of what has triggered it. In this sense, the duality of perception is revealed to us through art: on the one hand, there is our self-forgetfulness in experiencing the work of art, and, on the other, our experience of living physical activity. The former has no practical relevance to us since it is not noticed. In contrast, the latter becomes evident to us in the conscious living experience, e.g., in the tone and scale of music, the visual play of colors and forms, the movements in dance, the sweet, sour, or bitter taste in foods, or the tone of voice in language.⁵⁸ This is where the fundamental elements of the *conditio humana* manifest in artistic form.

Remarkably, however, our self-forgetfulness is also significant, because it highlights the blindness of the beholder to possible intentions of the work of art or the artist. This manifests itself in the general rejection of the possibility of the artist desiring to have an intentional influence on the beholder and, accordingly, in the rejection of possible reactions and actions of the beholder to what is conveyed by the work. Therein lies the crux of art as such and the conceptions surrounding it. It ultimately rests in the false assumption that art is *free of purpose*, while this is not the case for design, advertising, or propaganda.⁵⁹ But this is precisely where the contradiction lies, for each mode of creative expression—whether in art or design—is based on the same principle of appealing to feeling. In the same vein, *Gestalt*, as created or intended by artists and designers, pursues a specific purpose—whether to render a motif, address a theme, express a taste, or formulate a message. It is not possible to claim neutrality towards content or intent. A conception of art falls short if it assumes that only pleasure, displeasure, and some possible insights are conveyed.

Here, a re-evaluation seems appropriate. We can neither claim that art is just a human approach to the world that is based in feeling, nor can art be understood as having its value solely in the conscious feeling of its expression. Moreover, what the artist chooses as a motif is not limited to nature as a model, but can be chosen at will. Whatever becomes the motif, with the new conditions indicated, is not accessed by the beholder via an *external world*, but an *internal one* created by the artist. The artist's image (in German, *Vorstellung*) can be experienced by the viewer through the perception of the "living forms" of the artistic means. Against the backdrop of Langer's general act theory, this experience is characterized by "decision effects." In the case of art, it depends on the artist's "decision acts" for a particular gestalt. In this way, art conveys a specific view about something that is fixed or determined by the artist. However, the artist's viewpoint, which is subliminally communicated to viewers, can be obscured by traditionally false assumptions about its presuppositions. Its true function as a means of communication then remains hidden.

Langer herself pointed out that the product of art "is more than a vital expression, it is the expression of his [the artist's] idea, his personal conception of the ways of feeling."⁶⁰ It is consequently the artist's—or his or her client's—conception of or intention for a subject that is realized in the viewer's perception. In this sense, art can very well have

an effect on revelations of our inner life. But Langer's statement, "that it shapes our imagination of external reality according to the rhythmic forms of life and sentience, and so impregnates the world with aesthetic value"⁶¹ falls short. In essence, this is contradicted by her approach, according to which all products produced and thus shaped by us are based on the same premises. For they cannot be understood as actual organic tensions of internal forms of nature, but as virtual organic tensions of perceptually generated tensions of artistic or external forms.⁶² Art, then, is not only the objectification of feeling but also the embodiment of the feeling as a motif. And because this motif is mediated by feelings, the subjectivation Langer speaks of is not necessarily that of an external motif (such as nature), but can be anything the producers want to convey.

In fact, Langer hints at the possibility of manipulation not only in design and advertising but also in art. This becomes clear in her remarks on the analysis of the perception of images in art. To this end, she says that form is not an actual representation of organic tensions in nature, but *virtually generated tensions of artistic or outer forms*.⁶³ Her reference to the fact that the viewer experiences these feelings consciously in their encounter with the arts simultaneously explains the effects it can have accordingly. That which is conveyed thus recedes into the background, and the experience itself becomes determining. When Langer speaks of a subjectification of the motif itself, this also becomes apparent. Unlike Langer, however, I claim that this motif need not be nature, but whatever the producer shows us. This means that what we are shown and what we subsequently feel depends on the producer's intentions and will. It is not neutral at all, as Langer sees it when she makes the connection to nature.⁶⁴

The secret of the "fusion" is the fact that the artist's eye sees in the nature, and even in human nature betraying itself in action, an inexhaustible wealth of tensions, rhythms, continuities and contrasts which can be rendered in line and color; and those are the "internal forms" which the "external forms"—paintings, musical or poetic compositions or any other works of art—express for us.⁶⁵

Against this backdrop, for example, a late landscape painting of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire by Cézanne, seems actually, as Langer suggested, oriented to the external model. A love song or the *pas de deux* danced by a pair of lovers can also be judged as comparatively harmless with regard to a possible influence on opinion formation, since these do not convey personal, group, or client intentions, but address universal feelings. Less chaste are sales intentions or ideologically driven views in the arts, whether they are *weltanschaulich*, political, or religious. Some want to draw us into buying, by using electrifying speeches, gestures, and marches. As is known in research oriented towards the philosophy of art, it was already the idealists Plato and Kant who criticized these abilities of the arts, and called for their orientation towards higher ideas (in German, *Vorstellungen*); the true, the beautiful, and the good. In contrast, it was the cultural critic Walter Benjamin who was less idealistic and looked to *models in art itself*, such as DADA, to break free from this. Only in this way does he see the possibility of those affected by art to become aware of its influence and able to critically engage with its content. Only if this succeeds, Benjamin continues, it is possible to *liquidate* the "traditional value of the cultural heritage" that constitutes art.⁶⁶ After centuries of dependence on art in the service of the patron, Benjamin's hope seems to have been realized. This is clearly recognizable among modern artists, who today are independent of commissions and thus have and use the opportunity to discuss potentially controversial social and environmental issues.

LANGER'S BASICS FOR A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE *CONDITIO HUMANA*

The human condition at its core implies that our sense of feeling permanently responds to the stimuli that impinge on us. What emerges as an *image of feeling* or *image of mood* (generated in accordance with the stimuli, and in interaction with our own culturally shaped being) forms the foundation for our decisions and actions. From here, we can draw further conclusions on the phenomenon of the human urge to express and lend *form* to what is felt internally. If one extracts all positive or negative evaluations and considers this phenomenon independently, it represents the core aspect of being human. This is true if every form of artistic expression, be it language, picture, sound, or even smell, is understood not only as an epistemological but also as a communicative term. Independent of possible insights that the formative process can produce, there is an equally vital connection to communication aspects. Communication—redefined as vital forms that express one's own feelings and intentions—therefore consists of the transmission of self-images: our views or opinions about something. These take shape with the words, pictures, tones, tastes, and fragrances, etc., we create. In this way, they can emerge from us and can simultaneously be perceived and understood by others. In continuation of Langer's extended theory of *acts* as the *conditio humana*, neither images, nor language, sound, or smell are neutral.⁶⁷

The remarkable thing about the functioning of the process of perception and evaluation is that what is intended by art's presentational ability—through the organization of forms and their subliminally vital affect and vital effect—is hardly perceived by us. According to our everyday habits of perception, we can only be certain of what has been said and represented. This corresponds to what Langer called the “infallible, all-supporting primary illusion”⁶⁸ that dominates our perception from the age of fifteen to eighteen months, as Stern showed. This means that in view of what we believe to be true because it is felt bodily, and due to its effects on our actions, it follows that basically everyone who creates (and we do that in every moment of our lives) bears *responsibility* for their creations, as does the one who perceives what has been created. In this respect, both the “speaker” (the creator) and the “receiver” (the beholder) should be alert that they are active in the process of forming and being formed. This requires awareness of the mutual and subliminal processes of creation and perception, and the knowledge that in these processes there is no such thing as neutrality.

NOTES

1. For the influence of the arts on social life, see Martina Sauer, “Visualität und Geschichte. Bilder als historische Akteure im Anschluss an Verkörperungstheorien,” in *Jenseits des Illustrativen. Visuelle Medien und Strategien politischer Kommunikation*, ed. Niels Grüne and Christian Oberhauser (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2015), 39–60.
2. Symbolization or the formation of “images” (German, *Vorstellungsbilder*) as described by Ernst Cassirer in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 1929 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 162–90, here 181–4. See also Martina Sauer, “Bildkraft und Tatkraft: Zum Verhältnis von ästhetischer Erfahrung und Technik im Anschluss an Cassirer, Langer und Krois,” *Techne—poiesis—aisthesis*, ed. Birgit Recki: *Kongress-Akten, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ästhetik* 3 (2018): 1–25.

3. It is Whitehead who describes the power of symbolization in this way. See Alfred N. Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (New York: Little and Ives Company, 1927), 57.
4. Instead, Langer focuses on a different aspect of sociocultural life, as Anne Pollok and Robert Innis argue here in their chapters. It starts from an understanding of the sociocultural as a specific realm of “representative symbols” (or “presentational symbolization”), which originate in mythic and ritual consciousness. (See Anne Pollok’s Chapter 7 in this volume, “Susanne K. Langer’s Theory of Self-Liberation Through Culture,” and Robert Innis, Chapter 10 in this volume, “Psychological Dimensions, Cultural Consequences, and their Breakings in Susanne K. Langer’s Symbolic Mind”).
5. See Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, vol. 1, 1967 (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 257–306, 275–99, expanded on 307.
6. *Ibid.*, 314.
7. *Ibid.*, 307–59, 329. A further discussion on Langer’s non-discursive forms is found in Martina Sauer, “Ästhetik und Pragmatismus. Zur funktionalen Relevanz einer nicht-diskursiven Formauffassung bei Cassirer, Langer und Krois,” *Image* 20 (2014): 49–69.
8. Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, vol. 2 (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 103–40, 137–3, 265–316, 301–12). In contrast to human interaction, exchanges between animals cannot be understood as a social process (*ibid.*, 200–14). This is a matter of instinct-driven action without the formation of ideas or object awareness (*ibid.*, 45–101, 55, 62).
9. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 55–106, 67, for reference to nature, see 87.
10. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 1953 (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1967), 319–25; cf. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 127.
11. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 67.
12. *Ibid.*, 87. See here Anne Pollok and Robert Innis, Chapters 7 and 10. Both agree that with the formative power of the human being an artistic-symbolic form is created, through which we become aware of the emotional level. “Art is ‘about’ emotions ... Art unfolds these feelings, offering us a semblance of the world” (Pollok, “Susanne K. Langer’s Theory of Self-Liberation,” this volume, Chapter 7, 108). In this context, Innis also refers to the normative nature of Langer’s approach, which is concerned with fostering “a joyous pulse of life ... to create a ‘defense against outer and inner chaos’” (Innis, “Psychological Dimensions, Cultural Consequences, and their Breakings,” this volume, Chapter 10, 150).
13. Cf. Martina Sauer, “From Aesthetics to Vitality Semiotics—From l’art pour l’art to Responsibility. Historical Change of Perspective Exemplified on Josef Albers,” in *BildGestalten. Topographien medialer Visualität*, ed. Lars C. Grabbe, Patrick Rupert-Kruse and Norbert M. Schmitz (Marburg: Büchner, 2020), 209–10.
14. See Martina Sauer, *Faszination und Schrecken, Zur Handlungsrelevanz ästhetischer Erfahrung anhand Anselm Kiefers Deutschlandbilder*, 2012 (Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net, 2018), 35–106, 191–266.
15. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 206–53, 329, cf. (with reference to the arts) Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 207, and 47–59 and 372, respectively.
16. Langer seeks evidence for this approach in psychology, developmental psychology, physiology, neurology, biology, and zoology, the results of which she presents most notably in vol. 2 of *Mind*.
17. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942; New York: American Library, 1954), 230–1.

18. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 261.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 263.
21. *Ibid.*, 292; for elaboration of the connection, see 272–99.
22. *Ibid.*, 324.
23. Similarly to Langer, Whitehead and Cassirer referenced concrete empirical research and mathematical considerations in their philosophy. All three were concerned with proving that, on a molecular level, there are interactions, which are “controlled” by physical and chemical processes, and rise up as more complex organic, psychic, and eventually artistic processes. See Whitehead, *Symbolism*, 64–5; and Cassirer’s correspondences with neurologist Kurt Goldstein (Frankfurt a.M), who did research comparable to the biosemiotics of Jacob von Uexküll. In *John M. Krois: Bildkörper und Körperbilder. Schriften zur Verkörperungstheorie ikonischer Formen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011), 53–62, 176–93. Cassirer’s connections to mathematics and physics are apparent in Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, 279–447.
24. See Martina Sauer, “Ästhetik und Pragmatismus.” In this context, the approach of Cassirer’s colleague from the Hamburg Circle (the art historian and cultural scientist Aby M. Warburg) is also interesting. However, his concept of “pathos formulas” will not be specifically discussed here, since there is only an indirect connection to Langer. For this, see: Sauer, *Faszination und Schrecken*, 213–25.
25. Whitehead, *Symbolism*, 26–59, 45, and for more on “pathos,” 47.
26. At the same time, Jacob von Uexküll developed his bio-semiotically oriented theory of “Umwelt” (environment) by observing the behavior of animals. See Jacob von Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (Berlin: J. Springer, 1909).
27. Whitehead, *Symbolism*, 74–88; see also 45, 48–9, 54.
28. *Ibid.*, 51.
29. *Ibid.*, 60–88, here 66, cf. also 78–88.
30. *Ibid.*, 85.
31. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, 66.
32. *Ibid.*, 73.
33. *Ibid.*, 80.
34. *Ibid.*, 162–90, 181–4, cf. with reference to the process of symbolic formation with consideration of Max Scheler’s philosophy: 99–107, here 87–8.
35. *Ibid.*, 99–107, 84.
36. Cassirer never realized his planned fourth volume of the philosophy of symbolic forms in art. This can be explained, among other things, as an after-effect of Cassirer’s immigration in 1933 via detours to the USA. It may therefore have been the correspondences with Langer since 1941, and her book from 1942, which provided him with points of departure for his approach to the function of the arts in his last publication *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, 1944 (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1953). This book was intended as a summary of his previous three volumes for the English-speaking world. However, considering the key points laid out in *An Essay on Man*, it can also be understood as an extension and an actual application of the approach he advocates beyond language, myth, and knowledge to science, art, and history.
37. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 176–217, 194.
38. *Ibid.*, 190.
39. *Ibid.*, 186–91, 184,
40. *Ibid.*, 178–94, 187.
41. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 393.

42. Ibid., 395. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 186–91, 184.
43. See Ulrich Müller, “The Context of the formation of Heinz Werner’s ideas,” in *Heinz Werner and Developmental Science: Path in Psychology*, ed. Jaan Valsiner (New York: Kluwer Academic, 2005), 25–54.
44. See Heinz Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development*, rev. edn, 1940 (New York: International University Press, 1957), ch. 2, part “primitive perception as dynamic: physiognomic perception”: 59–142, and especially 67–103.
45. Ibid., 59–67.
46. Ibid., 71–2. This was elaborated by Werner in collaboration with the Bauhaus master Gertrud Grunow, using Kandinsky as an example. See Heinz Werner, *Einführung in die Entwicklungspsychologie*, 1926 (Munich: Barth, 1959), 46–7, and 66–7.
47. Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 28.
48. Ibid., 47–68, 51.
49. Ibid., 53–61, 54.
50. Ibid., 27–8, elaborated on 162–82.
51. Ibid., 157–61, 158. See also Stern’s second book and his conclusions regarding the performing arts such as music, dance, theater, and film: Daniel N. Stern, *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology, the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development* (Oxford: University Press, 2010), 75–101.
52. Giacomo Rizzolatti et al., “Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex,” *Brain* 119 (1996): 593–609. Following this research, concrete references to art were being made by a member of this group, Vittorio Gallese, together with the American art historian David Freedberg (2007). This research has been constantly deepening ever since. See David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, “Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11, no. 5 (2007): 197–203, cf. Vittorio Gallese and Cinzia Di Dio, “Neuroesthetics: The Body in Esthetic Experience,” in *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, ed. V. S. Ramachandran (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2012), 1–7. On embodied simulation: Vittorio Gallese, “Embodied Simulation: Its Bearing on Aesthetic Experience and the Dialogue Between Neuroscience and the Humanities,” *Gestalt Theory* 41, no. 2 (2019): 113–28.
53. Cf. Giacomo Rizzolatti et al., “The Neural Correlates of ‘Vitality form’ Recognition: An fMRI Study.” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 9 (2013): 951–60.
54. See Giuseppe Di Cesare, Marzio Gerbella, and Giacomo Rizzolatti, “The Neural Bases of Vitality Forms,” *National Science Review* 7 (2020): 202–13; see also Giacomo Rizzolatti et al., “The Neural Bases of Tactile Vitality Forms and Their Modulation by Social Context,” *Scientific Reports* (2021).
55. Di Cesare, Gerbella, and Rizzolatti, “The Neural Bases of Vitality Forms,” 202, cf. with reference to tactile vitality forms Giacomo Rizzolatti et al., “The Neural Bases of Tactile Vitality Forms and Their Modulation by Social Context.”
56. Cf. Giada Lombardi and Giuseppe Di Cesare, “From Neuroscience to Art: The Role of ‘Vitality Forms’ in the Investigation of Multimodality,” *Multimodality: On the Sensorially Organized and at the Same Time Meaningful and Socio-culturally Relevant Potential of Artistic Works*, ed. Martina Sauer and Christiane Wagner: *Art Style*, special issue 10, no. 1 (September 2022). Giada Lombardi, Martina Sauer, and Giuseppe Di Cesare, “An Affective Perception: How ‘Vitality Forms’ Influence Our Mood,” *Atmosphere and Mood. Two Sides of The Same Phenomenon*, ed. Martina Sauer and Zhuofez Wang: *Art Style*, special issue 10, no. 2 (March 2023).
57. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, 157–61, 159. For a detailed discussion of performing arts, see Stern, *Forms of Vitality*, 75–101.

58. On the methodological and interpretive consequences of this consideration, cf. Martina Sauer, "Affordance as a Method in Visual Cultural Studies Based on Theory and Tools of Vitality Semiotics: A Historiographic and Comparative Study of Formal Aesthetics, Iconology, and Affordance Using the Example of Albrecht Dürer's Christ Among the Doctors from 1506," *Material Image: Affordances as a New Approach to Visual Culture Studies*, ed. Elisabeth Günther and Martina Sauer: *Art Style*, special issue 7 (2021): 11–37.
59. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 127, and Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 306–25, 319.
60. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 225.
61. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 392–415, 399.
62. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 153–97, 164.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Langer states, "The secret of the 'fusion' is the fact that the artist's eye sees in the nature, and even in human nature betraying itself in action, an inexhaustible wealth of tensions, rhythms, continuities and contrasts which can be rendered in line and color; and those are the 'internal forms' which the 'external forms'—paintings, musical or poetic compositions or any other works of art—express for us" (Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 73–106, 87).
65. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 73–106, 87.
66. Hanna Arendt, ed., *Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936 (New York: Schocken/Random House, 1969), II, line 26.
67. Cf. Martina Sauer, "Visualität und Geschichte," 39–60.
68. Cf. Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 230.

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