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**Feeling the Body in Art:
Embodied Cognition and Aesthetics in Mark Johnson
and Susanne K. Langer**

After a long period of silence and neglect recent years have witnessed a surge of interest in the work of American philosopher Susanne K. Langer (1895-1985), both from within and from outside the field of aesthetics. Much of this interest centres on her account of the biological roots of human mentality and symbolic meaning as expounded in her trilogy *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967, 1971 1982). Although this theme was already present in her earlier works such as *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), *Feeling and Form* (1953) and *Problems of Art* (1957), in *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* we find an extended and more detailed description of the basic continuity between corporeal sensing and 'making sense' of the world. While substantially influenced by the Neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer and the process philosopher A. N. Whitehead, Langer's thought invites comparisons with a number of other traditions, such as pragmatism, phenomenology and evolutionary philosophies of mind. In this article I will focus on a comparison between Langer's later work and that of cognitive philosopher Mark Johnson. I conclude that Johnson is not advancing anything on what Langer had already said almost half a century earlier. If anything, there is a regression because, unlike Langer, Johnson neglects the constructive role of human symbolisation (as developed by Cassirer), in the process of mental representations.

Although Langer's later work represents a change of focus from her earlier work, there is nevertheless a strong continuity between the two, including between her early and later views of art and aesthetics. Throughout her work this view could be summarised as follows: art is the articulation of pre-reflective, affective human experience; or, as she puts it herself: 'art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling.'¹ Whereas signs involve conditioned reflexes, symbols serve as vehicles for conceptions, including conceptions of felt experiences. Unlike reactions to signs, symbolic activity is not conditioned by instinctive behaviour. Yet this does not mean that it is disconnected from the body or would operate outside or independently from the body's sensory apparatus. On the contrary, for Langer, *all* symbolic activity, whether discursive or non-discursive, is deeply rooted in the human organism's primordial

¹ S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art developed from Philosophy in a New Key*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p. 40.

engagement with its environment. This is clear from the very beginning of her work. Warning against misguided idealist interpretations of her philosophy of symbolic forms, she writes in *Philosophy in a New Key*:

‘We need not assume the presence of a transcendental “human spirit,” if we recognize, for instance, the function of *symbolic transformation* as a natural activity, a high form of nervous response, characteristic of man among the animals.² ... Rationality is embodied in every mental act. ... It permeates the peripheral activities of the human nervous system, just as truly as the cortical functions.’³

Although this naturalistic *conception* of human mentality is implicitly present in her early work, in *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* it gets an explicit account. More specifically, it provides a philosophical and scientific grounding of the principle of continuity between body and mind rooted in the organic and reciprocal relation between an organism and its environment. As she describes the purpose of the book:

‘If vitality and feeling are conceived in this way [i.e. as a heightened form of organic life] there is no sharp break, let alone metaphysical gap, between physical and mental realities.’⁴... Instead of accepting “mind” as a metaphysically ultimate reality, distinct from the physical reality which subsumes the brain, and asking how the two can “make liaison,” one may hope to describe “mind” as a phenomenon in terms of the highest physiological processes, especially those which have psychical phases. That is the purpose of this book.’⁵

Langer’s later research on the mind and human consciousness is of direct relevance to her views of art and aesthetics. This is because it provides a more explicit account of her notion of feeling as it operates in her definition of art as the symbolic form of feeling.

For Langer, the concept of feeling is broader than its garden varieties such as joy, anger, sadness and so on. It goes both deeper and higher, including, on the one hand, simple sense impressions and, on the other, high level rational reasoning and judgment.

On Langer’s terms, the most basic types of feeling are sensory acts, mediated by the sensory cells in the peripheral surface of an organism. Whereas skin has grown into the largest as well as one of the most adaptable sense organs, the specialised sense-organs such as the eyes and ears allow events in the world outside the skin to influence events inside it without even touching or penetrating its barriers.⁶ The great importance of the peripheral surface lies in the fact that, as the provider of the first primal sensations and feelings, it paves the way for the first behavioural acts, the first opportunities for free-living animals to interact with their ambient environments.

Even when living in the same environment, different organisms have different experiences of their ‘ambient worlds.’ This depends on their body shapes and

2 S.K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980, *Preface* to 1942 edition, p. xiv.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

4 S.K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Volume I, p. xix. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Volumes I, II and III, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, 1971 and 1982.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 422.

types of sensory cells on their peripheral surfaces. An organism's first encounters with the world are mediated via movement and touch. Langer argues that, once humans became bi-pedal, the increasingly sensitive musculature in their fingers and hands turned these into complex sense-organs able to register subtle sensations.

[A]ll the sensory reactions of the skin and underlying structures are engaged together in the tactual perception of substances: feelings of pressure and release, 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.⁷

These 'multimodal, often nameless qualities' take on an aesthetic significance, evoking feelings of pleasure – 'cool or warm waters, living grass, leaves and petals, fur or human hair' or disgust and horror – 'repellent impingements of crude, grimy or decayed matter, unhealthy skin.'⁸ Moreover, such feelings can naturally be metaphorically extended beyond their original tactile domain. This transfer allows us to find a 'name' for a feeling encountered in another realm of life. Indeed, it provides the foundations for language.

Aesthetic tactual values have importance for man because his experiences of them readily take on metaphorical significance; expressions for 'hard,' 'soft,' 'liquid,' 'rough,' etc., seem to have entered into his most peculiar achievement, speech, from their earliest uses to designate more than tactual qualities. Like all aesthetic perceptions 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.⁹

In a work of art, initially inchoate feelings can be captured in ways that render them available for shared human experience. The creation of unified artistic forms pregnant with affective meaning enables feelings to turn from mere private experiences to articulations of a shared understanding of the world and one's place in it. Works of art are one way of making sense of the world and lending it a meaning.

When we now turn to the recent work of philosopher of language and cognition Mark Johnson, we encounter a striking degree of similarity and overlap. In his book *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (2007) Johnson claims that 'art is an exemplary form of human meaning-making... [U]nderstanding the nature of the arts could give us profound insight into how humans experience and construct meaning in their lives.'¹⁰ For Johnson, as for Langer, an 'aesthetics of human understanding' is not confined to the study of art, beauty or aesthetic experience in the traditional sense, but entails an exploration of the whole spectrum of 'qualities, feelings, emotions, and bodily processes that make meaning possible.'¹¹ It concerns our primordial, embodied, visceral connection with the world.

7 S.K. Langer, *Mind...*, Volume II, p. 258.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

9 *Ibid.*

10 M. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 212.

11 M. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, p. x.

Johnson is one of a growing group of cognitive philosophers and scientists who, over the last two decades, have focussed on the body as a central player in cognition. There is currently an increasing consensus that cognition is situated not merely in the brain but in the dynamic reciprocal relationship or 'coupling' between an organism and its environment. In *The Meaning of the Body* Johnson draws a sharp contrast between what he and George Lakoff in *Philosophy of the Flesh* refer to as first and second generation cognitive science. On Johnson's view, first generation cognitive science typically operates with computational models of the mind that are marred by a Cartesian mind-body dualism. This prevents them from acknowledging the crucial role of the body and its sensorimotor processes in the formation of mind and cognition.

By contrast, so he argues, the new field of embodied cognition as developed by second generation cognitivists recognise that mental activity emerges from a basic interaction between the organism and its environment. It takes serious the body's physical and social condition as it informs human cognition and behaviour. Like Langer, he acknowledges a radical unity and biological continuity between pre-linguistic embodied experience and abstract conceptual understanding.¹²

Following Shaun Gallagher, Johnson adopts the term 'body schema' to refer to 'a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring.'¹³ Like Langer, Johnson points out that different organisms have different body schemas and, consequently, different interactions with their environments. The *Umwelt* or ambient of an animal such as an eyeless tick that negotiates its environment purely on the basis of smell and temperature is obviously different from that of a multi-sensory organism such as a human being.

Like Langer, Johnson identifies movement in space as the foundational feature of an organism's engagement with his surroundings.¹⁴ Through spatial movement an organisms gains direct experience of trajectories, direction, obstacles, weight, pressure, balance, gravity, and so on. Depending on their shape, different organisms move about differently. Because humans stand and move about upright, their body schema involves the basic experiences of contours such as up and down, front and back, near and far, balanced and unbalanced, curved and straight and so on. These foundational experiences shape the way humans view the world.

Like Langer Johnson holds that in human conceptualisation these basic image schemas are extended into other realms. Drawing on his and Lakoff's earlier work on metaphor, he argues: 'One of the chief ways that humans are different [from non-human animals] is that we have neural mechanisms for metaphorically

12 *Ibid.*, p. 264. In developing his argument Johnson draws on, amongst others, Antonio Damasio, Gerald Edelman, Vittorio Gallese, Eugene Gendlin, George Lakoff, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, and Francisco Varela. Important historical sources include Maurice Merleau-Ponty, William James and John Dewey.

13 S. Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 24. On Gallagher's model, a body schema is to be distinguished from a body image. A body image, on Gallagher's terms, consists of 'a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body.' Quoted by Johnson in *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, p. 5.

14 M. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, p. 20.

extending image schemas as we perform abstract conceptualisation and reasoning.¹⁵ Such metaphorical extensions do not imply any rupture or gap between lower and higher levels within an organism: ‘“Higher” cognitive processes have to emerge from complex interactions among “lower”-level capacities.’¹⁶

In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Langer had argued that ‘there is an unexplored possibility of genuine semantic beyond the limits of discursive language.’¹⁷ Johnson, likewise, claims that, in order to develop a philosophical theory of embodied meaning and cognition, we have to look ‘beyond linguistic meaning and into the processes of meaning in the arts, where immanent bodily meaning is paramount.’¹⁸ He criticises traditional theories of meaning for ignoring and excluding the pre-reflective, sub-conscious realms of qualitative feeling and sensorimotor experience: ‘One of the greatest impediments to an appreciation of the full scope of embodied meaning is the way philosophers of language focus almost exclusively on *language* (i.e., spoken and written words and sentences) as the bearer of meaning.’¹⁹ Instead, he claims, we need to recover ‘the deep processes of meaning, by looking beyond and beneath the formal, structural, conceptual, propositional, representational dimensions of meaning.’²⁰

Crucially and finally, both Langer and Johnson are adamant that the study of the form of art can help illuminate aspects of the mind which otherwise remain obscure and elusive. As Langer had put it in 1967:

It was the discovery that works of art are images of the forms of feeling, and that their expressiveness can rise to the presentation of all aspects of mind and human personality, which led me to the present undertaking of constructing a biological theory of feeling that should logically lead to an adequate concept of mind, with all that the possession of mind implies.²¹

Art for Langer, as we have seen, is ‘the [symbolic] objectification of feeling.’²² It reflects the ‘logical form’ of sentient life and vital experience that ‘language is peculiarly unfit to convey.’²³ As she puts it: ‘[a]rtistic form is congruent with the dynamic forms of our direct sensuous, mental, and emotional life; works of art are projections of ‘felt life’ ... into spatial, temporal, and poetic structures.’²⁴ Johnson echoes the point with respect to music:

‘Music is meaningful because it can present the flow of human experience, feeling, and thinking in concrete, embodied forms – and this is meaning in its deepest sense. ... [Music] appeals to our felt sense of life.’²⁵... ‘In any musical work ... there is a structure and pattern of temporal flow, pitch contours, and intensity (loudness/softness) that is analogous to felt patterns of the flow of human experience.’²⁶

15 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

17 S.K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 86.

18 M. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, p. 209.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

21 S.K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Volume I, pp. xviii, xix.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

23 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 32.

24 S.K. Langer, *Problems of Art*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957, p. 25.

25 M. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, p. 236.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Art, for both, not only expresses private feelings but raises broader questions about the human condition and people's orientation in life. Langer again:

[The link between art and the world] accords with the intellectual and indeed, the biological importance of art: we are driven to the symbolization and articulation of feeling when we *must* understand it to keep ourselves oriented in society and nature.²⁷

Johnson likewise:

'People turn to art ... because it is meaningful and because it helps us to understand our human condition.'²⁸ ... Art is an exemplary form of human meaning-making. [U]nderstanding the nature of the arts could give us profound insight into how humans experience and construct meaning in their lives.²⁹

Although Johnson mentions Langer appreciatively on a couple of occasions, he arguably does not give her as much credit as he could or should have done. In fact, there is little in Johnson that can be said to improve on Langer.

Johnson and Langer differ on one important point. Despite their broad consensus and striking overlap on the issues of embodied cognition, they part ways on an important issue: the nature and role of internal mental representation. Johnson strongly rejects the idea of internal representations, something he associates with first-generation cognitive science:

'What I am denying is that we have mental *entities* called "concepts" or "representations" in our "minds" and that thinking is a matter of manipulating these entities by surveying their properties, discerning their relations to each other and to mind-external objects, and arranging them in internal acts of judgment.'³⁰

According to Johnson, recent neuro-science has shown that conceptualisation in the brain does not take place in 'highly specialised brain regions that are physically and functionally separate from areas responsible for perception and motor movement.'³¹ Instead: '*imagining* certain motor actions activates some of the same parts of the brain that are involved in actually performing that action.'³² Thinking and doing are not of an ontologically different order: 'concrete concepts are realised neurally as sensorimotor schemas that organize functional neural clusters into meaningful, integrated gestalts.'³³

Although this information is based on neuro-biological research that would not have been available at Langer's time, this does not undermine Langer's position. In fact, Langer never thought of representations in terms of manipulable 'mental entities.' Influenced by Gestalt theories and neo-Kantian Casirer's philosophy of symbolic forms she sees no tension between, on the one hand, internal representations' biological basis as a 'stable patterns of neural

27 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 253.

28 M. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, p. 208.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*

activation' and, on the other, their symbolic representational character. On the contrary, it is precisely *because* internal representations display a 'stable pattern' or *Gestalt* in the ongoing flow of stimuli and neural activity that they can adopt a symbolic representational function. That's what enables humans to recall and envision things in their absence, 'off-line' from their immediate experience. This view of mental representation is rooted in the philosophy of symbolic forms as developed by Ernst Cassirer. *Pace* Johnson, this representational understanding of symbol does not commit Langer to a dualistic conception of mind. Instead, it gives mental representations a proper biological footing, firmly planted in the humans' first embodied encounters with the world.

In summary, there is a striking overlap between the views of Mark Johnson and those of Susanne K. Langer with respect to their views of art and embodied cognition. Despite the substantial increase in neuro-scientific knowledge since Langer's time, however, Johnson does not advance on Langer philosophically and does not add anything of substance to what she had already written almost a century ago. If anything, Johnson pays insufficient attention to the active role of (embodied) human symbolisation in the ongoing process of the formation of mental representations. Had Johnson had a better understanding of Langer's later work, he would not have needed to postulate a tension between internal representations and embodied cognition.

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Keywords: Susanne K. Langer, Mark Johnson, Ernst Cassirer, aesthetics, the arts, meaning, feeling, the body, the senses, symbolisation, embodied cognition