**6  Whitehead’s Process and Susanne K. Langer’s Symbol**

(Hobbs, Robert. Robert Motherwell, Abstraction, and Philosophy (Routledge Focus on Art History and Visual Studies) (pp. 75-83). Taylor and Francis)

Picasso’s *The Studio* in Peggy Guggenheim’s collection served as a paradigm for several of Motherwell’s collages, beginning with his earliest works from 1943, as we have seen. This painting authorized one of Motherwell’s predominant views of collage and painting as preeminent means for setting up relationships between one or more nested images inside a given artwork that in turn repeats its overall perimeter. In addition to this *mise en abyme*, gainsaid through reworking the compositional model provided by Picasso, Motherwell’s collages enact an additional type of nesting, evidenced through each individual work’s enclosure of two-dimensional and/or low-relief fragments from the outside world, at the same time these collages literally constitute, in their entirety, discrete bits of this much larger realm. This internal-external progression of nested forms is certainly one viable way to think about making collages, and it has proven to be an enduring tactic for Motherwell’s contributions to this genre from 1943 until 1991 when he created his last ones. Moreover, since Motherwell objectified colors as things that he then disperses on canvas, his paintings are similarly involved in an internal/external dialectic.   
 There is a second favorite piece from Peggy Guggenheim’s collection that has provided Motherwell with a different and equally rich prototype for thinking about collage and painting, and it is the aforementioned 1925 field painting by Miró, notable for its unevenly thinned brown painted background, punctuated with a few somewhat ambiguous figures and signs. Instead of using first the space inside a work’s perimeter to reference an outside world, as the Picasso does, Miró’s painting conjures up a totally separate universe, replete in itself, at the same time it includes in this realm several revealing figurative references.   
 Considered together, these two paintings provide very different aesthetic tactics that can be understood not only in terms of Picasso’s and Miró’s prototypes but also in relation to Whitehead’s work and that of his former graduate student Susanne K. Langer, who completed her 1926 dissertation, “A Logical Analysis of Meaning,” under his direction. The first model, based on the Picasso painting, parallels Whitehead’s view of concrescing forces, which he has characterized, as noted earlier, in terms of “the throbbing emotion of the past hurling itself into a new transcendent fact,” to describe first the creation of the actual entity, which I have regarded as the art object itself, before becoming a source for the next stage of actual entities resulting from each individual viewer’s interaction with a given work. Differing from Picasso’s precedence, the Miró model might be understood as paralleling the basic contradictions that are formative for Langer’s thought. She considers artworks to be meaningful in terms of the *representational logic* of comparative analogies or metaphors, which she has defined in terms of “saying one thing and meaning another, and expecting to be understood to mean the other”[[1]](#footnote-1) and *presentational symbols*, whereby the work of art presents its own meaning directly as a qualitative whole, a type of gestalt, with each component “involved in a simultaneous integral presentation.”[[2]](#footnote-2)   
 Langer first met Whitehead in 1924 soon after he arrived in the United States from London, where he had retired from the position of Chief Professor of Mathematics at the University of London’s Imperial College of Science and Technology in order to join Harvard’s philosophy department. Whitehead came to Harvard with a most impressive reputation for having coauthored the *Principia Mathematica* as well as having written other books on philosophy and education. A graduate student at Radcliffe, Langer asked Whitehead to be her dissertation adviser even though her topic on logic seemed more in line with his earlier work with Russell and appeared to be further removed from his present metaphysical research.   
 To acquaint herself with Whitehead’s recent thinking, Langer attended his graduate seminar on metaphysics in which he was developing ideas for the series of prestigious Gifford Lectures, which he delivered at the University of Edinburgh during the 1927-1928 session—and later published as *Process and Reality*, one of his major and most challenging works. After receiving her PhD, Langer invited Whitehead to write a preface for her 1930 book *The Practice of Philosophy*. Twelve years later she dedicated her first major work in aesthetics entitled *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* to Whitehead, whom she referred to as “my great Teacher and Friend,” although she pointed out in her preface that “the writings of the sage to whom this book is dedicated receive but scant explicit mention.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Even when she was a graduate student working with Whitehead, Langer found Ernst Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which she had read in German, much more useful for her work. In her published research Langer rarely mentions Whitehead’s name, and her involvement in the logic of symbolic forms would suggest great differences from his work.   
 Until the late 1990s, philosophers tended to discount any reliance Langer might have had on Whitehead’s process philosophy. Fortunately, philosophers Randall Auxier, Donald Dryden, and Rolf Lachmann discerned Langer’s connections with Whitehead’s process theories, and their reevaluation resulted in the special 1997 issue of *Process Studies* which Lachmann edited.[[4]](#footnote-4) More recently, Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin has written *The Philosophy of Susanne Langer: Embodied Meaning in Logic, Art and Feeling*. In her book, Chaplin states:

Langer was immensely influenced by Whitehead’s thinking. This applies not only to his *Principia Mathematica* but to all his subsequent philosophical work, whether on science, perception, process or education.[[5]](#footnote-5)

One of the main reasons I view Langer’s work as a necessary contribution to my investigation of Motherwell and Whitehead is that her theories about the overall work of art as a presentational symbol help clarify the way Whitehead’s prehensive forces (his relational structures) function in artworks. For Langer, symbols differ substantially from signs: whereas signs only point to their referents, symbols are experiential in providing qualitative human perspectives through which individual artworks can be conceived and understood, so that works of art not only present special qualitative contents but just as importantly they also provide the lens for appreciating and understanding these distinct meanings.[[6]](#footnote-6)  
 Citing one of Langer’s unpublished manuscripts in his essay for the special issue of *Process Studies*, Dryden emphasizes her characterization of Whiteheadian metaphysics as “a strange creation by a great scientist” before qualifying this assessment. She does so by comparing Whitehead’s work to other great metaphysical systems in “go[ing] beyond the inventor’s literal conception” in order to constitute “a genuine philosophic myth—not an allegory or consciously poetic statement, but a living myth, intended as literal truth.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Ironically this view of groundbreaking philosophy as first a myth before becoming a rationally organized system is a theory Whitehead himself entertained, as I indicated earlier, so even Langer’s evaluation of Whitehead’s work can be likened to a criterion he articulated. In her introductory textbook *The Practice of Philosophy*, Langer historicizes philosophy as developing periodically over time through the introduction of such myths or overarching metaphors—we might consider them in terms of Thomas Kuhn’s later formulation of paradigm shifts—which are capable of setting up major changes in people’s way of thinking:

Such a discovery reorientates [sic] our whole world. It gives rise to a new outlook in philosophy, and in its time is apt to be hailed as the very Truth, the insight which reveals the whole secret of Being….[Such a set of originally intuited insights] must, in its original form, be regarded as a myth, which sets forth freshly and naively some new point of view…[while providing] new opportunities for rational construction.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Langer’s assessment is entirely in sync with Whitehead’s own view of “the leap of imagination reach[ing] beyond the safe limits of the epoch, and beyond the safe limits of learned rules of taste…[to produce] the dislocations and confusions marking the advent of new ideals for civilized effort.”[[9]](#footnote-9)  
 Because of her respect for Whitehead as an original thinker, Langer has taken some of his ideas, mainly prehensive elements concrescing into actual entities, and personalized them so that they accord with the logic of artistic symbols, even at the expense of reifying them. Since logic and later aesthetics are her prime subjects, Langer needed to redirect Whitehead’s process theory so that it was able to describe how works of art function. “I do not hold what is known as an ‘expressionist’ theory of art,” Langer has written, summarizing the route she took in *Philosophy in a New Key*, as she also was rethinking Whitehead’s view of feelings as energizing forces giving rise to a perpetually changing world. Instead, she wrote of “regard[ing] artistic expression of feelings as a logical expression, not a venting of emotions.”[[10]](#footnote-10)  
 By logical expression, Langer is referring to her new key—relational feelings—referenced in the title of her book, which she discusses in terms of music. Her new key is an abstraction; it moves beyond a simple outburst of emotions to structured realizations enabling them to be conceived in the work of art, and feelings taken from life are reconstituted as sets of analogies or metaphoric relations that can then be articulated as patterns of feeling in art on the basis of a common structure, which often takes the form of an analogy (simile) or metaphor that both share. As Langer points out in *The Practice of Philosophy*, “the expressiveness of any thing which functions as a symbol depends upon its logical structure….Moreover, the symbolic relation between any two things holds just in so far as the two things are analogous.”[[11]](#footnote-11) For one thing to symbolize another thing, one or more elements in the first thing must correspond to one or more aspects found in the second one. To illustrate this point, Langer makes her famous pattern-and-suit analogy:

Whenever we know that two systems exemplify the same pattern, we know that any essential configuration in one system will find its analogue in the other; just as the lines and proportions of a suit are analogous to those of its paper prototype. Therefore, any alternation or combination that can be made in the one system can also be made in the other….Thus any logical construct in a system can be *expressed* by an analogous logical construct in any other system having the same form.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Langer’s pattern-and-suit analogy can be used to explain her view of artistic form’s modus operandi—the pattern itself—which she regards as a relational structure and an overarching symbol that often subsumes under its auspices conventional symbols. Conventional symbols or signs in the Miró field painting mentioned earlier operate at a different semantic level than his superintending symbol, the painting in toto as a primary type of feeling gestalt. One of his sign systems consists of the abstract signs for a male in the upper left, another is used for the female represented in the center, and a third is connoted by the yellow flame in the lower right, which might signify love or passion. These signs evince structural and metaphorical relationships to traditional signs for masculine rationality (the sun) and female sexuality (the curvaceous figure “8”), both taking place on an earth-colored brown field. The formal system under which this group of painted signs is subsumed serves as the overarching symbol constituting the work of art that in turn qualifies each of the conventional signs found in it. In other words, the painting as symbol constitutes the *lens* through which this work and its various components are to be understood. In consideration of Motherwell’s interest in this painting by Miró, I suggest that he was engaged with Whitehead’s process theory when considering his collages as constellations of different energies and also with Langer when considering how art as a presentational symbol, i.e., a relational structure, can itself be an analogous form of cognition about the world.   
 When Langer takes Whitehead’s theory of actual entities as relational structures and redirects it to formulate her view of symbols in the visual arts and in music as nonverbal types of understanding, her work helps Motherwell crystallize his own thoughts about how abstract works of art can serve as modes of cognition. He does this most empathically in 1963 when he analogizes his own relationship with his chosen artistic media in terms of love—thereby joining aspects of Whitehead’s and Langer’s philosophy in his own work:

Now, if a creative person in the arts is a person with an extraordinary capacity for love…he therefore directs his love toward the other thing in human existence as rich, sensitive, supple and complicated as human beings themselves; that is to say toward an artistic medium, which is not an inert object, or conversely, a set of rules for composition, but a living collaboration, which not only reflects every nuance of one’s being, but which, in the moments in which one is lost, comes to one’s aid not arbitrarily and capriciously…, but seriously, accurately, concretely *with you*, as when a canvas says to you: this empty space in me needs to be pinker; or a shape says: I want to be larger and more expansive; or the format says: the conception is too large or too small for me, all out of scale; or a stripe says: gouge me more—you are too polite and elegant; or a gray says: a bit more blue—my present tone is uncomfortable and does not fit with what surrounds me.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Like Whitehead, Langer regards feelings in art as analogous structures enabling them to be envisioned, a stance that might seem to erode the power of its presence (her representational logic). But, in a contradictory fashion, she also joins this substitutive and analogical situation with the power of art as a formal gestalt (her presentational symbol). She does this in order to maintain the centrality of art’s occurrence, an approach not unlike Miró’s painting in Peggy Guggenheim’s collection in maintaining its status as first and foremost a discrete and separate entity before one looks more closely for the formative analogies and metaphors giving rise to the abstract personages inhabiting this special alternative world. In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Langer concludes with a gestaltist view of art as a wholistic and integrated presentation:

The meanings of all other symbolic elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure. Their very functioning as symbols depends on the fact that they are involved in a simultaneous, integral presentation. This kind of semantic may be called “presentational symbolism,” to characterize its essential distinction from discursive symbolism, or “language” proper.[[14]](#footnote-14)

To the concept of art as a presentational symbol, a formal and conceptual gestalt, Motherwell responded circuitously in his public lecture entitled “Symbolism,” which he delivered at Hunter College in 1954:

But the symbolic thought is in the work, so to speak, and not *about* it; otherwise you would be thinking a symbolizing of a symbolizing, not merely symbolizing. I do not think it is possible to do both at once. At least I have never had a thought about painting while painting, but only afterwards. In this sense one can only think in painting while holding a brush before a canvas, and this symbolization I trust much more than the thinking that I do *about painting all day long*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Even earlier, in the transcript for a lecture given in 1949, but never published, Motherwell responds more directly to Langer’s theories; in fact, he quotes at length from her *Philosophy in a New Key* to elucidate the way in which meaning can inhere in a work of art. This selection of passages from Langer’s text is used to explain how symbols can be understood as a form of meaningful communication different from everyday speech. Motherwell held Langer’s explications of the ways symbols function in the highest esteem “as some of the most moving passages in modern philosophy.”[[16]](#footnote-16) He points out that she posits two current epistemological assumptions (1) “that language is the only means of articulating thought, and (2) “that everything that is not speakable thought, is feeling.” If both these assumptions are true, he then hypothesizes that large portions of human experience might not be able to be communicated; however, he takes note of Langer’s theory that every language has a vocabulary and syntax and is capable of translation from one language to another. In verbal languages some words are equivalent to other words and also to combinations of them; meanings can be expressed in many ways. But nonverbal languages like painting and music do not share these characteristics. Motherwell cites Langer’s following statement, “They [symbols in art and music] have neither words nor syntax nor a dictionary, nor are capable of equivalent translation into another language, nor are they capable of generalizing, as words do.” According to Motherwell, Langer is affirming that the work of art is “first and foremost a direct presentation of an individual object,” which can be used to formulate symbols, whose elements are “involved in a simultaneous, integral presentation” and whose meanings are determined, as noted earlier, by their relation within the artworks’ overarching structure, which they in turn support. Langer characterizes this type of symbolism, as noted earlier, as presentational to distinguish it from the discursive type or language proper. To reinforce Langer’s concept, Motherwell includes the following quotation from her *Philosophy in a New Key* in his talk:

The recognition of presentation symbolism as a normal and prevalent vehicle of meaning widens our conception of rationality far beyond the widest boundaries, yet never breaks faith with logic in the strictest sense. Whenever a symbol operates, there is meaning; and conversely, different classes or experience—say, reason, intuition, appreciation—correspond to different types of symbolic meditation. No symbol is exempt from the office of logical formulation, of *conceptualizing* what it conveys; however simple its import, or however great, this import is a meaning, and therefore an element for understanding.

Motherwell then cites Langer’s statement pertaining to her conviction that such a method would bring “within the compass of reason much that has been traditionally relegated to ‘emotion,’ or to that crepuscular depth of the mind where ‘intuitions’ are supposed to be born.” Her statement provides him with a theoretical basis for believing feeling can be given symbolic form in his art because symbols are definite forms of communication and accrue meaning from the relations of the elements composing them. Motherwell highlights the following conclusion from Langer’s argument:

If all thinking is fundamentally symbolizing, language is a different kind of symbolizing from painting; the relational structure that each represents is different in kind; and consequently expresses different meaning relations, i.e., the meanings best expressed in words cannot be communicated in painting, nor can painting meanings be converted into words.

When symbols are regarded in this way, he concludes, painters do think in very definite and articulate ways, even though they think in painting terms, not in words:

The curse of a painter’s existence is that he lives in a verbal society, and is consequently supposed to be articulate. If you people could only guess the worlds of meaning that cannot be said in words, that we are able to articulate in painting every day!

Motherwell summarizes his conviction that paintings can function as articulate symbols, and an artist’s most important thoughts are not verbal, even though they may incorporate words. Speaking analogously, one could hypothesize that colors and shapes are Motherwell’s vocabulary, the relational structures are his syntax, the brush his voice, and he himself a conduit, all of which work in unison to present “feelings, the expression of the world as felt.” In this phrase Motherwell is referring not only to his own feelings but also to the feeling/energy expressed by his media; the conflation of the two form integrated structures, which he equates with symbolic thinking.   
 While Motherwell’s analysis of symbolic thought in the visual arts demonstrates his endorsement of Langer’s presentational symbolism, as my analysis suggests, it also depends on Whitehead’s view of prehending feelings or vectors of energy stemming from the world, the artist, the act of creating itself, and the actual entity that is being formed through the concrescence of these forces, all of them coming together in the process of creation. One can conclude that Motherwell was well enough versed in Whitehead’s view of creative dynamics as a basis for the universe and Langer’s consideration of artistic symbols as modes of thinking to join the two: Whitehead’s theories thus enabled him to think about the creative process, while Langer’s explications, provided him with a way to comprehend how his nondiscursive work can communicate on different semantic levels: first, as founding an overall symbolic or emotional gestalt, and second, as functioning similar to metaphors by representing distinct iconographic forms.

**Notes**

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1. Susanne K. Langer, *The Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Susanne K. Langer, “Preface to the First Edition,” in *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Process Studies*, special Issue: Langer and Alfred North Whitehead, ed. Rolf Lachmann, 26 (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dengerink Chaplin*, The Philosophy of Susanne Langer: Embodied Meaning in Logic, Art and Feeling*, pp. 100–101. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Donald Dryden, “Whitehead’s Influence on Susanne Langer’s Conception of Living Form,” *Process Studies* 26, No. 1–2 (1997): 62–85, http://www.anthonyflood.com/drydenlangerwhitehead.htm, consulted 5 April 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Susanne K. Langer, *The Practice of Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1930), pp. 173 and 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Susanne K. Langer, “Reply to Henry Aiken’s Criticism,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 7. No. 4 (June, 1947): 672. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Langer, *The Practice of Philosophy*, p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Langer, *The Practice of Philosophy*, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Robert Motherwell, “’A Process of Painting” (5 October 1963) in Terenzio, ed., *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Robert Motherwell, “’Symbolism,” Lecture presented at Hunter College, New York City, 24 February 1954. Ashton and Banach, eds., *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Robert Motherwell, ‘Transcript of Untitled Lecture on Susanne K. Langer and Visual Thinking’, c. 1949, n.p. All the quotations included in the following discussion of Motherwell and Langer are taken from this transcript. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)