

‘Life is obviously not easy to define’

Viral politics and dynamic patterning in Susanne K. Langer’s philosophies of art and life

Iris van der Tuin

In this chapter I work with Volume One of the interdisciplinary trilogy *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* written by the American philosopher Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985).¹ Langer’s earlier monograph *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* was a Harvard University Press bestseller from its publication in 1942 onward,² and her work was widely read by college students in the 1960s.³ In 1953, Langer’s monograph *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* was published,⁴ a monograph that was developed from *Philosophy in a New Key*. The work gradually fell off the canon though, with Langer’s readership growing into a small number of dedicated and committed readers in the years after Langer’s death. Langer is back to getting a larger following today.⁵ I would argue that the three *Mind* volumes – first published in 1967, 1972 and 1982 respectively – are the pinnacle of Langer’s philosophical career. They use ‘human feeling’ as the common ground from which to integrate knowledge and insights from a great many disciplines and fields of study covering the full academic spectrum.⁶ According to the logic of integrative interdisciplinarity, the three hefty volumes, when taken together, form a more comprehensive understanding of ‘mind’. *Mind*’s first volume engages primarily with biology, physiology, genetics and the theory of evolution. In this chapter, I zoom in on Langer’s work on the virus as a ‘borderline case’, in her language, or as a ‘boundary object’, in the language of American feminist, theorist and historian of science and technology, Donna Haraway,⁷ as a launch pad to expose how, as per the project of this twenty-first-century post-pandemic book, art has a prefigurative capacity for exposing and understanding forms of sociability and of life. After all, engagement with the biological sciences and with psychology

is taken on in *Mind I* from the sole vantage point of the theory of art as it was expressed in *Feeling and Form*.

In the chapter, I do not argue that Langer's philosophy is posthumanist. I will, however, hint at how her unique and innovative work, the starting point of which are the expressions of *human* feeling as *living* forms, can only be fully appreciated with the benefit of hindsight. About viruses and all other borderline cases, Langer ends up saying that they are characterized by an interplay of 'individuation' and 'involvement'. The former is a concept that we nowadays ascribe to the French philosophers Gilbert Simondon (1924–89) and Gilles Deleuze (1925–95). The latter captures a process that we, today, describe with a word such as 'entanglement', from American theoretical particle physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad or, alternatively, with the word 'assemblage' – in French '*agencement*' – from Deleuze and his co-author, the French psychiatrist, philosopher and activist Félix Guattari.⁸ The following quotation from *Mind I* provides a first introduction to both Langer's use of art as steppingstone and the intricate dynamics of individuating-in-involvement:

Though we have no physical model of [the] endless rhythm of individuation and involvement, we do have its image in the world of art, most purely in the dance; for this dialectic of vital continuity is the very essence of the classical ballet. Think only of that perfect example, *Les Sylphides*: individual figures emerge and submerge, *pas de deux* develop and melt back into the web of choric movement, divisions for only to close over what was, for a moment, the path of an advancing stream. And not only in dance but in all choric works of wide range this largest rhythm appears: the 'tide in the affairs of men, that, taken at the full, leads on to fortune'; or, in the highest musical form that has yet been developed, the sonata, which is choric in structure whether scored for the keyboard or the full symphonic orchestra: a scarcely discernible new theme may begin a history, but even if it rises to apotheosis it can never transcend the stream, which may finally integrate with another individual form or even simply engulf it.⁹

It is my goal in this chapter to unpack the 'politics' of the virus as well as dynamic patterning per se in a series of close readings of relevant sections from Langer's *Mind I* as well as of auxiliary material that gives insight into the development of the trilogy and its philosophical propositions.

Susanne Langer started out as a logician studying for her BA (1916–20), her master's degree (1922–4) and her PhD (1924–6) first under Ukrainian-American logician Henry M. Sheffer (1882–1964) and later under English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). She received her

degrees at Radcliffe College, then the women's annex of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In spite of her start as a logician,¹⁰ Langer became established for her philosophy of art, particularly as the result of the publication of *Feeling and Form*. Following a career of teaching philosophy at various colleges and universities in the United States, Langer received a grant from the Edgar J. Kaufmann Charitable Trust of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1956 in order to do the full-time research for what eventually became the *Mind* trilogy.¹¹ This trilogy was developed from *Feeling and Form*, but it is a masterpiece in the philosophy of life.

Langer wrote the three volumes of *Mind* in Old Lyme, Connecticut, where she had bought a cottage halfway through the 1950s. Prior to that, Langer lived in Cambridge for her education at Radcliffe and the first years of married life (1916–21, 1922–3); in Vienna, Austria, for an exchange (1921–2); in Worcester, MA, for her husband's first job at Clark University (1923–7); and again in Cambridge when William Langer (1896–1977), a Harvard alumnus, returned to Harvard after his time at Clark for a tenured position in the Department of History. Susanne returned to the city of her birth – New York – after their divorce in 1942, a painful event that coincided with the publication of *Philosophy in a New Key*.¹² Before the divorce and while raising two sons with the help of a nanny, Langer worked as a tutor at Radcliffe for fifteen years; after the divorce, she took on the teaching positions at different academic institutions both in New York City and elsewhere in order to finally land a full professorship at Connecticut College in New London, CT, in 1954: that is, by the time she was fifty-nine years old. By 1962, and as a result of the long-term Kaufmann grant getting more generous over time, she was able to step down from all administrative duties and from teaching in order to devote herself fully to reading and writing for *Mind* in both Old Lyme and in the woods of Ulster County, NY, where Langer owned a cabin around the town of Hurley.

Mind I is a volume with two interconnected goals. The first goal is to read biological knowledge and insights rigorously; the second is to establish the study of psychology on its own terms, not on terms of either biology or of the well-established disciplines of physics and chemistry. It is the project of *Mind I* to demonstrate how 'the artistic semblance of life' opens up to a 'holistic symbol' or a 'synoptic view' that biology studies parts of already, which psychology has not yet gotten around to, and for which physics and chemistry do not offer the overarching model.¹³ In later volumes of the trilogy, Langer takes the more comprehensive understanding of 'mind' gradually as the starting point for organizing disciplinary materials ranging from anthropology and archaeology

to computer science and mathematics. This is how Langer formulates the genesis and gist of her philosophical undertaking in the introduction to *Mind I*:

there is a value in images quite apart from religious or emotional purposes: they, and they only, originally made us aware of the wholeness and over-all form of entities, acts and facts in the world; and little though we know it, only an image can hold us to a conception of a total phenomenon, against which we can measure the adequacy of the scientific terms wherewith we describe it. [. . .] 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.¹⁴

The very basis of this discovery, as Langer explicitly calls it, is formed by the implications of the insight from *Feeling and Form* that works of art are expressive of feeling, objective and living forms. A lucid formulation of both the nature of works of art and the relation between *Feeling and Form* and the *Mind* trilogy can be found in an undated composition titled ‘Philosophical Implications of the Theory of Art Contained in *Feeling and Form* that can be consulted in Houghton Library of Harvard as it has been archived there as part of the Susanne Langer Papers, a 30-box, 38.75-linear-feet archive gifted to the library by Leonard C. R. Langer (1922–2009), Susanne’s eldest son, in the period 1985–95. On four single-space typed pages, Langer provides a forward-looking summary of the approach to *Mind* (unbeknownst of the fact of it ending up being a trilogy), its total project, naturalist premises and her then-immediate reading-and-writing project. She writes under the subheading ‘The Approach: From Art to Nature’:

We have come to regard ‘life’, today, as [. . .] a metabolic process, and consequently can make statements about it in exact chemical and physical terms. Under the new rubrics gathered from philosophy of art, we may view the ‘life of the mind’ as a process of essentially similar form. The fundamental rhythms of mentality and feeling are presented, not only in a vague way, but in amazing detail, by the fundamental rhythms of art. The inviolable character of the art symbol bespeaks the inviolability of organic structure. Art makes its abstraction not from rudimentary forms, as science tends to do, but from the highest eflouescence [*sic*] of life, the dynamic patterns of feeling and thought. But progressive study of art forms shows that these highest phenomena contain and express the entire gamut of vital events down to the basic anabolism and catabolism of physical organic existence.¹⁵

This summary is repeated in a more condensed form and from a slightly different angle in *Mind I* itself, where Langer writes:

The fact that expressive form is always organic or 'living' form made the biological foundation of feeling probable. In the artist's projection, feeling is a heightened form of life; so any work expressing felt tensions, rhythms and activities expresses their unfelt substructure of vital processes, which is the whole of life.¹⁶

In both quotations we see immediately that Langer's philosophies of art and life are intimately connected. The premises are naturalist, indeed, and the very insight of expressive-form-as-living-form must be taken very seriously, albeit that the word 'living' is at times scare-quoted.¹⁷

Let me continue with a card from Langer's card-index file, a file that Langer worked on and used from 1916 until she had to give up philosophy entirely for reasons of growing blindness and old age.¹⁸ The file consists of 37 iron drawers and roughly 25,000 paper cards, and can currently be consulted at the Houghton.¹⁹ The card that I wish to single out here provides a view of the typically Langerian entanglement of art and life, and their philosophies, in a vignette about a motif that was found, first, in a tree living and dying across the road from the house where Langer lived in either Old Lyme or around Hurley and, second, as the Indian stupa. She used this vignette to muse on 'clues to feeling in art', that is, on 'what is expressed' by works of art.²⁰ The card reads verbatim as follows:

Note – clues to feeling in art [↵ Return] Across the road from my house is a pile-up of vegetation: a red cedar completely overgrown with vines. The deepest mass of them is honeysuckle, at present dark green; over that, climbing more on the honeysuckle than on the cedar (though of course on both), a woodbine that has gone to the very top and turned down over itself, hanging in a curtain over the whole. In a few places, golden green bunches of bittersweet show through the dark red woodbine against the green honeysuckle and slightly different green bits of cedar that one can see. In front of the tree, on the wall, is a mass of poison ivy that sends its trailers to the foot of the tree and up the trunk inside the dead structure of choked twigs. This is not visible from outside at all. The whole setup has the form of an Indian stupa, and the profusion of surface forms is reminiscent of Indian sculpture. [↵ Return] The stupa is a fairly obvious phallic symbol. The cedar is a 'natural symbol,' phallic in total form, but not only a symbol of generation; it also expresses the profusion of competing lives – overpopulation without the poverty we usually associate with it. It is overpopulation with immense wealth of living form, spreading all sorts of shapes over the exterior of the tree. The tree, of course, is dying. [↵ Return] Has the Indian stupa with

its mass of composed forms covering every inch of it a similar motif? What is the inside of it like? – *Usually empty, dead.* [↵ Return] India has lived so long with its vast population that the popular mind is shaped by it, and feeling has incorporated it. Art, the composition and expression of feeling, naturally reflects it. It has become the basis of style. *To us, who find it new, it is terrifying.* [↵ Return] *Motif is properly the localization of forms of feeling in actuality.* Many actual feelings are similar in form but quite different in value, even to the extent of being sad or happy.* Motif is their locus. [↵ Return] In good art, the play of values is greater than words make it. There is sense within sense. [↵ Return] All symbolism in art should be enrichment of the art symbol. [↵ Return] *See Ivy Campbell-Fisher.²¹

Judging by the placement of this card in the file, safely stored in acid-free paper boxes in Houghton Library, it was used for the writing of chapter 4 of *Mind I*, titled ‘The Projection of Feeling in Art’. Reading the card, we encounter a motif articulating phallicism in a combination of generation – which is a duplex concept consisting of actualized generational classes and generativity per se – and competition – representing here not poverty, but instead abundance. Competition comes to the fore as a duplex notion too as it ambiguously combines ‘overpopulation with immense wealth of living form’ that suffocates the cedar, just like the stupa that is, while abundantly decorated on the outside, regarded as ‘empty, dead’ inside. Langer reads the overgrown cedar (an actual living form studied by biologists) through the decorated stupa (an actual phenomenon of feeling expressed by artists and craftspeople and serving religious or emotional purposes) as a way to differentiate, not between actualized values such as sadness and happiness, but between such values and what could be called, for the time being and with the benefit of hindsight stemming from years of studying poststructuralist and new-materialist theories, ‘valuing’. I consider Langer’s combined philosophy of art and life a new-materialist theory *avant la lettre*, given that she works from a naturalist premise, and I read her as poststructuralist *avant la lettre* based on the following methodological choice she made: ‘the principle that working concepts must be functional rather than substantive.’²² The combination of new materialism and poststructuralism, here, is predicated on their shared non-reductive or inclusive premises that prefer to *study* instead of *presume to know* the workings of complex material, discursive and material-discursive apparatuses and systems across and within the spectrum of natures and cultures.²³ Admittedly, this combination of poststructuralism and new materialism may sound counterintuitive for some scholars.

Langer writes about 'valuing' in chapter 4 as part of a movement of taking the work of French writer Philippe Fauré-Fremiet (1889–1954) to the limit by reflecting on how 'works of art exhibit the morphology of feeling.' She continues: 'the matrix of a work is always an idea, a single idea whereof all apparently separate ideas in the work are further articulations ([art theorist Gustav] Britsch [(1879–1923)] would say, further differentiations). [. . .] In a work of art, the idea has to be embodied in a perceptible creation, worked out coherently as an organic form.'²⁴ Valuing, here, points at a threshold; it is the threshold between biology and psychology. How can the leap to such an abstract claim be made following a discussion of cedars and stupas, and of the work of a writer, Fauré-Fremiet, whose embryonal formulation of the threshold must be pushed beyond its terms?

In *Mind I*, the topic of valuing materializes in a discussion of respectively ordinary (i.e. everyday) projections of feeling that are incoherent and, let's say, free-floating, the limited and limiting power of discursive expression (literal language meant for direct communication), and the matrixial projection of feeling in art. Langer writes:

The tensions of living constitute an organic pattern, and those which rise to a psychical phase – that is to say, felt tensions – can be coherently apprehended only in so far as their whole non-psychical organic background is implied by their appearance. That is why every work of art has to seem 'organic' and 'living' to be expressive of feeling. Its elements, like the dynamic elements in nature, have no existence apart from situations in which they arise; but where they exist they tend to figure in many relationships at once. . . . This multiplicity of functions is reflected in any symbolic form that can express the morphology of feeling [. . .] the non-discursive structure of artistic presentation prevents art from ever being a symbolism which can be manipulated by general rules to make significant compositions, but at the same time is the secret of its great potentiality.²⁵

Valuing thus points at the shift from every day and discursive entities (the one, the many; possibly incoherent) to the artistic event (unity in multiplicity). The point, also to be found in poststructuralist philosophy and new-materialist theory, is that events can explain entities (as actualizations, articulations, differentiations), whereas entities never accrue to the level of the explanatory event.²⁶ In Langer's comprehensive formulation in the introduction to *Mind I*, this discussion, abstracted again, comes down to the following theorization:

If vitality and feeling are conceived in this way there is no sharp break, let alone metaphysical gap, between physical and mental realities, yet there are thresholds

where mentality begins, and especially where human mentality transcends the animal level, and mind, *sensu strictu*, emerges.²⁷

Whereas there exist entity-like physical and mental realities, we must not understand them as different in kind. We must say, though, that human and animal mentalities differ in degree. A similar threshold exists between the world of plants and the animal kingdom. The important point here is that the index card about a tree and the stupa opens a discussion about the virus, an *actual* living form that is *messier* than plant, animal and human entities and which is akin, perhaps, not to the cedar from the vignette above, but rather to its creeping vines.

Attention is paid to viruses in chapters 8 ('The Act Concept and Its Principle Derivatives') and 9 ('On Individuation and Involvement') of *Mind I*. In chapter 8, the virus is explicitly named a 'borderline case',²⁸ a characterization that is continued in chapter 9 where Langer mentions in passing that 'the status of viruses is uncertain'.²⁹ In both cases, Langer footnotes the work she builds on by referencing American geneticist and co-winner of a Nobel Prize in 1958, George W. Beadle (1903–89); Australian virologist and winner of a 1960 Nobel Prize, Frank Macfarlane Burnet (1899–1985); American microbiologist and virologist Lloyd M. Kozloff (1923–2012); and American biophysicist and virologist Robley C. Williams (1908–95).³⁰ The virus pops up immediately upon turning attention away from art and towards life itself: that is, upon '[t]urning from the symbolic presentation of life to the phenomena of its actual occurrence'.³¹ In this move towards literature that is unconventional for the traditional humanist, a literature that is meticulously referenced, summarized and cross-referenced in her card-index file and masterfully integrated in the *Mind* trilogy itself, Langer shows herself struck, first, by the differences between living and non-living entities, and between animate and inanimate nature, and, second, by the difficulties of maintaining established biological differentiations. She writes:

upon closer inspection, the boundaries between those two categories appear less and less sharp; there are borderline cases, such as viruses, which are hard to assign to one or the other, [. . .] 'Life' is obviously not easy to define.³²

And, indeed, viruses defy classification as they neither obey the laws of mechanics, as the non-living and the inanimate do, nor behave in wholly incalculable and unpredictable ways like the living and animate. This insight brings Langer to the realization 'that all [biological] categories tend to have imperfect boundaries'³³ and to developing the concept of 'acts' with which she sets out to deal 'not [. . .] with material parts of a living thing, but with elements [that is, acts] in the

continuum of life'.³⁴ These acts are Langer's way of philosophically 'approaching living form in nature' from the situated event upward, downward or sidewise, and on all levels of life's complexity. Given the project of also providing the grounds for a psychology on its own terms, and approaching the forms of mental life philosophically, it is important for us readers of Langer's work to immediately realize that *Mind I's* subsequent chapter (chapter 9) opens with a discussion of acts-without-agents, driven instead by 'vital activity' or 'agency'.³⁵ One could summarize that for avant-gardist Langer, presupposing an entity-like doer behind a consciously executed deed is too easy a theory. Rather, deeds are eventful.

The lines from chapter 8 that follow the introduction of the 'act' concept form the very beginning of Langer's unique philosophy of life developed from her philosophy of art:

[Natural] events arise where there is already some fairly constant movement going on. They normally show a phase of acceleration, or intensification of a distinguishable dynamic pattern, then reach a point at which the pattern changes, whereupon the movement subsides. That point of general change is the consummation of the act. The subsequent phase, the conclusion or cadence, is the most variable aspect of the total process.³⁶

Langer then lists the varieties of change that may occur (e.g. gradual or abrupt) as well as the possible relations among acts (e.g. horizontal or vertical) thus keeping activity ontologically prior. She continues as follows by very precisely formulating the crossing of the threshold towards human mentality:

These and many other relations among acts form the intricate dynamism of life which becomes more and more articulated, more and more concentrated and intense, until some of its elements attain the phase of being felt, which I have termed 'psychical', and the domain of psychology develops within the wider realms of biology, especially zoology.³⁷

Chapter 9 then brings in 'individuation' and 'involvement' as the two mirroring concepts with which a philosophical approach to psychology can materialize. As a true avant-gardist thinker, Langer, *as if* inspired by posthumanism and anti-anthropocentrism, develops a theory of mental or psychical reality from within, and as part of, physical or biological/zoological reality.³⁸ Individuation is the functional notion that conceptualizes the process of events producing entities, all occurring in a series of differentiating acts motivated by a 'vital situation': that is, 'a phase of the total life, the matrix from which motivation constantly arises'.³⁹ Involvement is the relational function.⁴⁰ Individuation and involvement

are complexly interconnected, and their interconnecting is at work almost everywhere in life.

Let us now return to borderline cases, because the fact that the borderline case of the virus defies standard biological classification got Langer going in the first place. Certainly, these cases are *involved* as Langer mentions the ‘physically connected populations (plants conjoined in rhizoids, stolons or rhizophores, colonial animals by a coenoecium or a coenosarc)’ as exemplary for involvement in chapter 9, and these populations (the plant populations) are indeed the vines from the index card discussed earlier.⁴¹ Involvement is how borderline cases work: relationally. Langer also writes about the case of the parasite: ‘what makes the parasite an organism in an environment is that it has fine control of the exchange of matter, whereas the organism it has invaded has, with respect to it, only gross or indefinite control of the contract transaction.’⁴² The relevant point here, for a precise philosophy of life as well as for a biology and a psychology established on their own terms, is that as organisms-in-environments that engage in a process of individuating-in-involvement, borderline cases such as parasites and viruses and, indeed, creeping vines too, contribute to the ongoing ‘patterning’ (my word) that is life itself. Langer writes:

An organism is a continuous dynamism, a pattern of activity, basically electrochemical, but capable also of large, concerted forms of action with further principles of organization. [. . .] The organism, *in toto* and in every one of its parts, has to ‘keep going’. Every act of a living unit transforms its situation and necessitates action under the impact of that new development as well as of any fortuitous changes coinciding with it. This is what Whitehead called the ‘creative advance’ of nature. It is certainly the pattern of life.⁴³

Whitehead, in *Process and Reality*, uses ‘creative advance into novelty’ for what I just called patterning,⁴⁴ so the influence of Langer’s PhD supervisor even on the *Mind* trilogy, the pinnacle of a very independent career, to say the least, is hard to miss.⁴⁵

And this is also how chapter 9, the chapter that clears the conceptual ground for a philosophical approach to psychology to materialize, closes: vital activity moves forward by individuation, by involvement, by mixtures of the two, and even by the two processes moving in opposite direction or directly clashing. These ‘dialectical dynamisms’ between individuation and involvement are driven by ‘the great rhythm of evolution’, says Langer, ‘which moves between them in a direction of its own, always toward more intense activity and gradually increasing ambients of the generic lines that survive.’⁴⁶ There is creativity in the

opportunism of all of this, Langer seems to suggest, in both non-human and in human life. 'Life is so opportunistic,' she argues, 'that every possible avenue of implementation and continuation is exploited [. . .].'⁴⁷ And regarding human life in particular, she ends on a quite critical note:

In human life, corporate acts are the most spectacular assertions of the species, extending its ambient even beyond the terrestrial surface; but they spring from the most individuating element in each brief life, the mind, and as soon as individuation is seriously frustrated, they also fall apart.⁴⁸

Evolution is the process that is responsible for integrating such literal and figurative highs and lows in its ongoing, dynamic patterning. Survival is often a matter of pushing back against an organism's falling apart by re-establishing itself in an environment, in an involved manner. This is a viral politics, one could argue, because, as Langer writes, 'under such conditions the organism can persist only by being involved with others of its own kind or of alien kinds that vicariously perform its waning function'.⁴⁹

It does not do justice to the comprehensive understanding formulated in the *Mind* trilogy to end on this note. And besides that, now that creativity is on the agenda, we are invited to fold the discussion back to art and the philosophy of art as vantage points for Langer's discussions of life, of philosophy of life, and of the sciences of biology and of psychology. The integrative approach of Langer's project as a whole is the approach that Langer takes herself, both in the *Mind* trilogy and in the individual and cross-referenced index cards. The current ordering of the cards appears as frozen in the early 1980s as the period in which the near-blind Langer was working on her archive with her dedicated research assistant Linda M. D. Legassie (dates unknown) after the completion of *Mind III*. This makes them appear even more as the building blocks of the trilogy. Let me, therefore, as a final step in this chapter pick out a second index card, a card that I found in a drawer in close proximity to a card referencing aforementioned American philosopher and psychologist Ivy G. Campbell-Fisher (1888–1948), the former professor in Aesthetics at Wells College in Aurora, NY, who featured on the first index card that I discussed earlier. The new card, filed behind a salmon-pink tab dedicated to the introduction to the *Mind* trilogy, reads verbatim as follows:

Note – principles of biological +artistic 'life' [↵ Return] The fact that vital functions, organic patterns, and physical tensions do not have direct counterparts in artistic functions, design, and illusory tensions is that there is a mediate transformation – the projection of life into the dynamic pattern of

feeling. It is this 'psychical' version of life that is objectified in art. (*The psychical phase of vital processes*) [↵ Return] The counterparts of physical organic factors and esp. biological principles are, therefore, often doubly transformed, and integrated past easy recognition in the structure of artworks. But they can usually be found if you know what you are tracing.⁵⁰

This index card is about thresholding and discusses the phase transitions between life (as vital), feelings (as subjective) and art (as objective) as a series of two transitions between, first, the physical and the psychological or 'psychical' and, second, the psychological and the artistic.⁵¹ Campbell-Fisher, who died before she finished the two articles 'to which [Langer] can subscribe almost without reservation', is staged in chapter 4 of *Mind I*.⁵² Langer enthusiastically celebrates Campbell-Fisher's work for the distinction it makes between 'referential, associational meaning' and 'intrinsic expression'. She criticizes her colleague, however, for blackboxing the distinction in the same stroke upon calling it 'the art miracle of fusing the two'.⁵³ Langer herself cracks open the black box:

The secret of the 'fusion' is the fact that the artist's eye sees in 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.⁵⁴

Sharpening Campbell-Fisher's philosophical toolbox by building on the philosophy of art as she, herself, provided it in *Feeling and Form*, which is concerned with how 'works of art exhibit the morphology of feeling',⁵⁵ Langer characteristically continues her discussion by moving into the direction of a philosophy of life (as implied in her philosophy of art):

The connection with the natural world is close, and easy to understand; for the essential function of art has the dual character of almost all life functions, which are usually dialectical. Art is the objectification of feeling; and in developing our intuition teaching eye and ear to perceive expressive form, it makes form expressive for us wherever we confront it, in actuality as well as in art. Natural forms become articulate and seem like projections of the 'inner forms' of feeling, as people influenced (whether consciously or not) by all the art that surrounds them develop something of the artist's vision. Art is the objectification of feeling, and the subjectification of nature.⁵⁶

This dialectics between objectification and subjectification provides the clue perhaps to how art can prefigure as-yet-unknown ways of living both among humans and in the more-than-human world. Let me explain.

For the clue provided by Langer to be found and worked with, I want to turn to Langer's plea for taking 'some analytic effort to distinguish between an emotion directly felt and one that is contemplated and imaginatively grasped'.⁵⁷ Both Campbell-Fisher and Langer criticize the commonsensical move to interpret art as representational: that is, as self-expression and direct communication of the emotions of the artist and as absorbed in the contingencies of the receiver's personal, emotion-filled life. The two women complicate common sense in aesthetics, psychology and epistemology. Campbell-Fisher, the aesthetician, writes about 'the emotions unnamed perhaps, but expressible and realizable in art' and argues: 'Those, and not personal emotional excitements, are what great artists give.'⁵⁸ Langer, the inter-disciplinarian, pushes Campbell-Fisher's non-representational or performative philosophy of art to a philosophy of life developed from such a philosophy of art. The former accomplished this task, first, by pushing Campbell-Fisher's work to the limit. Langer exchanges the emotional register that is limiting even when generalized for the more encompassing register of *feeling*. Second, she brings in her training in logic. Langer argues: 'The intuition of artistic import is a high human function which so far both psychology and epistemology have completely by-passed. Yet its roots lie at the same depth as those of discursive reason, and are, indeed, largely the same.'⁵⁹ And then she states: 'The analysis of spirited, noble or moving work is always retrospective; and, furthermore, it is never definitive, nor exhaustive. [. . .] The explanation of its peculiar resistance to systematic treatment lies in the nature of the symbolic projection effected in art.'⁶⁰ Great art, too, defies classification.

Notes

- 1 Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, vol. 1 (Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, [1967] 1970); *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, vol. 2 (Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, [1972] 1974); and *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, vol. 3 (Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, [1982] 1984).
- 2 Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, [1942] 1957). For information about the publication history of *Philosophy in a New Key*, see Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, *The Philosophy of Susanne Langer: Embodied Meaning in Logic, Art and Feeling* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 18.
- 3 See, for example, Howard Gardner, *Art, Mind, and Brain: A Cognitive Approach to Creativity* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 48.

- 4 Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953).
- 5 The three currently available monographs on Langer are: Rolf Lachmann, *Susanne K. Langer: Die lebendige Form menschlichen Fühlens und Verstehens* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2000), Robert E. Innis, *Susanne Langer in Focus: The Symbolic Mind* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009) and abovementioned Dengerink Chaplin, *The Philosophy of Susanne Langer*. For the growing interest in Langer's work, see Lona Gaikis, 'Susanne Langer,' *Oxford Bibliographies* (2020); available online: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0401.xml> (accessed 15 January 2021). See also the website of the international and interdisciplinary Susanne K. Langer Circle, founded in 2020: <https://langercircle.sites.uu.nl/> (same access date).
- 6 For 'integrative interdisciplinarity', see Allen F. Repko and Rick Szostak, *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory*, 4th edn (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2021). In the language of this type of interdisciplinarity, 'common ground' refers to the concepts and/or models with which knowledge and (possibly conflicting) insights from at least two disciplines or fields of study can be integrated and a 'more comprehensive understanding' refers to the integrated result. Langer herself has reflected on integration and/as interdisciplinarity; see some index cards in box 20 of the Susanne Langer Papers, 1895–1985 (MS Am 3110). Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- 7 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 26; Donna J. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988), 595. The third volume of Langer's *Mind* trilogy and Haraway's article 'Situated Knowledges' are only four years apart.
- 8 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1980] 1987).
- 9 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 55. The internal quotation is from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* from around 1600, a bibliographical fact that goes unmentioned in *Mind I*.
- 10 See, for instance, Susanne K. Langer, *An Introduction to Symbolic Logic*, 3rd rev. edn (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1967).
- 11 Langer had received a Rockefeller Foundation grant for *Feeling and Form* while teaching at Columbia University in New York in the second half of the 1940s.
- 12 Lachmann, *Susanne K. Langer*, 23.
- 13 For 'semblance', see Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 50–1 (and throughout the entire monograph): 'All forms in art [. . .] are abstracted forms; their content is only a

semblance, a pure appearance, whose function is to make them, too, apparent – more freely and wholly apparent than they could be if they were exemplified in a context of real circumstance and anxious interest. It is in this elementary sense that all art is abstract. Its very substance, quality without practical significance, is an abstraction from material existence; and exemplification in this illusory or quasi-illusory medium makes the forms of things (not only shapes, but logical forms, e.g. proportions among degrees of importance in events, or among different speeds in motions) present themselves *in abstracto*.¹⁴ See also Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2011).

14 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, xviii–xix.

15 'Philosophical Implications of the Theory of Art Contained in *Feeling and Form*' (undated), 5. The underlining is original. Box 5 of the Langer Papers.

16 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, xix.

17 See also *ibid.*, 61ff.

18 Winthrop Sargeant, 'Profiles: Philosopher in a New Key,' *The New Yorker*, 3 December, 75.

19 I undertook what is likely to be the first, and currently only, extensive study of Langer's card-index file in January 2020, right before the global Covid-19 pandemic made intercontinental travel impossible. Personal e-mail communication Donald Dryden, 5 January 2021. Dryden is a scholar of Langer who also processed her archive.

20 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 100.

21 Box 24 of the Langer Papers. The italicized parts of the quoted card have been added by Langer at three different (later) stages, after having completed the vignette. The underlinings are original; the *first* underlining, however, was added when working on, or with, the card (i.e. later). All this can be gleaned from the fact that not only Langer's typical fountain pen was used on the card (for the original vignette), but also both a pencil, a ballpoint and a red crayon (for the additions). The reference to Campbell-Fisher was also one of the later additions to the card. Campbell-Fisher's work is discussed in chapter 4 of *Mind I* and we will return to it in the final section of this chapter. For Langer on the stupa, see also *Mind*, vol. 3, 151ff.

22 'Philosophical Implications,' 3.

23 I wrote about non-reductive continental naturalism before in relation to another, rediscovered female scholar (French historian of science H el ene Metzger [1886–1944]), poststructuralism, and new materialism; see Iris van der Tuin, 'Non-Reductive Continental Naturalism in the Contemporary Humanities: Working with H el ene Metzger's Philosophical Reflections,' *History of the Human Sciences* 26 (2013).

- 24 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 100. This, and the part referenced in note 13, was written while explicitly reviewing the work of Fauré-Fremiet. Langer is explicit about pushing this work to the limit, thus explaining the method behind the project of the entire *Mind* trilogy: ‘works of art exhibit the morphology of feeling. I think Fauré-Fremiet would have agreed to it, though he did not really exploit its implications, which were blurred for him by the usual difficulty of distinguishing between the occurrence of feelings and the conception of them’ (Ibid.).
- 25 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 103–4.
- 26 Cf. the slogan ‘Beings do not pre exist their relatings’, explicitly introduced as Whitehead-inspired, from Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 6. I wrote about entities and events together with Nanna Verhoeff in the article ‘Interfaces (for) Diffracting Technobodies: A Science-Humanities-Design Perspective for an Algorithmic Somatechnics,’ *Somatechnics: Journal of Bodies – Technologies – Power* 10 (2020).
- 27 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, xix.
- 28 Ibid., 258. The composition ‘Philosophical Implications’ already hints at the possibility of ‘transitional forms’ that do not fit into the three biological “kingdoms” of plants, animals and humans on page 3 (scare quotes around the word ‘kingdom’ in original).
- 29 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 338.
- 30 George W. Beadle, ‘Genes and Biological Enigmas’, in *Science in Progress VI*, ed. George A. Baitsell (New Haven etc.: Yale University Press, 1949), 184–249; Frank Macfarlane Burnet, *Virus as Organism: Evolutionary and Ecological Aspects of Some Human Virus Diseases* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945); Lloyd M. Kozloff, ‘Virus Reproduction and Replication of Protoplasmic Units’, in *Dynamics of Growth Processes*, ed. Edgar J. Boell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 3-20; Robley C. Williams, ‘Relations between Structure and Biological Activity of Certain Viruses,’ *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 42 (1956).
- 31 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 257.
- 32 Ibid., 258.
- 33 Ibid., 259.
- 34 Ibid., 261.
- 35 See *ibid.* for ‘approaching living form in nature.’ See *ibid.*, 305 for ‘vital activity’ and *ibid.*, 307 for ‘agency.’ Chapter 9 starts on page 307.
- 36 Ibid., 261.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Cf. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, ‘Introduction,’ in *Posthuman Glossary* (London, etc: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 2. They state on the indicated page that

posthumanist and anti-anthropocentric theory 'assumes that the human is always partially constituted by the non-human and that their interaction is too complex to be reduced to a mere dialectical opposition.'

39 Ibid., 311–12.

40 Ibid., 312.

41 Ibid., 312. See also *ibid.*, 337 about symbiotic relationship as best characterized via involvement, not as an anomaly in relation to individuation.

42 Ibid., 26.

43 Ibid., 26–7.

44 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, [1929/1978] 1985), 35, 128, 222, 349.

45 Langer scholar Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin writes: 'Although Whitehead's supervision of [Langer's] thesis was minimal, his ideas and teaching were to have a major influence her own thinking.' See Dengerink Chaplin, *The Philosophy of Susanne Langer*, 15. See also Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 336, n. 53 for 'our great inspirer, A.N. Whitehead'; and Iris van der Tuin, 'Bergson before Bergsonism: Traversing 'Bergson's Failing' in Susanne K. Langer's Philosophy of Art,' *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 24 (2016).

46 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 355.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Box 25 of the Langer Papers. See note 17 for the key to underlining, italicization and so on.

51 'Thresholding' is, just like 'valuing' and 'patterning,' my choice of words.

52 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 85–90. The two articles discussed by Langer are: Ivy G. Campbell-Fisher, 'Aesthetics and the Logic of Sense,' *The Journal of General Psychology* 43 (1950) and 'Intrinsic Expressiveness,' *The Journal of General Psychology* 45 (1951). The posthumously published articles were delivered by Campbell-Fisher's husband.

53 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 86.

54 Ibid., 86–7; 'internal form' and 'external form' are used (according to Langer: wrongly) by Campbell-Fisher.

55 See note 19.

56 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 87.

57 Ibid., 89.

58 Campbell-Fisher, 'Aesthetics,' 268 in Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 88.

59 Langer, *Mind*, vol. 1, 89.

60 Ibid., 90.