

In-determinism in Susanne Langer's Philosophical Concept of Feeling and Eastern Thinking Tradition

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Western centre-periphery concepts of experiencing art within current (neuro)aesthetics show the way Susanne K. Langer's philosophy of art intersects with the non-Western mode of thinking. To find what is conceptualised as *undetermined* in Langer's philosophical concept of *feeling* and, more generally, art, this paper offers a shortened review of her position explained in several neuroscientific studies. Additionally, it looks at how Western neuroscientific categories would possibly lead a dialogue with the conceptualisation of creation and art in the Eastern thinking tradition. The submitted study aims to open a possible untraditional vista for comprehension of, first and foremost, a communicative function of art employing non-reductive comprehension of its nature. In the way of such a constituting, it will present overlaps of the neuroscientific line, Langer's work, and Eastern (Japanese) thinking tradition. Thus, to also be onto the importance of the unacknowledged significance of Susanne Langer's work, *bridging* will appear at the centre of attention. | *Keywords: Susanne Langer, Aesthetic Experience, Neuroscience, Neuroaesthetics, Western and Eastern Thinking Tradition, Feeling*

1. Introduction

The main goal of the following paper, submitted as the continuation of a previously published study (Košičanová, 2022, pp. 99–114), is to specify lines within neuroscience and neuroaesthetics that indicate an interest in the centre-periphery concept, a concept important to one of the basic categories in the field of aesthetics – aesthetic experience. To pursue this line of argument, I entwine it with sources indicating the actual re-emerging interest in the work of twentieth-century American philosopher Susanne Langer and thereby demonstrate the relevance of her work to our pursuit.¹

¹ After several years significant of absence of any more comprehensive event dedicated to Susanne Langer's thoughts – the last one had taken place in 2007 (cf. Innis, 2007, pp. 1–3) –

Regardless of the specific forms it assumes, comprehending the boundless nature, specificity, and role of aesthetic experience in our perception, cognition, life, and culture necessitates an in-depth examination of our cognitive processes. Consequently, both neuroaesthetics and philosophical aesthetics are pertinent disciplines. In accordance with the aforementioned intention, the open-ended list of selected sources will facilitate subsequent research.

2. Susanne K. Langer, Neuroscience and Neuroaesthetics

Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985), characterized as a philosopher of mind, was developing her interdisciplinary overlap during a lifetime of philosophical thinking and research initially dedicated to human arts. Cornelia Richter (2007, p. 113) suggests the beginning of this path to arise in the early nineteen-fifties with the paper *The Deepening Mind; A Half-Century of American Philosophy* (1950), and to continue until the author's death in 1985 after publishing her three volumes of *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967, 1972, 1982). Since then, Langer's philosophical thoughts about mind have been appreciated,² and a Langer-neuroscience line has been in existence. Despite the current characterization of belonging to the so called "collective unconsciousness" by New World Encyclopedia (newworldencyclopedia, 2023),³ Langer's legacy for neuroscience is considered to be demonstrated not only through the past reflection, e.g. the one by neuroscientist Howard Gardner (1982), but also current advances in this field – as the paper will present.

Langer's interdisciplinary overlaps keep one's attention and interest in how to not only conceive of but also read her work. They create an interactive realm of seemingly contradictory studies of the human soul provided by both natural sciences and humanities. Thus, one can have an interest in a strictly neuroscientific perspective on aesthetic experience as well. Based on such a fact and combined with still further comparisons – as analysed in this paper – our Western neuroscientific mode of thinking about this issue seems to expose rather contradictory, although counterparted positions with those of the Eastern mode. Would it then be possible to consider Langer's unique work as established already in the middle of the previous century

a "multi-disciplinary network of people interested in the work of Susanne K. Langer" (langercircle, 2024) came into existence in 2020. Currently, the first of its kind, over 100 members form its mutual debates. They even organised their two conferences on Langer; the first one in cooperation with Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, where I presented an initial study preceding this paper – Frankfurt am Main, Germany (June 2022). The second conference took place in Carbondale (USA) in 2024, hosted by the American Institute of Philosophical and Cultural Thought (*Ibid.*).

² Shortly reviewed, Langer's study of mind has been appreciated by the following authors: Emilia H. Eckardt's emphasises her symbolization (herewith also on imagination) as "a principle that have relevance for human functioning" (Eckardt, 1991, p. 624); Margaret M. Browning comments on of her work as an important contribution to neuroscience (Browning, 2006, pp. 1131–59), and Cornelia Richter makes a notion of her concept of (also non-discursive) symbolization in the role of "the key to all human existence" (Richter, 2007, p. 110).

³ A similar idea appeared already in 2007 when Robert E. Innis characterised her at the above-mentioned Symposium on Susanne K. Langer as "one of the 'forgotten figures' in American philosophy" (Innis, 2007, p. 1).

intersecting these two poles?⁴ Would her work accentuate what is pre-exposed today as *embodied aesthetics*?

On this point, the lines of interconnections lead one's attention also to the latest trends in aesthetics. Those are represented by neuroaesthetics (one of its branches), too. It's interesting to consider its historical roots as well. Reminding us of a short return (Košíčánová, 2022, pp. 100–102), historical reflection by Crivellato and Ribatti examines the deep ancient origin of modern, twenty-first-century clinical neuroscience as well as its key concepts that have remained unchanged over centuries. Another comment by Ihringová (2016) adds that neuroaesthetics springs from overlaps with neuroscience, and according to Jisoo Kim (2019), its second generation has advanced the limitations of the first one using Dewey's pragmatic, interdisciplinary, non-reductive naturalism.⁵ As already mentioned in previous studies, there is an undeniable (not only geographically justified) overlap between Dewey and Langer that can be revealed through both Langer's comments on Dewey's work as well as later reflection of their interconnection by Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin (2021).⁶ Considered here is the idea that Langer even improved on Dewey's thought – presented by Chaplin as well. Moreover, his *Art as Experience* (1934) has advanced neuroaesthetics, and persists also an inspirational and debated topic with the recently established field of aesthetics, everyday aesthetics.⁷

It's not the aim of this paper to pause deeply in the comparative space of analysis of Langer-Dewey's conceptual philosophical interline. Rather, it's a crucial aspect to emphasise, especially Dewey's thoughts on the complex, thus dynamic nature of aesthetic experience.⁸ It's this aspect that Chaplin has

⁴ One of the worth mentioning, frequently commenting and well-known authors on Langer as influencing the future development in sciences is Donald Dryden – e. g. Dryden (1997, pp. 161–182) or Dryden (2007, pp. 27–43) – as a part of the whole Symposium on Susanne K. Langer dedicated to the 40th anniversary of her *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (for further study see also Dryden (2001, pp. 272–285)). Another commentator on Langer within this matter is Mary J. Reichling (1998, pp. 12–21), Agáta Košíčánová (2015a, pp. 13–15), and Beatrice K. Nelson (1994, pp. 277–296) – cf. Košíčánová (2015b, p. 138).

⁵ But still another paper by Nadal and Skov (2013, p. 3) defines “neurobiological” study of aesthetic experience within neuroaesthetics as establishing its existence. From this perspective, neuroaesthetics can be understood as originating already by E. Burke (1757).

⁶ Most lately, Langer's work has been characterized as conceptually interconnected, many-ways overlapped with that of him – with that of pragmatists (Cf. Dengerink Chaplin (2021, p. 230)), or even improving it.

⁷ Yuriko Saito (one of the iconic figures of its establishment) defines Dewey's book on Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as the main source of inspiration for “almost all writers on everyday aesthetics [...]” (platostandfordedu, 2024).

⁸ See especially Dewey (1934, p. 19). Dewey's interweaving of life and art in a non-reductive and non-simplified mode stems from his criticism of mass production and the mechanisation of industrial society and its inability to create art (Dewey, 1934, pp. 8–9; 13). His explanation focuses on a mindful dynamic aesthetic aspect, typical of intensification and “more significant life” (Dewey, 1934, p. 14). The uniqueness of the aesthetic aspect of our experience, according to Dewey, corresponding to the originality of art, comes from its non-mechanical and dynamic nature. This nature is drawn from an overcoming of conflicts and oppositions when our organism deflects and “recovers union” (Dewey, 1934, p. 14) with its surroundings. He called this ‘balance’ or ‘Equilibrium’ (Dewey, 1934, p. 14). There is the next important definition: “The rhythm of loss of integration with environment and recovery of union not only persists in man but becomes conscious with him” (Dewey, 1934, p. 15). Artists, in Dewey's point of view, reflect these moments of tension and resistance; they neither deny nor exclude them, but cultivate for the sake of hidden potentiality, “bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total” (Dewey, 1934, p. 15).

lately accentuated as worth noticing within Langer's processual philosophical contribution. She characterises Langer's concept of 'feeling' presented throughout her book as follows: "Emphasising the active dimension of the term 'feeling' [...] treats it as a verbal noun: 'To feel is to do something, not to have something'" (Dengerink Chaplin, 2021, p. 121).⁹ In Dengerink Chaplin's view, conceiving *feeling* as a verbal category of a noun in Langer's work signifies her concept of *feeling* as a process, not a result. It's Langer's envisagement of feelingness as non-restrictive that joins both rational and emotional aspects of evolutionary human traits in one extraordinary philosophy of art. As such, it implies a challenge of including the framelessness of non-art objects.

2.1 Neuroscientific Comments on Langer's Concept of Feeling

The authors introduced below pay attention to those aspects of Langer's work that explicate our human nature – subjectivity stemming through symbolic processes of mind. In the following examples from the neuroscientific field, aesthetic experience is analysed as a process of one's self-understanding with the relevant possibility of changing culture as well. The result of the following comparative analysis should draw one's attention to the fundamental principle of creativity functioning in our mind and being at the core of art and its experiencing.

In the nineteen-nineties, Langer's neuroscientific implications in *Philosophy in A New Key* (1942) were analysed by means of their educative value by Michael Polanyi's passionate follower, the educator Robin Allason Hodgkin (Cf. Perrin (2003)). In his paper *Making Space for Meaning* (Hodgkin, 1997, pp. 386–387), Hodgkin was looking for conceptually overlapping scientific perspectives on touch. He found ideas about rich foundations of personhood (Hodgkin, 1997, p. 396)¹⁰ (of 1930–1960) by the philosophical antagonist John Macmurray, suggestive of Langer's concept of the power of feeling and emotion generating new meaning. In Hodgkin's view, Langer's study of Hellen Keller's birth of new concept or, in other words, mind processes typical of "new-minted" (Hodgkin, 1997, p. 390) words, that are filled with meanings for all "early *homo sapiens* [author's emphasis], for infant, or for an inspired artist" (*Ibid.*), answers the ancient question. It's a question of which evolutionary changes have brought about the transformation of a living organism into a person. Moreover, Hodgkin attributed Polanyi's, Goodman's and even the physicist and Nobel Prize winner Erwin Schrödinger's works to inspiration by Langer's study, and suggests Langer's neuroscientific significance on the work of Jerome Bruner, Henry Skolimowski and Stuart Kauffman (Hodgkin, 1997, p. 395).¹¹

⁹ Dengerink Chaplin quotes here Langer's first volume of *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967). Chaplin also explains that "Langer's main contribution to the neurosciences was not the discovery of more data or facts but a new hermeneutical framework" (Dengerink Chaplin, 2021, p. 224); and she adds that Langer's philosophy of mind is based on considering feeling and reason "as integrally connected and interdependent. More radically even, Langer locates feeling at the very center of human mentality out of which reason evolves" (Dengerink Chaplin, 2021, p. 226).

¹⁰ Hodgkin was explaining the role of tools, by means of which, in his belief, "head' and 'heart' do, indeed, educate each other" (Hodgkin, 1997, p. 389).

¹¹ Hodgkin finds parallels between Langer's thought and the human rhythmicised process of learning as the nature of life, and the emergence of new forms as explained by Jean Piaget's

Twelve years after Hodgkin's ideas, philosopher Andrea Lavazza – a co-founder of the Italian Neuroethics Society and a leader in this new discipline (informationphilosopher, 2024) – surveyed the interconnectedness of neuroaesthetics, evolution and phenomenology through William James's empirical, and at that time newly rediscovered term *fringe* (from 1890).¹² Lavazza reflects neuroaesthetic studies and two-thousand-five-hundred-year-old distinctions typical for the centre-periphery model of consciousness.¹³ In his paper *Art as a Metaphor of the Mind*, James's term that explains "a merely intuited shade of content; vague and peripheral experiences or feelings" (James, 2009, p. 160) can explain evolutionarily-rooted art and aesthetic experience due to its ability to differentiate neuro-cognitive bases. Ex post, this notion supports Hodgkin's citation of Stewart Kauffman's study of organic complexity. Within this complexity, Kauffman anticipates that the threat of a break in already existing, organised systems is the condition for the spontaneous appearance of new forms of order "at 'the frontier' or at the 'dangerous edge' (William James's term)" (Hodgkin, 1997, p. 395). Lavazza's notion also encompasses Schrödinger's idea as Hodgkin explains it (it reminds Dewey's notion of 'Equilibrium' as well). According to Hodgkin, "a poet, or a prophet" is the only one able to rediscover "many-levelled meanings" of "pristine, transparent, symbolic quality", lost through frequent usage of "newly-minted words" (Hodgkin, 1997, p. 391). In his view, these meanings reappear just on the edges signified with loss (Hodgkin, 1997, p. 399).

In his work *Feeling the Signs* from 2002, a biophilosopher Andreas Weber (humansandnature, 2024), considered Langer a proto-biosemiotic thinker. He stated this on account of her conception of *feeling* being conditional for keeping personal identity in contrast to the outer world. Weber analyses Langer's thought about the creation of meaning. Not only he ascribes the origin of her conception of feeling to William James (1890) (Weber, 2002, p. 184), but he also highlights the importance of symbolization for "self-understanding" in "intersubjecti[ve] [and] interbeing" (Weber, 2002, p. 194) cultural accessibility. As Weber explains it, this is how *feeling* provides us with human-specific value. *Feeling* is thus understood as a principle operating on the basis of opposing (animalian) indifference; it's what actually enables us to create a difference, i.e. value.¹⁴ Due to the linkage of expressivity with the form, including the artistic one, Weber emphasizes a need for an aesthetic, organic theory of the human organism including important Kant's position.¹⁵

follower Jerome Bruner (1968) (britannica, 2024), pre-eminent figure of eco-philosophy Henryk Skolimowski (1994) as well as by a thought of famous "theoretical biologist" and complex systems researcher Stuart Kauffman (informationphilosopher, 2024) as follows: "Man's three-fold, interdependent roles: as playful, as practicing and as wise explorer: *homo ludens*, *homo faber* and *homo sapiens* [author's emphasis]" (Hodgkin, 1997, p. 395).

¹² Lavazza (2009, p. 160) quotes Kevin Mulligan (1995).

¹³ Lavazza (2009, pp. 164–65; see also pp. 160–62) – adapting unpublished PhD thesis in psycho-aesthetics by B. Mangan from 1991 (University in California) – dates it back to Anaximandros, Plato, Leibniz, Kant, but also Baumgarten, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and the most comprehensively accentuated by William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890).

¹⁴ Weber (2002, p. 188) explained that "Feeling ... is the tertium comparationis that links causa, perception, with its effect, mobility [author's emphasis]. Such a causality is a teleological, not a mechanical one".

¹⁵ Weber characterized him "most influential philosopher who saw a nexus between aesthetic thinking and living organism" (Weber, 2002, p. 196).

He concludes: “Beauty in organism is not arbitrary [...] It is a necessity” (Weber, 2002, pp. 196–197).

Weber’s thoughts overtook Lavazza’s notion (2009) of aesthetic experience as evolutionarily natural. Lavazza contradicts it to the ever-existing aspect of its mysteriousness, springing from its character of ‘unusually intensified fringe’. Lavazza traces aesthetic function back to biologically essential, cognitive meaningfulness, conditioned by shortening the distance between conscious and non-conscious.¹⁶ According to him, aesthetic function is enhanced in specific moments (“Euréka”; Weber, 2002, p. 171). He conceives of it a “problem-solving function of consciousness” (*Ibid.*). In aesthetic experience, such a function organises the general “consistency or compatibility” between aesthetic data in consciousness and their “appropriate non-conscious context” (Weber, 2002, p. 170). Therefore, for Lavazza, ‘je ne sais quoi’ (indefinable quality or attribute) corresponds in art with inarticulable, yet persistently existing “unusually intensified fringe” (Weber, 2002, p. 171). Lavazza concludes that the power of the presence of this artwork’s mysterious aspect (formed due to the excessive size of information for our brain while perceiving a work of art) results in its prevalence over as well as in what is conscious. That’s the reason why meaningfulness “exactly corresponds to the consistency and meaning of creation and becomes the most important datum of the aesthetic experience” (*Ibid.*). Put it differently: the economy of nature (constituting our human mentality) causes everything unutilized to be postponed into the non-conscious process of our mind, hence enabling it to acquire a unique (aesthetic) meaning. It means that the periphery of merely natural aesthetic experience underlies the intensification of meaningfulness.

Finally, a psychoanalytic psychotherapist Wayne Featherstone contributes to deeper understanding of the center-periphery concept of aesthetic experience in his paper *Intersections with ‘O’* (Featherstone, 2013) as well. In line with Lavazza, Featherstone analyses engagement of many philosophers, neuroscientists and psychoanalysts (starting with Plato) to define “the nature of human subjectivity” (Featherstone, 2013, pp. 45–46). His view of mind is inspired by twentieth-century psychoanalytical work of Wilfred Bion on a concept of ‘O’.¹⁷ It is based on inter-related, mutually conditioned knowledge, whose constituents of aesthetic dimension arise relationally, and possess their aesthetic status just to provide the experience with meaning, not to fulfill some criteria of beauty (Featherstone, 2013, p. 36). Obviously, it’s a principle Weber reminds us while talking about beauty as a necessity (in spite of his term *beauty*).

Also, Bruno Trentini (2016, p. 1) reflects cognitively integrative complexity of aesthetic experience and resulting impossibility to understand it in isolation. Trentini’s idea mirrors Featherstone’s view on an aesthetic aspect of our mind

¹⁶ Lavazza (2009, pp. 170–171) explains that “variations in the level of meaningfulness indicate the degree of significance: the closer the ‘adjustment’ (in an evolutionary sense) between conscious and non-conscious information, the stronger the feeling of meaningfulness”.

¹⁷ Institute of Psychoanalysis (British Psychoanalytical Society) states that apart from its character of “challenge for contemporary analysts”, it reminds of elusiveness and the under-surface source of sensory phenomena (psychoanalysis, 2024).

that arises within the complex of its complementary processes when failure of language enlivens other ways of expression – artistic ones. Anyway, it's interesting that a language and literature professor Angelo P. Bertocci (newspapers, 2002) emphasized this complexity already in 1969. It called his attention to Langer's work that stresses out especially artistically presented non-discursive knowledge (Bertocci, 1969, p. 261). Together with Langer's core concept of *feeling*, Bertocci defined them as the only way leading "philosophy and psychology [...] to break through the impasse in the mind" (*Ibid.*). Langer's own words from her study *The origins of speech and its communicative function* (Langer, 1960, p. 121) accomplished such a connection: "Language always expresses relations among acts or things, or their aspects. It always makes reference to reality – that is, makes assertions or denials – either explicitly or implicitly." Crucial is to realize that Langer's complex concept of language is correlatively both linguistic and non-linguistic. As such, her non-discursive (artistic) language can express and present feeling than just explain and represent it, and discursive language shows us the way how to understand our evolution as well.

On a par with Joseph Carol, Lavazza characterises humanization status of art as follows: "Art [...] is rather the fruit of the evolution of the mind/brain and its products [...] not descent from hyperuranium" (Lavazza, 2009, p. 175).¹⁸ Of course, the condition of its existence becomes a human being, staying "open to contemplating the flow of things [...] 'letting go' [author's emphasis]" (Lavazza, 2009, p. 176). Lavazza's enhances his conclusion about the nucleus-fringe complexity relation with prevailing importance of fringe through other neuroscientific works as well.¹⁹ He also ascribes later W. James's statement on fringe a function of bridge between phenomenology and neuroscience. For both Lavazza and Langer, it's exactly a way through which a scientific theory of art could exist "as the inevitable corollary to a scientific theory of consciousness" (Lavazza, 2009, p. 180).²⁰

What is missing in such a relation of a center and a periphery? It's Langer's fully acknowledged visionary position as well as the notion about the gap underlying our seeking for a meaning (in knowledge). To comprehend it fully, there is a useful Featherstone's assertion of the American poet William Bronk: "Meaning streams out of the 'black hole'" (Featherstone, 2013, p. 38).²¹ If the meaning is generated then by something existing, so to say, *beyond*

¹⁸ Lavazza introduces Carol's view on both personally and socially helpful role of literature in our life based on its ability to continuously develop flexible and creative respond to a changing surrounding.

¹⁹ Especially the one by the neo-Jamesian and complementary Antonio Damasio (1994, 1999, 2003) (Lavazza, 2009, p. 179).

²⁰ Lavazza states: "The 'embodied' aspect of the fringe as a background feeling partially counters the essentially cognitive understanding of the above authors, but the feeling of rightness and meaningfulness could be the evolutionary fruit of the primary survival impulse typical of all living things, which has become more 'sophisticated' in time and been applied to other types of mental content" (Lavazza, 2009, pp. 179–180).

²¹ Featherstone (2013, p. 38) quotes from the work by William Bronk, *Vectors and smoothable curves: Collected essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press) (Featherstone, 2013, p. 56) as follows: "Reality is brought to mind by the inadequacy of any statement of it, the tension of that inadequacy, the direction and force of the statement" (Featherstone, 2013, p. 38).

(reasonability)', Langer's philosophical conception of non-discursive art symbol provides us with much of its greatness than the discursive language itself. So, to attribute art with Bronk's term *black hole* would mean to appreciate its potentiality accounted for its capacity for human flourishing (effort to achieve self-actualization and fulfillment within a context of larger community). Coming back to the idea of object's existence implying its non-existence, a 'black hole' implying our human looking for meaning (cf. Featherstone, 2013, pp. 37–38) and Langer's view of art symbol and its function in our life, all these notions infer that richer art symbol meaningfulness reduces the gap underlying our seeking for a meaning and supplies us with greater selfhood. Also, above-mentioned Margaret Browning explains Langer's conception of aesthetic dimension of our mind. Simply said, Browning understands emotions formed and proactively transformed into art in our consciousness as substitutes for direct physiological response and she conceives of language (art being one of its forms) as interpenetration of personal and social (Browning, 2017b, p. 191). Reversely taken, such a process changes also our culture and our personal feelings. Herewith, cultivation through art is a relevant dimension.

At this point, Langer's term non-discursiveness comes into one's attention. Featherstone gives priority to the role of Langer's artistic non-discursive symbols and non-discursive thinking as well (Featherstone, 2013, p. 51). In the following passage, he explains it as based on their ability to show primacy of the affect leading communication with patients: "The psychoanalytic object we seek is the *Subject*, the fabled *Self* [author's emphasis]. One cannot speak to it or from it: one can only speak it into existence" (Featherstone, 2013, p. 55).

There is a proportional relation between potentiality of knowledge enabled by art symbol and its expressiveness. And the possibility to express springs only from the necessity (to do so), which comes into existence out of the 'black hole', i.e. out of the absence of any (*discursive*) meaning to be gained. The primary condition for such a process is communication, or interaction. That's the meaning of Featherstone's statement "speak it into existence" – it's any neglecting of the 'black hole'. Also, Lavazza appreciates this aspect of Langer's concept of *feeling* through his comment on Donald Dryden's analyses (2001, 2003, 2004) of her work.²²

What is missing then in our differentiation of the common from the artistic? It's *letting go*. The human condition is characterised by an innate and unrelenting pursuit of significance, a phenomenon that can be traced back to our evolutionary origins. This intrinsic need to ascribe meaning to our existence gives rise to a dimension of perception that is imbued with aesthetic qualities. Asking for the difference between art and non-art, it's necessary to differentiate these two poles by means of their dynamic correlativity. It actually signifies a non-discriminative way, i.e. through *letting go*.

²² Lavazza (2013, footnote n. 17, p. 174) specified this as follows: "[Dryden]...performed a faithful rereading of [her] aesthetics in neo-Jamesian terms", especially in regard to their interpretatively complicated and misleading term *feeling*.

Such a mental condition requires our mind to keep the tension between two opposite poles of its perception balanced in a correlational, dynamic, not a static manner.

3. Western Neuroscientific Categories in Dialogue with Eastern Philosophical Thinking on Art

Eastern mode of thinking about art and its articulation appears to be counterpart of the above-mentioned Western neuroscientific points of view on the principles of functioning of aesthetic experience in our minds and lives. Undoubtedly, spreading of light spectrum on a subject matter of how Susanne Langer's conceptual style of thinking about (especially) art would be understood favourable for the current aesthetics trends, including Eastern-based everyday aesthetics, it will require much wider than the narrow beam of light that is going to be flashed. Anyway, even though it does not deal with the complexity of a topic in dispute – Langer's work *bridging divides* of Western and Eastern philosophical tradition, it aims to cover a constant adjustment of reading Langer's works under this light as well. Doing it, Langer's remarkable ideas and logic would be still proved as offering a thriving way to deepen and enrich current aesthetic-philosophical trends of thinking about art. Using Raquel Cascales's – the contemporary professor of Anthropology and Ethics in Design and Theory of the Arts in Philosophy at the University of Navarra (PhilPapers, 2025) – pertinent description in the lately published book *Mujeres en la filosofía* (Cascales, 2024), Langer's work is understood the one that even “anticipates the solution of both exacerbated modern rationalism and contemporary radical emotivism” (Cascales, 2024, p. 121). Naturally, wider beam spread means further research so as to address also the importance of inquiring about the unacknowledged Langer's position – about the level of brightness of this scholar staying the same over her lifespan as well as the decades following it. As Cascales says, there is no doubt that despite Susanne Langer's – “the first American woman to be considered a professional philosopher” (Cascales, 2024, p. 108) – involuntary distance kept from then “predominant scientific paradigms” (Cascales, 2024, p. 110), “[her] ideas continue to resonate in contemporary philosophy” (Cascales, 2024, p. 122).

3.1 Eastern Philosophical Thinking and Nothingness

To flash some introductory light on Langer's *bridging divides*, the following part deals with just two aspects of Eastern philosophy as presented by two contemporary authors commenting on their philosophical-aesthetic functionality and their origin. It's worthy of one's attention to reflect how Japanese scholars encounter with conceptualization of nothingness, in other words emptiness, and (artistic) creation. For them, it's one of inherited lineage of thinking resulted from their crucial philosophical figures such as Nishida Kitarō. Comparing it with Susanne Langer's thinking about the category of *feeling*, herewith as the one giving coherence to all dynamics of our life, and its development in her works, progressive deepening of her original type of logic would appear as that of deeper consideration.

Lately published *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Philosophy* by Michiko Yusa (2019) summarises relevant contemplations on the developmental stages of Japanese philosophy, dealing with both the past and present comparative dialogue with the Western philosophical articulation as well. Upon the third part on aesthetics, Raquel Bouso Garcia penetrates into the current, so-called *intercultural aesthetics* as presented by two contemporary European thinkers, Italian philosopher Giangiorgio Pasqualotto and Spanish thinker Amador Vega. Garcia writes:

In the position of both Pasqualotto and Vega the transformative element of the philosophical practice, characteristic of the understanding of philosophy as a way of life, finds a reference point in traditional Japanese aesthetics, which is understood as an artistic training and an art of living. (Garcia, 2019, p. 188)

According to Garcia, Pasqualotto's intercultural perspective establishes "cultural identities as [...] the result of the interaction of diverse cultures" (Garcia, 2019, p. 190) and it actually helps to opt for philosophy of equality thanks to diversity that enables "understanding and transformation [...] without diluting the diversity into one homogeneous mass" (*Ibid.*). Here, one can observe Nishida's influence. Quoting original statements, Andrew Feenberg (2019, p. 24) presented "Nishida's conception of a 'global world' (*sekaiteki sekai*)", in which our humankind destiny "is to fruitfully combine Western and Eastern culture in a 'contradictory self identity.' This concept refers to a synthesis of (national) individuality and (global) totality in which the emerging world culture is supposed to consist" (Feenberg, 2019, p. 27).

Interestingly, one can reflect again on affinity with Western neuroscientific categories as established through their functionality in the human mind. Garcia highlights Vega's main contribution (Garcia, 2019, p. 192f.), namely the release of a space for creation through nothingness. In Garcia's view, the "notion of nothingness [...] appears as a question that can bring closer together distinct cultural traditions [...] It is the hermeneutical key with which to interpret both artistic works and the creative process" (Garcia, 2019, p. 195). Similarly to Featherstone's 'speaking *Self* into existence', Garcia's analysis mirrors Western dimensions through the Eastern thinking tradition as follows: "It is in the experience of artists that the Eastern idea of artistic life as a process of 'dis-identification,' a shedding of the ego-self that allows the artists to liberate in themselves a space for creation, a space through which art will express itself" (*Ibid.*).

To grasp the Eastern-based idea of intercultural aesthetics as analysed by Garcia's study of these two contemporary European thinkers, one needs to understand also Pasqualotto's *aesthetics of emptiness*.²³ In Garcia's view, Pasqualotto defines Japanese cultural conceiving of aesthetics by means of *askesis* to imply the path of "reduction to the essential" (Garcia, 2019, p. 191), and this term is not

²³ Garcia (2019) analyses especially two books by Pasqualotto (from 1992 and 2001) that present his *aesthetics of emptiness* and evolve from analytical philosophy through Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Adorno, Horkheimer and Heidegger (Garcia, 2019, pp. 189; pp. 190–192).

used to indicate a 'theory of beauty' but rather to refer to a realm of practice and sensibility characterized by the activity of *giving form to experience*. Aesthetics [...] is a *discipline* in the sense of *training* or *askesis*. This does not imply that aesthetics is an artistic burden but rather a way of giving form to life, or even the *art of living*. (Garcia, 2019, p. 191)

Of course, Garcia ascribes this Pasqualotto's notion stemming from the standpoint of Buddhism and Daoism, in which everything in itself "exist[s] in a conditional, provisional, and interrelated way [...] identity is thought of a self-contradictory" (Garcia, 2019, p. 190). Thus, Garcia continues, "emptiness in Asian tradition should not be understood as mere nihilistic negation, but rather it should be taken as the condition without which nothing – no event – is possible" (*Ibid.*). As such, "this dialectic of empty and full experienced by the artist is recreated and captured in the work of art" (Garcia, 2019, p. 191). Therefore, what artists need is "to achieve an emptiness within, thereby making them able to generate form" (Garcia, 2019, p. 192).

Conclusively, conceiving of Garcia's analysis of Pasqualotto's conception of *art of living*, one can find the possibility for Western neuroscientific similarities. It's with Hodgkin's birth of new meaning as an evolutionary trace of human being, as well as with Kauffman's 'dangerous edge' being a condition for the appearance of new forms. What comes to mind as well is James's conception of 'feeling' used by Weber to explain our non-animalian preference, i.e. feelingness for (aesthetic) value, Lavazza's notion about evolutionarily conditioned persistent existence of 'unusually intensified fringe' that enables our brain to acquire (aesthetic) meaning, and, finally, it's Bronk's 'black hole' that enables springing of meaning as explained by Featherstone. We find all these Western views pointing to art and its symbol as a dialectical means to declare the meaningfulness of emptiness. New, especially artistic forms are born just out of its existence. Such a notion is analogous to Nishida's philosophy itself. Drawing out the implications of Nishida's *place of absolute nothingness*²⁴ for his dialectic, Feenberg schematized its four levels as follows:

1. Judgment, or knowledge of nature: the known abstracted from the knower.
 2. Self-consciousness, or psychological self or knowledge and action: the knower/doer abstracted from culture.
 3. The world of meaning or value as ground of action: the self considered in its cultural significance.
 4. 'Absolute nothingness': experience as a field of immediate subject-object unity underlying culture, action, and knowledge making them possible as objectifications of this prior unity.
- (Feenberg, 2019, p. 49)

Getting back to Garcia (2019), one can, moreover, find a crucial point of such a correlational conception "lead[ing] us to think about reality in terms of a process rather than essence and objects" (Garcia, 2019, p. 192). And that's exactly where not only Lavazza's neuroscientific *letting go* is about to be reflected, but also Langer's concept of art as based on the non-restrictive category of *feeling* in a processual manner. As already mentioned, Chaplin

²⁴ Feenberg (2019, footnote n. 27, p. 138) ascribes this systematic interpretation of Nishida's thought to original work by Iwao Kōyama (1935).

(2021) finds this aspect of Langer's work foundational for the understanding of her philosophy of art.

Finally, it's the category of silence as offered by Garcia that leads us a way to imply also Langer's evolutionarily established non-discursiveness. For Langer, every human being takes steps from a *person* to a *creator* and back, and it embraces a non-restrictive, evolutionary path of our process of meaning formation, both discursively and non-discursively. Reminding us of our capability to speak *Self* only *into* existence (by Featherstone), and of Langer's conceptualisation of discursive and non-discursive language ways, one finds implicational Garcia's (2019) quotations of Ueda Shizuteru as follows:

*'What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.'*²⁵ [...] When we are rendered speechless, silence is not the end. For we would put into words what causes us to remain silent. It just is not true that there exists somewhere and somehow some unspeakable reality. What is real is the event that stirs us into moving from language toward language. (Garcia, 2019, p. 195)

Summarising with appreciation of Pasqualoto's and Vega's pioneering role in introducing Western dialogue with Japanese philosophy, Garcia thinks about artists' engaging with the continuity between the unutterable, yet still expressible, thus meaningful silence (Garcia, 2019, p. 197). Laura Elizia Haubert (2019) used still some other term to comprehend the principle of ineffable meaning or *non-discursiveness* (Langer's term) as correlated with discursiveness. She applied the term "confluence" (Haubert, 2019, p. 229)²⁶ between everyday and artistic experience to describe what she considers a cardinal, although sometimes misinterpreted principle in John Dewey.

3.2 Langer's Work Bridging Divides

In Susanne Langer's work, one can observe how she progresses from the conceptualization of philosophical-aesthetic categories to the complexity of their functionality for human mind and culture. And it's just our mind which, in accordance with her thoughts, constructs not only a space but our world, not only a group but our society, and not only signs, language and their narrow, inherited forms but also our symbols, art, and culture. In her final magnum opus *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1982), it becomes leading also to a possibility of finding implications in Eastern concept of emptiness's meaningfulness and Western neuroscientific perspectives within this matter. Then, she summarised:

[...] mind is a purely human phenomenon, evolved from a unique mental proclivity, and [...] a treatise on mind is an essay on human feeling. The objectification of subjective sense of balance [...] has a natural counterpart, the subjectification of the protosymbolic object as an image. The feeling projected into the well- or badly balanced external object comes back to its producer as an image of equilibrium, secure or precarious as it may be [...]. (Langer, 1982, p. 49)

²⁵ It is Garcia's quotation of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1961, p. 151).

²⁶ She says that "one should not make the mistake of thinking that he sees [life and art] as identical, but strives to show continuity between these domains and to focus on this kind of continuum rather than to focus on differences" (Haubert, 2019, p. 224).

Such a perspective meets in Langer's *Feeling and Form* (1953) with art's instructional nature for our existence as follows:

Every good work of art has [...] something that may be said to come from the world [...] This 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. (Langer, 1953, p. 253)

Getting to Langer's concept of *feeling*, it non-restrictively penetrates life itself, giving a form to all its spheres, therefore also to the most abstract one, human culture. One of her most famous statements to define this term: "As I use the word, in defining art as the creation of perceptible forms expressive of human feeling, it takes in all those meanings; it applies to everything that may be felt" (Langer, 1962, p. 85),²⁷ had started what later became even more typical for Langer – her anti-dogmatic attitude. While reading her books, it's of one's interest to realize the way this theme is developed by this "hybrid philosopher" (Cascales, 2024, p. 111), who moved in both continental and analytical philosophy (*Ibid.*) in order to catch up "the centrality of feeling in all its dimensions, from the purely cognitive to the purely physiological response" (Cascales, 2024, p. 115) – as Cascales has lately emphasised. In fact, it's Langer's already-analysed original logic (Košiřanov, 2024, pp. 154–163) that penetrates also even her work preceding the final one, namely her *Philosophical Sketches* (Langer, 1962). In this book, she expressed non-restrictive understanding of the term *feeling* (Langer, 1962, pp. 8–9, 85, 98) by means of which she offered even a new definition of *symbol* especially in art.

Of equal importance to Langer's *feeling* is what Cascales (2024) properly describes as a focal point of her works presented in "same theme and from all possible points of view: meaning" (Cascales, 2024, p. 109). Langer's concept of meaningfulness becomes presupposition of our life as lived, and hence there are two correlates in her philosophy (of art as well), i.e. meaning and feeling, both of and in life. And our looking for meaning presupposes neuroscientifically established 'black hole' filling process. It signifies a birth of creation. The more intensive these processes are, the greater the possibility of making art, the true masterpiece(s). In *Feeling and Form* (1953), Langer writes as follows: "Above all, however, art penetrates deep into personal life because in giving form to the world, it articulates human nature: sensibility, energy, passion, and mortality. More than anything else in experience, the arts mold our actual life of feeling" (Langer, 1953, p. 401). Anyway, already in her most famous *Philosophy in A New Key* (Langer, 1942) – Cascales (2024) stresses its status "of one of the most successful books of the twentieth century [...] and one of the most cited in the last hundred years" (Cascales, 2024, p. 113) – Langer sketched her earlier definition of symbol through non-reductive intersections. She directed reader's attention to their functioning on a basis of complementarity as follows: "The parent stock of both conceptual types,

²⁷ Already in her *Feeling and Form* (1953) – the work preceding her *Philosophical Sketches* (1962), Langer had introduced this definition as follows: "Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling" (Langer, 1953, p. 40). Elsewhere she also says that the arts create forms to express the *life of feeling*.

of verbal and non-verbal formulation, is the basic human act of symbolic transformation. The root is the same, only the flower is different” (Langer, 1942, p. 143).²⁸ Eventually, Langer’s original dualism is expressed in this book when she also says: “A mind that works primarily with meanings must have organs that supply it primarily with forms. [...] All sensitivity bears the stamp of mentality” (Langer, 1942, p. 90). With the following books, this principle can be repeatedly reflected in conceptualisations of discursiveness and non-discursiveness or, for example, individuation and socialisation (e.g. the seventh chapter *Man and Animal: The City and Hive of Philosophical Sketches* (Langer, 1962)). Such a correlational continuity of life and mind elements establishing our culture is reflected again in her final *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1982) as follows:

[...] the organism, being built of acts – in themselves highly complicated events – makes permanent changes in the material it exploits. [...] That is the process of individuation, the counter-aspect of the integration that establishes the matrix. (Langer, 1982, p. 92)

Moreover, specifically in *Philosophical Sketches* (Langer, 1962, pp. 4–5f.), Langer requests a real scientific definition for those days’ subject matter of just-about-to-evolve psychology, i.e. mind. At that time, she wanted to define mind employing philosophical establishing of its “conceptual framework” (Langer, 1962, p. 6) that would be based on the category of (again) indiscriminate *feeling* as forming a basic distinction between living beings and non-living things. Anyway, unlike those days “sterile theories of mind” (Langer, 1962, p. 8), she believed it wouldn’t mistake “the notion of feeling as a separate sort of entity, ontologically distinct from physical entities” (*Ibid.*).

In order to comprehend Langer’s philosophy, the above-mentioned contemporary Langerian expert Donald Dryden has just lately (Dryden, 2024) underlined her iconic term *feeling*, critically solved and comparatively reflected on its development. As well as the above-analysed conclusion about Langer’s conceptual specificity, Dryden has also concluded with both its emotional/perceptual and cognitive/conscious parameters whose understanding would, in his view, really help to understand her philosophy (Dryden, 2024, pp. 133–147). Besides, it would also help to appreciate it.

4. Conclusion

It has become the aim of this paper – on a par with Dengerink Chaplin – to set up an inspiration to understand Langer also through non-Western concepts of aesthetics and philosophy. It remains exposed and worth further study. Undoubtedly, to comprehend, hereby appreciate Langer’s philosophy, it would also be very beneficial to deepen as much as possible the discussion of Langer’s aesthetic contributions for the latest scientific understanding of aesthetic brain (see, for example, Magda Polo (2024) and Raquel Cascales (2024)).²⁹

²⁸ Also, to define music, she complements language discursiveness (as a spectrum of rationality) with non-discursive possibilities as follows: “Such non-discursive forms, charged with logical possibilities of meaning, underlie the significance of music” (Langer, 1942, p. 265).

²⁹ Cf. Polo (2024, pp. 349–368) and Cascales (2024, pp. 107–122).

Dengerink Chaplin has just lately finalised her thoughts on Langer through anticipating time thanks to her “Bridging Divides” (2021, p. 261) between many spheres of human interest,³⁰ including the Western and non-Western thinking tradition. It’s what Garcia would agree with as well.³¹ Since both Langer’s (Western) multi-layered and multifaceted terminological scope of her conception of *life of feeling* and Eastern non-restrictive, interrelated conception of *art of living* intersect by means of a human being and their evolutionarily conditioned process of seeking for a meaning, thus giving form to a life, it’s just the deeper study of their intersections that could draw a possible future line of development for aesthetics and a profound comprehension of Langer’s legacy. What’s more, it would lead to a way how to meet Cascales’s opinion on a considerable “debt [of gratitude] the history of philosophy owes [this woman philosopher]” (Cascales, 2024, p. 122).

Anyway, it’s not only past and present reflections of Nishida’s heritage in Japanese cultural and philosophical trends, but also current fields of study, e.g. everyday aesthetics, that postpone our attention to Langer’s “Bridging Divides” (Dengerink Chaplin, 2021). Traces of this have just lately appeared in *Bloomsbury Handbook of Susanne Langer* (2024). There, Thomas Leddy has optimistically (pre)viewed Langer’s work for such a possibility (Leddy, 2024, pp. 263–274). Dewey’s non-Western detour of extraordinary experience intrinsic in the everyday in his concept of aesthetic experience – as analysed by Tordis Berstrand in the recently published volume on everyday aesthetics by Kvokačka and Giombini (2021) – has become the most inspirational for this lately established field of aesthetics.³² Possibly, Langer’s detour of (extra)ordinary philosophical conception of *feeling* as presented in her works would bring new implications for everyday aesthetics that we appreciate today as “a new frontier of aesthetic discourse” (platostandfordedu, 2024). Surely, to specify these implications for a line of Langer (Western) and everyday aesthetics (Eastern-based) debate, it will require much further research in Langer’s *bridging* than the scope of just one paper.

Since, as it’s scientifically established, our mental world and its possibility to perceive aesthetically is a means of how to understand ourselves, it’s crucial to keep non-reductive interdisciplinary dialogue between neuroscience and philosophical aesthetics (as the French researcher, interested in the cognitive processes involved in aesthetic experience Bruno Trentini (2016) suggests). This would mean to open other than art-centred vistas by means of attention to some other aesthetic category than (Western) pre-determined beauty. That’s how we

³⁰ She defines Langer as forming connections between “humanities and natural sciences [...] philosophy and the special sciences [...] analytical and continental philosophy” and, finally between any institutional and let’s say unprofessional art forms (Dengerink Chaplin, 2021, pp. 258–261).

³¹ He concludes with a notion on recent years typical of “interdisciplinary studies on aesthetics [...] and different works that explore the relation between aesthetics and notions such as negativity, nothingness, and emptiness” (Garcia, 2019, p. 196), and ascribes intercultural approach “preparing a way ahead” (Garcia, 2019, p. 197).

³² Berstrand (2021, pp. 196–197) explains it as opposed to “the Western [...] preference for extraordinary experiences of art outside the realm and domain of the everyday”. It was just Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934) that means breaking point within Berstrand’s quest for “more inclusive aesthetic concept [author’s emphasis]” (Berstrand, 2021, p. 197).

can also open and understand our real, dynamic, Eastern and Langerian dialogue with art, instead of leading a nonsensical monologue. All in all, it's just thanks to Langer's achievements that we can understand the gift of symbolization as presented by Langerian logic (and enhanced in aesthetic experiencing – as explained in Eastern thinking tradition as well). By its means, evolution has always offered us a chance to reflect on ourselves. Hereby, it has permanently provided us with the possibility to learn about ourselves. The mirror of our scientific field of history has justified our results, both successes and failures of such a process. Margaret Browning (2017) defined it as follows: "Our capacity as a species to project feeling into symbolic form produces what we call the 'objectivity' of our sciences and the 'subjectivity' of our arts, two different but equally mindful pursuits" (Browning, 2017, p. 203).

Western neuroscientific works, analysed in this paper, study the need for understanding non-exclusive, non-reductive complexity of experience with art. In hoc, they provide us with the notion that it is not an issue of internalisation or externalisation, engagement or detachment, intensification or reduction that underlies the uniqueness of aesthetic experience but the one of resulting (relational) signification. Similarly, Eastern thinking tradition finds nothingness the point of new creation, hereby its meaningfulness. This stems from our interpretation, thus interpenetration with the world and, consequently, with ourselves. Such an experience of and with art, that is understood by means of non-reductiveness of perception and cognition, excludes standardisation. Consequently, adapting neuroscientific explanations, it retains originality as an inevitable part of itself.

Lavazza (2009, p. 175) considers a man's mind in constant interaction with the world as well. Hereby, he understands them as an ever-learning human being. In other words: once we start a phenomenological dimension in our mind, that Dengerink Chaplin (2021, p. 258) defines as anticipated through Langer's philosophy, and the hinges of it can be found already at the beginning of her path as a philosopher of mind, when she said:

These new researches [Carnap's linguistics, Whitehead's philosophy of organism, symbolic logic, Cassirer's study of symbolic and conceptual forms but also phenomenology] open wide perspectives on the nature of imagination, with its relations to perception and reason on the one hand, and to emotion, feeling, and the deeper organic processes on the other. Here may indeed be the beginning of a "theory of mind" more capable of clarifying and supporting the humanistic disciplines than the classical epistemology of sense impressions and their retention and combination. (Langer and Gadol, 1950, p. 131)

we can't stop it. So it's not possible to leave out either individual choices or cultural practices altering components of the brain, which remains open to the development throughout a lifetime – as Browning (2017b, p. 185) emphasised as well.³³ Thanks to it, our life dynamics – including art and culture – continue opened also to in-determinism as a necessity for living.

³³ Browning (2017b, p. 185) writes as follows: "As Langer appreciates, it is our individual organic capacity to feel, our non-symbolized consciousness, that forms the basis of our membership in our symbolic culture, a culture that requires our involvement to be produced and reproduced and a culture that we may change, whether purposely or not". For further reading see also: Browning (2017a, pp. 1075–1095; 2019, pp. 25–52).

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