

Helmuth Plessner's Philosophy of the Work of Art in Anthropological and Phenomenological Perspective

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims to explore the theme of art in Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology and show the possibilities of its use in the analysis of artistic creation and artwork. The article is divided into three parts: in the first part, it presents the background of Plessner's anthropological project and the intersection of his philosophy with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. This strategy enables the synergy of both approaches which can be used for reflection of art. The second part displays the scope and ingenuity of Plessner's approach through a selection of texts where he addresses art. And finally, the third part delves into a functional elaboration of the anthropology of an artwork, specifically, using Max Beckmann as an example, into the question of anthropological foundations in art making, and the question of new form in art. For the latter question, I use the approach to architecture as an example relying on corporeality and Umwelt as guiding concepts. This analysis provides, on the one hand, description of anthropologically significant phenomena of artistic production of the first half of the twentieth century, and on the other hand, reveals functional determinations of corporeality, the world, and resonance with the world, the so-called equilibrium, which can be used to understand the artwork, and artistic production in the creation of a new form in art.

Keywords: philosophical anthropology, phenomenology, Helmuth Plessner, Edmund Husserl, Max Beckmann, corporeality, Umwelt, resonance, new form.

Helmuth Plessner, one of the main representatives of philosophical anthropology, was Edmund Husserl's student, studied zoology and philosophy and his contribution is mainly associated with the concept of excentric positionality.

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This concept is introduced in his book *Levels of Organic Life and the Human* which is one of his most significant writings, and it is divided into three parts dealing with the plant, animal and human spheres respectively. The final chapter presents three anthropological principles which later become essential for his further investigations of man, corporeality, relation to the environment, behaviour, sociality, and expressivity. These are: natural artificiality, mediated immediacy and the utopian standpoint. This paper attempts to demonstrate that Plessner's conception represents a *heuristic approach* useful for capturing anthropologically significant phenomena manifesting in a particular structure of an experience, description of which may be done using phenomenological resources present in Plessner's work.¹ This approach will then be applied to works of art and artistic creation.

Intersections between phenomenology and anthropology

The hypothesis I am drawing from is the interference of Plessner's anthropology and Husserl's phenomenology which is confirmed by biographical contexts², as well as overlaps of the ideas.³ Let us examine the possibilities of convergence and functional cooperation between phenomenology and anthropology from both sides, i.e. from both Plessner's and Husserl's perspectives.

The philosophical and scientific background against which Plessner's major work of 1928⁴ can be interpreted, both positively and critically, is extremely rich. Here, I aim to highlight the connection with Husserl's *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure*

¹ Originally a medical student, Plessner, under the influence of Hans Driesch and his lecture "Philosophical Psychology," took up biology and philosophy and studied with Husserl in Göttingen (Driesch, for example, writes to Husserl: "Plessner is primarily influenced by you," see Carole Dietze, *Nachgeholters Leben. Helmuth Plessner 1892-1985*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006, p. 34).

² See *ibidem*.

³ See Thiemo Breyer, "Helmuth Plessner und die Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität," in *Bulletin d'Analyse Phénoménologique*, 8(4), 2012; Maren Wehrle, "Medium und Grenze: Der Leib als Kategorie der Intersubjektivität. Phänomenologie und Anthropologie im Dialog," in Th. Breyer (ed.), *Grenzen der Empathie. Philosophische, psychologische und anthropologische Perspektiven*, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2013, pp. 217-238; Jaroslava Vydrová, "The Intertwining of Phenomenology and Philosophical Anthropology: From Husserl to Plessner," in P. Šajda (ed.), *Modern and Postmodern Crises of Symbolic Structures*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021, pp. 41-62.

⁴ Plessner also mentions the context of his work in the two introductions to the editions of *Levels of Organic Life and the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019, pp. xv-xxxv). "It is too early, incidentally, to decide which forces have been most significant in the emergence of the new philosophical disciplines, whether it is psychoanalysis or *Lebensphilosophie*, cultural sociology or phenomenology, intellectual history [*Geistesgeschichte*] or the crises in medicine" (p. xvi).

Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy II. Despite not being published during Husserl's lifetime, and despite Husserl constantly revising his manuscripts, their theme resonated profoundly. Husserl was engaged in exploring the concept of "units of constitution of things, the body and the soul,"⁵ while also aiming to clarify the relationship of phenomenology with natural sciences, psychology, and spiritual sciences.⁶ These discussions sparked debates in academic circles, shaping a research theme evident in the works of other contemporaneous thinkers. The central inquiry revolved around capturing the subjectivity of experience and knowledge in a manner that is both appropriate and plausible, without resorting to reductionism.

Husserl played a significant role in fostering these discussions, which were also apparent in anthropology during that period. However, he was also reacting to the works, which he believed were straying from the phenomenological agenda. In 1933, at the invitation of the Kant Society, he wrote the text "Phenomenology and Anthropology," where he positioned himself against the trend of anthropologizing philosophy. While critical, this text can also be viewed as instructive, emphasizing the importance of refining the method of addressing questions about human being and maintaining focus on phenomenology. In text about the meaning of anthropology from 1932 Husserl asserts that "the science of man appears to be a specific science. Man is in the world and does not himself contain the world, and the science of the human being, without going beyond the human being, qua human being, encompasses all the sciences."⁷ On one hand, the human affairs cannot be interpreted solely from the perspective of the world or of the objectification. Man exists within the world, but not merely as a component of it that can be fully comprehended from it. On the other hand, there are certain commonalities underlying the disciplines that focus on the world from a human perspective, leading to the study of human being. This affinity wouldn't be possible without "reasons in the subject matter itself."⁸ How to establish a science that isn't reductionistic or naturalistic, doesn't lose sight of the subjective perspective, and yet remains rigorous? Husserl's phenomenology distinguishes itself from the naivety of natural attitude as well as the naturalization of subjectivity. Through the phenomenological method, he elucidates these insights,

⁵ Marly Biemel, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in Husserl, Edmund, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch*, The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1952, p. xvii.

⁶ The second volume, included in Husserliana IV until 1952, underwent further collaboration with Edith Stein, who handled transcriptions and Husserl's textual enhancements between 1916 and 1918, and Ludwig Landgrebe, whose final transcription formed the basis of the edition. See Maren Biemel, "Einleitung des Herausgebers." The new edition (*Ideas II* and *Ideas III* volume) is now announced within the Husserliana.

⁷ Hua XV, p. 481.

⁸ Hua XXVII, p. 180.

bracketing them while also acquiring a new phenomenological and personalistic attitude. The origins of this knowledge lie within subjectivity and the new exploration of personal and spiritual realms, with a particular emphasis on behaviour, agency, cognition, being of the self in its environment (*Umwelt*), and with other people, in how one expresses oneself and creates—in specific analyses of possibilities, performances, experiences and human relations. These inquiries revolve around intentionality and motivation, not causality.⁹ Furthermore, this is the place where the fundamental intersection of phenomenology and anthropology lies as well, viewing anthropology as a spiritual science.¹⁰

As for Plessner, his references to phenomenology are occasional,¹¹ however, he implicitly values the phenomenological approach in multiple ways. He does not want to use phenomenology in the sense of a scientific method that provides a foundation (“foundation-securing”)¹² or in the sense of a theoretical interpretation. Its use is more important in uncovering the original phenomena:

Anthropology had at its disposal—and this is crucial—the means of phenomenological analysis, which made it possible to bring both empirical and philosophical accounts back to their original starting points. Wherever the danger arises that theories run into dead ends or that problems become dogmatic, where problems and theories fail, a pre-theoretical, direct, “demonstrative” (*anschaulicher*) contact can be acquired. In doing so, it is completely indifferent how phenomenological practice is interpreted.¹³

After Husserl’s departure from Göttingen to Freiburg in 1916, however, Plessner no longer follows his teacher, and the reason is transcendental idealism. He himself dates this departure from phenomenology to 1918.¹⁴ While it may seem that Plessner’s inclination towards the excentricity, towards the idea that the self’s foundation lies off-center clashes with Husserl’s ego-sphere, which strips the self of all

⁹ Hua IV, pp. 189, 195

¹⁰ Husserl differentiates between: “Man in the sense of *nature* (as an object of zoology and natural scientific anthropology)—Man as a *spiritual real* and as a member of the spiritual world (as an object of the human sciences)” (Ibidem, p. 143).

¹¹ Exploration in the original human experience (“the way it lives and not the way it presents itself to scientific observation”), thus “phenomenological description must step in here and lead the way to and stay with original intuition” (*Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, p. 20).

¹² Ibidem, p. xvii.

¹³ Helmuth Plessner, “Immer noch Philosophische Anthropologie?” in *Condition Humana*, Gesammelte Schriften VIII, 3rd ed., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017, pp. 235-236.

¹⁴ Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, p. xvii.

transcendent impositions, a more nuanced understanding of Plessner's confrontation with transcendentalism in phenomenology is feasible today, given new research and ongoing debates regarding transcendental phenomenology.¹⁵ Since transcendental subjectivity is not merely theoretical or empty but intertwined with intersubjective and corporeal dimensions, consequently this contradiction appears more surmountable. Transcendental phenomenology delves into the fundamental structure of experience, its progressions, and configurations, leading to inquiries into motivation, corporeality, and intentionality—examining experience in both its active and passive constitutions. Moreover, posing the initial investigative question appropriately aids in identifying convergences and avoiding imprecise analogies—specifically, in our case, regarding the notions of expression and corporeality, focusing on the connections with *Ideas II*. Husserl endeavours to explore the grammar of expression, where “this manifold expression in corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*) appresents mental *existence*, all this constitutes a double unified subject matter (*Gegenständlichkeit*): the human being—without ‘introjection’.”¹⁶

Although initially exploring Kantianism for answers—unlike Max Scheler, for example—Plessner ultimately refines his anthropological framework by revealing unique phenomena that fundamentally characterize human being: its expressivity and behaviour. Plessner provides insights into the structure of these distinctive experiences, shedding light on phenomena rarely addressed in philosophy but crucial for understanding the complexity of human being. Prominent examples include laughter and crying as distinct expressions of human being, alongside, for example, sport and role-playing, which serve as exemplary cases in anthropology. Additionally, Plessner delves into various forms of social interaction, examining the behavioural dynamics of diplomacy and tact or the roots of social radicalism. This is often intertwined even with what is seen in the paintings as artistic solution made by artist. From this follows that art and art-making can emerge as foundational inquiry in anthropology rather than mere additional reflection of human activity.

¹⁵ See Dan Zahavi, “Phänomenologie und transzendentalphilosophie,” in G. Figal, H.-H. Gander (eds.), *Heidegger und Husserl. Neue Perspektiven*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2009, pp. 73-99; Sara Heinämaa, “On the transcendental undercurrents of phenomenology: the case of the living body,” in *Continental Philosophy Review*, 54, 2021, pp. 237-257; Iulian Apostolescu, Claudia Serban (eds.), *Husserl, Kant and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020. Each of these approaches offers its unique perspective on Husserl's transcendental inquiry.

¹⁶ Hua IV, p. 166.

Art in Plessner's philosophy: introductory remarks

Plessner's engagement with the question of art can be approached on three levels. Firstly, there are instances where Plessner directly addresses art; secondly, art-making intersects with other anthropologically significant phenomena; thirdly, Plessner's own anthropological principles can be applied to analyses of art-making. While each area provides intriguing insights, I will focus primarily on the two latter levels after briefly surveying the first. This is because they provide valuable insights into the phenomenologically significant contexts surrounding the structure of artistic production.

In examining Plessner's texts, we encounter numerous passages where he grapples with the question of art. This includes critical contemporary analyses and explorations of visual perception, auditory experiences, and the relationship between hand and eye¹⁷ in artistic creation—exploring the *what*, *how*, and *why* behind artistic expression, as seen in painting, for instance. The covered topics range from expressivity and play in various contexts to discussions on music, modern art, the avant-garde across different domains, and the societal role of art. Additionally, Plessner's engagement with architecture, particularly in the design of his own house, offers further insights. The subtopics explored in his texts encompass concepts like kitsch, fashion, humour, and others. According to Carole Dietze, Plessner's deeper understanding of art history was fostered during his auxiliary civil service in 1917, where he worked at the museum in Nuremberg, aiding in the collection of Renaissance coins and commemorating the Reformation anniversary. Building on this experience, he later published text "On the philosophy of the history of the visual art since the Renaissance and Reformation."¹⁸ However, the main texts focusing on art emerged later and reflect Plessner's own philosophical-anthropological framework, such as *The Unity of the Senses (Die Einheit der Sinne)*, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, writings on socio-political issues, and texts on expressions, laughter, and crying. Additionally, Plessner's personal proximity to the art world, including interactions with artists and architects—such as his appreciation of Max Beckmann (1884-1950) whose three paintings he also owned—also informs us about his perspectives on art.

¹⁷ See Joachim Fischer, "'Ästhetische Anthropologie' und 'anthropologische Ästhetik,'" pp. 79-82.

¹⁸ See Carole Dietze, *Nachgeholters Leben*, p. 37; Helmuth Plessner, "Zur Geschichtsphilosophie der bildenden Kunst seit Renaissance und Reformation," in *Ausdruck und menschliche Natur*, Gesammelte Schriften VII, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003, pp. 7-49.

It is Max Beckmann who can provide us with an *immedias res* entry point for philosophical analysis. Although Plessner addresses him only minimally in theoretical terms, Beckmann's works are philosophically intriguing and, as we'll endeavour to illustrate, particularly significant for analysing corporeality.¹⁹ Notice especially those works produced after the First World War, a transformative period marked by the emergence of new artistic and social formations as well as formations of ideas, along with the discovery of fresh avenues of knowledge and creation, yet also witnessing an emerging crisis of the image of human being. What does such art express? For Plessner, the question of art and creation always arises within the context of human life in the world, in society, and amidst historical circumstances that shape possibilities for action and expression. On the one hand, art captures the spirit of the times—the atmosphere in which humans live—which is on the other hand shaped by their expressions and creations. However, this general statement doesn't merely linger on the surface of observing social conditions and art's development; rather, it becomes more precise when examining the structure of the experience at hand and the ways in which it manifests itself.

The dynamic structure of "artist—work—time and space" must be interpreted in Plessner's framework within the context of *excentric positionality*. The paradox inherent in this concept encapsulates human existence within the dynamics of experiencing (already existing in the world, taking part in a situation, undergoing experiences) and feeling it in relation to its integration into the context of life, other experiences, expectations, and memory. Human experiencing, feeling, and living unfold in correlation with the space and time one inhabits, similarly to all living organisms. Yet, in the case of humans, this doesn't occur in a purely centralized or purely external manner, distinguishing them from animal and vegetative modes of existence. However, it also doesn't happen in a fully transparent manner; even though humans understand their position, they cannot anchor their essence in a stable manner. Consequently, humans must grapple with their nature, as a matter that forces them to take a stance towards it and navigate their lives accordingly. This grappling with oneself, viewed through the lens of the three anthropological principles, reveals that human beings are both natural and artificial; they enact their nature by creating and utilizing various artifacts to navigate their situations—here, the hand serves as a prime example in its creative collaboration with materials.

¹⁹ Plessner is also linked to Beckmann by the fate of an emigrant who found refuge and internment in the Netherlands for a time. On the contrary, in his theoretical analyses, Plessner did not elaborate on Beckmann (see Carole Dietze, *Nachgeholters Leben*, p. 221). I am aware of one passage in Plessner ("Über die gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen der modernen Malerei," in *Schriften zur Soziologie und Sozialphilosophie*, Gesammelte Schriften X, 2nd ed., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006, pp. 276-277).

Humans experience both immediately and through mediated relationships with their environment and with others, all while embedded in their corporeality and experiencing immediacy. Human beings are drawn towards home, rootedness, and dwelling, yet simultaneously face uncertainty regarding their being in the world, continually confronting the question: What is my place in the world?

The conduct of life materializes in actions, creative endeavours, communication, and relationships; it manifests itself in the world. Human beings become themselves, emerging from concealment into the realm of manifestation, yet remaining partially veiled.²⁰ Here lies a distinctive characteristic of humans—their doubleness (according to Plessner the man is also *Doppelgänger*).

We want ourselves to be seen and to have been seen as we are; and we want just as much to veil ourselves and remain unknown, for behind every determination of our being lies dormant the unspoken possibility of being different. Out of this ontological ambiguity arise, with iron necessity, the two fundamental forces of psychological [*Seelischen*] life: the impetus to disclosure—the need for validity; and the impetus to restraint—the need for modesty.²¹

Starting from these principles, art becomes means of expressing one's identity through the dynamics of revelation and concealment in artistic expression, and as a form of creative activity, art serves as an expression of man's self-understanding. Just as a tangible object comes into existence through the utilization of a diverse array of tools, techniques, and means that individuals have at their disposal and have created for this purpose, an artist employs specific colours, techniques, and approaches to material, among other factors, in this endeavour. The significance of 20th-century art lies in the innovative techniques and forms of depiction crucial for deconstructing and rejecting imitative tendencies, aiming to lead both artists and viewers towards a true vision free from representational constraints.²² Consequently, art can become "devoted

²⁰ Plessner further delves into concepts like rootlessness, indeterminacy, unfathomability, and unanswerable nature of humanity's foundational question, labeling man as *homo absconditus* ("Homo absconditus," in *Condition Humana*, Gesammelte Schriften VIII, 3rd ed., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017, p. 357).

²¹ Helmuth Plessner, *Limits of community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*. New York: Humanities Press, 1999, p. 109.

²² One of Beckmann's most striking paintings is *The Falling Man* (1950), which in many ways captures the situation of man in Plessnerian determinations, although it is usually interpreted in the context of Heidegger's philosophy. Art can "liberate a person divided by life and enable to see into invisible spaces," it is a bridge to the unseen, but where the true reality lies (Beckmann in František Mikš, *Braque, Beckmann, Kokoschka, Balthus*, Brno: Barrister and Principal, 2013, pp. 136-141).

to vision," rather than ideas that underpin it.²³ This underscores the rootedness of creative activity in perceptual experiences (eye, hand, ear), as noted by J. Fischer.²⁴ These means are therefore not external constructs but are deeply intertwined with human nature as embodied beings.

Art encapsulates an image of the man, which is not merely a representation or external rendition of the inner experiences, or conventionalization of ideas. Instead, artistic creation as the activity of the subject is embedded in her corporeality, experience, and existence in the world. Art and creative activity are thus connected to Husserl's aforementioned concept of expression of mental activity, which he describes as an expression in corporeality expressing mental existence.²⁵ We can adopt a combination of anthropological and phenomenological approaches to further explore this connection.

The issues of corporeality in art: being a body and having a body

Central to this exploration is the concept of corporeality and the question is what understanding of corporeality does Helmuth Plessner bring to the forefront? He builds upon the phenomenological concept of corporeality and the distinction between the living body and physical body, grounded in the subjectivity of corporeality evident in self-experience, perception, and interactions with others. Husserl addressed corporeality in various contexts, and to elucidate, let's consider the three levels delineated by Sara Heinämaa in her conceptual clarification: "First, definitions that operate by the distinction between the *first-person perspective* and the third-person perspective; second, definitions that resort to the distinction between *being* and having (or *existing* and possessing); and, third, definitions that draw from the distinction between *subjectivity* and objectivity."²⁶ Phenomenology thus addresses the issue of corporeality from multiple angles, aiming to prevent the reduction of the body and to avoid the pitfalls of objectification and dualism. These challenges profoundly impact our understanding of the body across various fields, particularly scientific ones, where disembodiment or the degradation of corporeality can occur. Such issues may also arise in art and creation, such as in an overly

²³ Helmuth Plessner, "Über die gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen der modernen Malerei," p. 274; "wurde aus einer Kunst hingegebenen Sehens eine Kunst der Hingabe an das Sehen" (ibidem, p. 274).

²⁴ Joachim Fischer, "'Ästhetische Anthropologie' und 'anthropologische Ästhetik'," p. 79 f.

²⁵ See footnote 16 in this text; Hua IV, p. 166.

²⁶ Sara Heinämaa, "On the transcendental undercurrents of phenomenology: the case of the living body," p. 241.

idealized focus on interiority. As Thomas Fuchs explains, the relationship to the body can manifest itself in two problematic forms: “On the one hand, the subjective body is objectified as a mere physical thing; on the other hand, the bodily subject is hypostasized as a pure ego-consciousness.”²⁷ Drawing on Plessner’s insights, Fuchs demonstrates that consciousness and intentionality are deeply anchored in corporeality, body as the subject at the level of the proto-self, forming the foundational sensation of life.²⁸ In other words, this refers precisely to the fundamental enactment of life or the actions of living organisms within their environment.²⁹ Phenomenology emphasizes the significance of the pre-reflective and affective dimensions, which are essential for various aspects of human experience, including attention, movement, perception, and behaviour, in which all other higher symbolic systems are rooted.³⁰

What makes Plessner’s contribution significant is his depiction of the body within the dynamics of excentric positionality, representing both the body we are and the body we possess—*als Leib im Körper*—as Heinämaa articulates in the second definition of being and having. The terms *Leib-Körperlichkeit* or *Körper-Leiblichkeit* convey the interconnectedness of these two aspects, shaping the expressions and configurations of bodily experience and behaviour. Consider activities such as playing the accordion or learning to write with a pen, where physical abilities like muscle strength and coordination are important, especially hand muscles, back muscles, sitting balance, and coordination of parallel muscle actions are crucial as they affect the mastery of moving the instrument and the delicacy of the hand movements in writing. Muscle memory is particularly important in playing the accordion because hand movements cannot be visually controlled; however, these activities transcend mere physicality through creativity, synergy, spontaneity, subjectivity, and autonomy. Moreover, environmental interactions and affordances influence the formation of corporeality itself, as it actively integrates obstacles, mistakes, and unexpected events. In the act of creation or learning, subjectivity remains intertwined with the world and its tools. A mastered piece is the result of the interplay of the fingers, the instrument, the composition, where the subject no longer perceives her body in the pressure of the keys or in the grip of the pen (as *Körper*), but the body cooperates with the instrument, and allowing itself to be guided by the action the instrument

²⁷ Thomas Fuchs, *The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind*. Oxford University Press, 2018 p. 73.

²⁸ See *ibidem*, p. 117.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 138

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 145.

directs the hand (as *Leib*).³¹ In general, practical knowledge and skills are manifestations of living corporeality, enactive and holistic, embodying a comprehensive engagement that cannot be reduced to individual components.³²

If, then, the configuration of bodily experience entails one's interaction with the environment and with one's own corporeality, the inquiries in the realm of art-making about "what" is worthy of depiction and "how" it should be depicted naturally engage with the appropriate understanding of corporeality. On one hand, corporeality evolves within the environment and thus within the cultural context³³ and on the other hand, the representations, images of the body itself reflect the situation of man and perceptions of body. Essentially, "the body plays an important role in the relation of a person towards his or her culture, not only in the sense that cultural expressions often involve the body, but also in that the relation towards the body is influenced by culture."³⁴ Let's delve into specific examples of art and how the artists of this era perceive corporeality as expressed in their work.

Here, the body takes on two distinct forms, with notable examples of neutralizing, maintaining a distance from, and objectifying it. This is evident in the sterile depiction of the body (as sterile body schema) in various activities, including social interactions, role-playing, sports, and body display. In *Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism* (1924), Plessner discusses tactlessness in relation to art, bodily hygiene, emotional exposure, and extends this to tactlessness in relation

³¹ "the realized function of writing itself is only possible in the functional cycle of perception and movement, which ties organism, pen, and paper together into a dynamic unit" (ibidem, p. 128, see p. 131: "the-pianist-with-his-piano-in-the-soundscape," p. 144).

³² See works of Fuchs (ibidem), Gallagher ("Surprise! Why enactivism and predictive processing are parting ways: The case of improvisation," in *Possibility Studies & Society*, 1(3), 2023).

³³ "The resulting spatial proportions are adjusted for by the brain during early development. Such cuboid structures, however, are characteristic of urban cultures and rarely found in natural environments. As it turned out, in members of African round hut cultures the Müller-Lyer illusion in fact does not occur, or at least much less frequently" (Thomas Fuchs, *The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind*, p. 143).

³⁴ Kirsten Pols, "Strangely Familiar. The Debate on Multiculturalism and Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology," in J. de Mul (ed.), *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*, Amsterdam University Press, 2014, p. 273. As stated by Wulf: "his practical knowledge also includes the body movements that are used to stage scenes of social action. Discipline and control of body movements result in a disciplined and controlled practical knowledge which is stored in the body memory and enables human beings to enact the corresponding forms of symbolic and scenic actions. This practical knowledge is based on the social forms of action and performance established in a particular culture, and is therefore a pronounced but specific knowledge, limited in terms of its historical and cultural horizons" (Christoph Wulf, "The Creation of Body Knowledge in Mimetic Processes," in G. Etzelmüller, Ch. Tewes (ed.), *Embodiment in Evolution and Culture*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016, pp. 256-257).

to others and oneself.³⁵ While the body is indeed present in art and often emphasized, even seemingly transparent,³⁶ it is observed in a specific disembodied sense as an object. Plessner notes that the ambition of art is quickly exhausted and satisfied through schematism and quick fixes, whether through shock value (*le choc pour le choc*) or empty experimentation. The formalization of relationships, suppressed or unbridled emotionality, and inadequate attitudes toward one's own body provoke the opposite need—a quest for ways to reconnect with the body, to experience one's own corporeality, to be true to oneself. Examining Beckmann's works and those of his contemporaries reveals corporeality depicted in unconventional settings such as the circus, trapeze, cabaret, and taverns. They often serve as common themes for avant-garde artists, representing a release, a display of corporeality in its raw, elemental form since they are not the formal public spheres, nor are they the intimate spaces of private relationships, instead, they are transitional or escape spaces, and unofficial realms. In society of that time, both public and private spheres suffer from the pressure to publicly express emotions while simultaneously repressing and mismanaging intimacy, as diagnosed by Plessner. Conversely, disorder and lack of organisation are permitted in peripheral social spaces, contrasting with the sterile environments of cities and industrial architecture. The juxtaposition of the mundane, the ordinary, and the extraordinary is evident in the emphasis on certain objects or figures, such as a harlequin, bottles, musical instruments, and a funambulist.³⁷

They serve as the catalyst for a corporeality that, while outwardly constrained by conventions, inwardly disturbed in unprocessed phenomena. In 1918, Beckmann said: "I do not weep: I loathe tears, for they are a sign of slavery. I concentrate on my work—on my leg, my hand... on the relationship of straight and bent lines, on the interesting placement of small, variously and interestingly rounded shapes, next to flat surfaces, walls, tabletops, wooden crosses and housefronts."³⁸ Beckmann grapples with an emotional depth that, within the realm of his artwork, evades being fully understood and objectified; simultaneously, it escapes also from experiencing only in the intimacy and subjectivity of a person without corporeality. He aims to delve into a deeper layer of bodily existence, focusing on the purity of the form—the

³⁵ Helmuth Plessner, *Limits of community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*, p. 167.

³⁶ Lipták ("Body, Music and Electronics: Pierre Schaeffer and Phenomenology of Music," in *Studia UBB. Philosophia*, 67(1), 2022, p. 54) highlights the spectrum of bodily expression, ranging from transparency to opacity.

³⁷ They serve as a "collision of the 'ordinary' with the 'mysteries of the extraordinary' and exemplify the lay metaphysics of everyday life" (Oskár Čepan, *Oskár Čepan and visual art*, Bratislava, 2018, pp. 570-571).

³⁸ See <https://www.ft.com/content/31620d29-548e-48da-990e-160e39b50c09>.

concentration on the hand and the leg—seeking therein an authentic resonance with the world and its circumstances. Thus, we can reinstate an excentric positionality here, being the body and possessing the body:

“I am, but I do not have power over myself.” This characterizes the man within his corporeal being. Speaking, taking action, and various forms that require the control of one’s own body, a skill learned and continuously maintained. This sense of distance within oneself and toward oneself allows for the potential to transcend it. It doesn’t imply a division or splitting of the fundamentally indivisible self, but rather serves as a prerequisite for being oneself (*selbständig*).³⁹

From a phenomenological perspective, this situation presents a body that simultaneously reveals itself and exists in an unofficial, transitional state, enabling the artist to depict the body as an *ambiguous performance of boundaries* of the body schema *Leib im Körper*. It highlights the problem character of transparent manifestation when it obscures the nature of bodily manifestation, which led to its distortion or erasure in certain avant-garde works.⁴⁰ However, the subsequent cancelling of the body—reflecting the impossibility of its objectification or disembodiment in an exposed subjectivity—is not the sole outcome, as affirmed by Beckmann himself, who does not entirely forsake figuration.

New forms of art

Specific locations depicted in paintings lead us to explore themes of resonance with the world, the so-called equilibrium, where corporeality serves as the “resonant surface.” This leads us to inquire about Umwelt, anthropologically delving into spaces, environments, and the human world, while simultaneously, in a phenomenological sense, considering Umwelt “for me” as a person, as the focal

³⁹ Helmuth Plessner, “Die Frage nach der *Conditio humana*,” p. 190.

⁴⁰ Lipták (in “Body, Music and Electronics: Pierre Schaeffer and Phenomenology of Music,” p. 60) highlights the exploration of quasi-Leib and quasi-Körper in avant-garde music, stating: “We see that one of avant-garde methods is removal of this quasi-Leib, its reduction to Körper. And if it succeeds, there is in return no modified, neutralized quasi-Körper in such non-idiomatic musical work; Körper can be, at best, extraneously imagined.” An example of the dissolution of bodily form can be seen in the hygienic artworks of Z. Rykr, where the female body appears to morph into an amoeba-like shape (Jaroslava Vydrová, “Man as a Being of Hygiene in a Phenomenological and Anthropological Perspective,” in *Phainomena*, 32(124-125), 2023, p. 162).

point of environment, as elaborated in *Ideas II*.⁴¹ We've established this as the second leading clue of our analysis. Plessner values the concept of Umwelt as the unique space of the individual or living organism within which they interact, establish corporeality, and develop experience. Urban spaces are particularly significant here. As Beckmann articulates, the artist's role resides within the city, "a large organism that is the city."⁴² Furthermore, the works of artists from this period increasingly incorporate urban and technical structures like buildings, railways, and bridges. These artistic choices reflect changes in social, economic, and political conditions, as well as the new opportunities of human being through advancements in science, technology, and progress of knowledge.

At the foundation of modern art, Plessner raises a fundamental question regarding the issue of form which involves the search for an appropriate form of depiction and creation as an expression of resonance with the times, society, and the world in which art exists. It manifests in individual approaches that collide with the collective mediocrity of what "should be" created according to the fashionable style. In this context, let's recall Plessner's seminal text *Rebirth of Form in the Technical Age* (1932), written on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Deutscher Werkbund, which praised architectural works that engage with space, the landscape's face, and the human living environment.⁴³ Plessner raises the question: if form is a certain *relation, measure, equilibrium*,⁴⁴ how is this balance established in the era of modern technology, amidst new stimuli, discoveries, and rapid changes the man is facing? Unlike sceptical and closed attitudes toward technology, here we encounter the possibility of how humans can authentically navigate in new conditions and perceive the technological age with openness. It is

⁴¹ See Hua IV, §§ 34, 50 et seq.

⁴² František Mikš, *Braque, Beckmann, Kokoschka, Balthus*, pp. 96, 95. They appear in both in his literary texts and his paintings. "It has been observed that his idea of a fulfilling evening entailed sitting alone at the bar of a luxurious hotel, wearing a suit, and quietly observing people while sipping champagne from a glass, drawing inspiration for his paintings" (ibidem, p. 79).

⁴³ Plessner's text operates on multiple levels, delving into political and economic contexts, the evolution of art and architecture, and subverting anticipated interpretations. His appreciation for modern artistic endeavors must be understood within the framework of that period, reacting to figures like H. Wölfflin (*Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*) and his notion of the impossibility of open form in architecture, as well as various perspectives on technology (e.g., F. Dessauer's *Philosophie der Technik*—see Peter Bernhard, "Plessners Konzept der offenen Form im Kontext der Avantgarde der 1920er Jahre," in *Arhe*, 4(7), 2007, p. 239 ff.). Simultaneously, the text is structured as a speech, suggesting that further analysis of the outlined issues requires consulting Plessner's other works. For the present discussion, I will focus on the theme of form.

⁴⁴ Helmuth Plessner, "Rebirth of Form in the Technical Age," p. 39.

a fact that technology represents a force that transforms social relationships and human perceptions—for example, the relationship between the craftsman and his product, between the buyer and the product, the space in which people work (factory) and live (city) changes—“the intimacy and privacy of these relationships are dissolved and surrendered to a cold and neutrally objective public realm.”⁴⁵ The new world is brimming with impersonal mass-consumption goods, alongside the art market’s new expectations and demands, which give rise to contradictory manifestations in art such as de-aestheticization, formalism, consumption, and the emergence of kitsch. This initial uprooting of humans and their relationships, which can no longer adequately respond to changed conditions by establishing some stable position or seeking escape and closure into positions of “being for oneself,” can also play a positive role in the challenge of reconciling with the past and with old forms. Those were in art and architecture focused on the optical aspect, watching, aesthetic pleasure, submission to predefined styles, rather than on dwelling, usage, life activities inherent to human being. What is functional seems to stand in contrast to style, and vice versa. Therefore, new artistic approaches in this period attempted paradigmatic changes, which also mean sensitiveness, loosening tendencies of grasping and objectifying, freeing of vision itself. Moreover, in Plessner’s thinking, this consideration was influenced by his sensitivity to the positive aspects of the connection between the avant-garde and science, which concern organicity, environment, the connection with biology and technology in the form of functionally biological and living spaces.⁴⁶ They are focused on the environment where humans naturally live, and where they unfold their possibilities.

Therefore, Plessner directs his attention towards the *creation* of form and the pursuit of *novelty*—not merely a refreshed or reinvigorated variation of what came before. If a new form is to emerge, it must be rooted in the circumstances of life relevant to human being, rather than derived from the past or driven by the necessity for a specific style or ideal, which represents the notion of closed form. In essence, we observe a threefold movement here:

Three stages in the contestation of artistic consciousness, formal consciousness, and the formation of works with technology: the first epoch being an epoch of flight into past formal values; the second epoch being an epoch of flight into a new

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 40.

⁴⁶ See A. Behne’s article *Biologie und Kubismus*. “The avant-garde partially embraced the analogy between plant structures and technical construction principles. The primary objective of the avant-garde’s biotechnical maxim of formation was ultimately to pursue creation in accordance with the laws of form found in nature” (Peter Bernhard “Plessners Konzept der offenen Form im Kontext der Avantgarde der 1920er Jahre,” pp. 241-242).

world of forms, into a new world of style; the third epoch being a resolute about-turn and the subjugation of all considerations of spatial design to the purposes of technology.

So has the hour of the rebirth of form already come?⁴⁷

The question of novelty hinges on grappling with new situation through a free interplay (*Mitspielen*) with the outcomes, the products of labour, or resonance (*In-Einklang-sein*) with what technology offers—an openness to the possibilities confronting humanity in this era rather than resignation or opposition. If form is the measure, then, according to Plessner, we must acknowledge that in the age of modern technology, we may not even have a measure at our disposal; the real balance might precisely be the loss of balance, or a state of seeking equilibrium (these concepts are found in both Plessner and Merleau-Ponty), constant rebalancing, or resonance (as described by Uexküll). They are based on the correspondence between human beings and their environment, the world they inhabit, thus, “on the basis of existing capacities, a new *situational coherence* of organism and environment is created.”⁴⁸ As Husserl asserts, human beings are the subjects of a specific *Umwelt*, and the *Umwelt* is “the world for me,” the “*Umwelt* of *its* I-subject, the world experienced by it or otherwise conscious, posited in its intentional experiences with a particular sensory content... is, in a sense, in constant flux, in constant self-creation through transformations of meaning and always new formations of meaning.”⁴⁹ Phenomenologically speaking, the reconfiguration of experience regarding the environment and its transformations does not occur causally or schematically, but through the situational resonance of the living body and what Husserl terms the being in the world of our life. Assessing affordances and meanings can turn this process into a creative endeavour because the presence of new artefacts and technology in this world does not necessarily imply only bodily uprooting but can also signify the opening up of new spaces for new possibilities, for use, for dwelling, for practice, for spaces suitable for the man and the things she or he manages, creates, things which have “a membrane, a physiognomy, an appearance, and a face!”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Helmuth Plessner, “Rebirth of Form in the Technical Age,” p. 47.

⁴⁸ Thomas Fuchs, *The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind*, p. 101.

⁴⁹ Hua IV, p. 186.

⁵⁰ Helmuth Plessner, “Rebirth of Form in the Technical Age,” p. 48.

When examining our living spaces, they are intricately tied to the dynamics of urban life, encompassing buildings, homes, neighbourhoods, nations, and the global community; they are spaces that are “seldom in equilibrium.”⁵¹ This system isn’t merely a static arrangement, straightforward configuration, but rather a dynamic, living, and creative relationship between humans and their environment, situated in a unique setting. If the diagnosis of this situation is openness (nonconfinement, anarchy) and instability, dynamics of spaces and relations, then the response to this situation is the renunciation of claims and criteria. This not only creates a risky spaces which often embarrassingly result in schematism or experimentation, as seen in the architecture of the former communist states of Central Europe with their reservoir of housing estates, monumental “culture houses,” concrete playgrounds but also the potential for seeking a new form—or its resurgence—not by rejecting or overcoming old norms and styles, which would essentially place us in a similar situation of searching for different norms and styles, but by engaging in an open, playful relationship with the environment and its elements, as Plessner suggests (*Spielverhältnis*). New creative possibilities aren’t detached from reality but are intertwined with the way individuals create and perceive themselves, their societal position, their way of life, and where they call home, whether as inhabitants, citizens, philosophers, artists, and so forth.⁵²

Conclusion

In scrutinizing Plessner’s interpretation of artwork, anthropological aesthetics, and its intersection with phenomenology, several approaches for exploration arise, each posing its own initial inquiry. One such approach involves the anthropological perspective, in detail examined by Joachim Fischer, which traverses the realms of aesthetic anthropology and anthropological aesthetics. According to Fischer “the former examines the centrality of art within the *conditio humana*, whereas the latter investigates specific manifestations of art grounded in philosophical

⁵¹ “given the flows of matter, energy, money that pass into them” (DeLanda cited in Robert Mugerauer, “Bi-Directional Boundaries. Eccentric Life and Its Environments,” in J. de Mul (ed.), *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*, Amsterdam University Press, 2017, p. 219).

⁵² “Plessner was actively engaged in this ethos, collaborating with Werkbund member Lucy Hillebrand to develop the design for his residence. The result was a modern, functional home tailored to the needs of a modern professor, featuring large windows that provide uninterrupted views” (Carole Dietze, *Nachgeholters Leben*, p. 361).

anthropological assumptions.”⁵³ This analysis elucidates how Plessner contributes to aesthetic anthropology through *Die Einheit der Sinne*, while concurrently offering an innovative examination of modern art within the framework of anthropological aesthetics.

A second approach could involve adopting a phenomenological perspective by examining Husserl’s approach to artwork (in the perspective of modification of neutrality) and phenomenological aesthetics, particularly in how Plessner uses it. Although this would entail a different line of interpretation and comparison, it remains a viable avenue for exploration. This assertion is supported by the findings of the study, which underscore, within the context of Husserl’s philosophy, the “vitality” of artwork and “its ability to always reinvigorate our aesthetic perception. Aesthetic experience therefore does have strong critical potential, it does have the ability to subvert and undermine the established patterns of life; ... The critical potential of aesthetic experience is inherently tied to its rupturing of our common lived experience.”⁵⁴

The approach this study has used was driven by the lineage of philosophical anthropology intersecting with phenomenology, particularly in the context of *Ideas II* and the significance of the body and the environment. The aim was to conduct an examination of anthropological insights to gain a deeper understanding of the structure of experience and the creative process. In doing so, I sought to assess the heuristic of Plessner’s approach, which, in my perspective, provides a starting point for exploring the possibilities inherent in creativity. Plessner sheds light on the essence of creativity as the formation of new forms rooted in resonance with the *Umwelt* and the embodied existence of the man. Thus, my investigation delved into two main aspects: firstly, exploring creative potentials by capturing corporeality as a manifestation of the boundary of the schema *Leib im Körper*, and secondly, examining the resonance stemming from the original motivational context of “*Umwelt* for me,” leading to the creation of new connections in the environment in the technical age. The era in which both Plessner and Beckmann lived was very volatile, and unfixed, regarding a singular image of the man and the world.⁵⁵

⁵³ Joachim Fischer, “‘Ästhetische Anthropologie’ und ‘anthropologische Ästhetik,’” p. 76.

⁵⁴ Michal Lipták, “Husserl and the Radical Individuality of the Aesthetic Object,” in *Husserl studies*, 2023.

⁵⁵ “The technical world is... precisely by virtue of an intrinsically incomplete and open character with regard to the products he surrounds himself with, with regard to the space he puts these products in, and with regard to the time for which these products are supposed to be effective. Technology is characterized by the coming of this entirely new consciousness, the coming of an openness towards the endlessness of space and time” (Helmuth Plessner, “Rebirth of Form in the Technical Age,” p. 44).

It called for a nuanced response from both the artist and the philosopher—not merely preserving established paradigms, nor outright rejecting the previous. While Plessner identified key concepts that encapsulated the artist's complicated situation and creative output in the early 20th century—such as the quest for a new form as a means of resonance and grappling with corporeality—the relevance of these concepts today stimulate a new debate. The question whether they remain applicable or if a different framework is needed to explore anthropological conditions is appropriate. This study pursued an interpretation open to the former possibility, seeking new artistic forms rooted in equilibrium, resonance that aligns with the interaction between individuals and their environment. This brings about affordances which, according to Thomas Fuchs—and he does this within the framework of phenomenology and the biology of the embodied mind—may result in “new situational coherences.”⁵⁶

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was produced at the Institute of Philosophy of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, v.v.i. and supported by the Agency APVV under the project “Philosophical Anthropology in the Context of Current Crises of Symbolic Structures,” APVV-20-0137.

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⁵⁶ Thomas Fuchs, *The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind*, p. 101.

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