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## Langer's Logic of Signs and Symbols: Its Sources and Application

### Abstract:

Over the last few decades, philosopher of art Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985) has gained growing attention for her wide-ranging and innovative philosophy of mind and culture. A central element in this philosophy is her distinction between sign and symbol. In order to understand the way in which Langer draws this distinction it is essential to know her philosophically formative sources: Henry Sheffer, Alfred North Whitehead, Ernst Cassirer and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Having explained this background, I will argue that Langer's distinction between signs and symbols not only has significant theoretical value but can be used to explain important differences between certain kinds of artistic images. I will illustrate this with a series of murals in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, painted by the Bogside Artists. Unlike Northern Ireland's standard sectarian murals, the murals of the Bogside Artists do not function as territorial signs or as political message boards but as symbols that are vehicles for conception, reflection and commemoration. It is argued that Langer's notion of art as a non-discursive, open-ended symbol can contribute to a better understanding of the murals of the Bogside Artists and to an argument for their preservation.

### Keywords:

Susanne K. Langer, symbol, sign, art, Bogside Artists, murals

Over the last few decades, philosopher of art Susanne K. Langer (1895–1985) has gained growing attention for her wide-ranging and innovative philosophy of mind and culture. Shaped by the thought of her mentors, the logician Henry Sheffer and the metaphysician Alfred North Whitehead, as well as by that of the European philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Langer developed a penetrating critique of many central tenets of the

philosophy of her time. Some of those anticipated major “turns” in American and European philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I will address a fundamental distinction that underlies Langer's overall thought, including her philosophy of culture: the distinction between signs and symbols. I aim to show that this distinction does not only have important theoretical value, but that it can also be used to explain important differences between certain kinds of artistic images. To illustrate this, I will use a particular case study: the murals of the Bogside Artists in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The murals feature people and events from the time of “The Troubles” – a thirty-year conflict that started with a peaceful civil rights march in Derry in 1968 and concluded with the signing of a peace agreement in Belfast in 1998. The *Civil Rights Mural* depicts the historic march and includes many local people.

The murals were painted between 1994 and 2006 by three artists, the brothers William (who died in 2017), Tom Kelly, and their mutual friend Kevin Hasson, together called The Bogside Artists. All three grew up in the Derry's Bogside, which was the epicenter of the Troubles and the setting for the infamous Bloody Sunday.<sup>2</sup> All murals refer to specific incidents or recurring events during that time. The mural, *The Rioter*, for instance, symbolizes a typical stand-off between a local youth and the British Army. Since many of the clashes took place on Saturday afternoons, the mural is also nicknamed *The Saturday Matinee*.

Using Langer's distinction, I will argue that, unlike sectarian murals, the twelve murals of the Bogside Artists can be shown to function not as territorial signs or political message boards but as symbols that are vehicles for conception, reflection and commemoration. More importantly, I will show how Langer's notion of art as an open-ended, non-discursive symbol might contribute to a compelling defense for the importance of the preservation of the murals.



*Civil Rights Mural* (2004) Photo credit CAIN<sup>2</sup>



*The Rioter* (2001) Photo credit CAIN

1) A comprehensive treatment of Susanne Langer's overall philosophy can be found in Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, *The Philosophy of Susanne K. Langer: Embodied Meaning in Logic, Art and Feeling* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350030565>.

2) The dual name of the city reflects a longstanding naming dispute between Nationalists and Unionists, the first preferring Derry, the latter Londonderry. The oldest name for the city was Doire, later anglicised to Derry. In recognition of the settler merchants and investors from London during the Plantation of Ulster, this was changed by Royal Charter to Londonderry in 1613. Since the name “Derry” is widely used informally, and almost always locally, I will use that name to refer the city.

## Expanded Meaning

Langer's logic of signs and symbols can be said to be motivated by one overriding concern: to expand the realm of "meaning" beyond that of discursive language and to show its fundamentally embodied nature. Langer rejects Wittgenstein's conclusion in the *Tractatus* that the inexpressible in language is mystical and should remain in silence.<sup>3</sup> As she wrote in *Philosophy in a New Key* in 1942: "The logical 'beyond', which Wittgenstein calls the 'unspeakable', both Russell and Carnap regard as the sphere of subjective experience, emotion, feeling, and wish, from which only symptoms come to us in the form of metaphysical and artistic fancies."<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, for Langer, "There is an unexplored possibility of genuine semantic beyond the limits of discursive language."<sup>5</sup> Or as she put it in *Problems of Art*: "There is a great deal of experience that is knowable... yet defies discursive formulation, and therefore verbal expression."<sup>6</sup>

For Langer this experience is neither formless nor mystical. It merely requires a *different* form for its expression. In order to make this case she introduces three fundamental distinctions: first, between signs and symbols; second, between discursive and non-discursive symbols; and, third, between conventional and formulative symbols. While for most Langer readers the first two distinctions are widely recognized and discussed, the third distinction is often overlooked and ignored. This has led to a range of misunderstandings of Langer's position; lacking the third distinction, the reader inevitably fails to take into account three central elements that also underlie Langer's logic of signs and symbols – that is, *process*, *context*, and *embodiment*.

In Langer's conception, signs and symbols are not static entities but evolving processes. Symbols can change over time from tentative formulations of inchoate subjective experience into conventional symbols with dictionary meanings. This echoes the life cycle of a lingual metaphor, from a living word trying to express an ineffable or elusive meaning to a "dead" metaphor with a fixed dictionary meaning that has become part of our conventional day-to-day language. Moreover, symbol and symbolized can reverse roles depending on interest and circumstances.

In order to understand the particular way in which Langer draws the distinction between signs and symbols it is essential to know something of her philosophical background as rooted in her formative sources: Alfred North Whitehead, Ernst Cassirer, Henry Sheffer and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

## Whitehead

As part of the first cohort of Whitehead's students after his arrival at Harvard in 1924, Langer witnessed the development of his process philosophy first-hand. Three notions in particular were to influence Langer's understanding of symbols and symbolization. The first was Whitehead's view that symbolization is the result of the human and non-human organism's ongoing fluid and reciprocal engagement with its environment. This is a direct challenge to the primacy of the isolated self in traditional Cartesian models of the subject-object relation. The second idea that Langer adopted from Whitehead is that nature itself is a fundamentally temporal process with an organic rhythm of birth, growth and decline. This biological view of nature challenges physicalist positions where nature is explained exclusively in terms of causal mechanical processes. And the third notion is that the primary mode of an organism's engagement with nature is feeling. This notion challenges Descartes's view

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3) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1996) theses 7 and 6.522.

4) Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 86.

5) *Ibid.*

6) Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1957), 22.

that a subject's basic engagement with the world is thinking – *cogito ergo sum*. The three Whiteheadian insights above were to influence not only Langer's logic of signs and symbols, but also her view of mind as a biologically based process of mental activity and her concept of art as the form of feeling.

### Cassirer

In addition to adopting ideas from Whitehead, Langer also took on important insights from the neo-Kantian German philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Although Langer had only met Cassirer for the first time in 1941, she had been familiar with his trilogy *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923, 1925, 1929) long before it was translated into English in the 1950s. What she took from Cassirer was, first, that our forms of intuition and cognition are historically evolving, culturally based symbolic forms of perception and experience. This challenged Kant's conception of the forms of intuition and cognition as fixed and universally valid. Second, she took from Cassirer the idea that the world can be seen through a plurality of different prisms or "symbolic forms" each of which highlights different *aspects* of reality. This challenged the positivist view that only descriptions of the physical world constitute real knowledge and understanding. And, third, she took from Cassirer that this plurality includes not only discursive symbolic modes of understanding such as science and scientific language, but also non-discursive forms such as myth, art and ritual. This challenged the prevailing view that the latter cultural expressions were merely matters of subjective opinion or emotional release. Langer's English translation of Cassirer's *Sprache und Mythos – Language and Myth* – in 1946, a year after Cassirer's sudden death, provided the English-speaking world an early introduction to Cassirer prior to the publication of the translation of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1955–7). Keeping in mind the above sources, we will now turn to Langer's most foundational distinction in her semiotic logic, that between signs and symbols.

### Signs

On Langer's terms, a sign indicates the past, present, or future existence of a thing, event, or condition.<sup>7</sup> In a sign-relation there are three terms: a sign, an object and an interpreter for whom the sign and object stand in a one-to-one causal relation to form a pair. On that definition a scar indicates (is a symptom of) a previous wound – signaling something in the past; smoke indicates, for example, concurrent fire – signaling something in the present; and clouds indicate upcoming rain – signaling something in the future.

In all these examples, signs form part of the same physical situation or condition as the signified. The reason we select something as a sign is that it can tell us something about something else. According to Langer, the only difference between a sign and its meaning is that "the subject for which they constitute a pair must *find one more interesting than the other, and the latter more easily available than the former*."<sup>8</sup> It is through the sign that the interpreter can access the object, event or condition that interests him in the way a doctor relies on the patient's symptoms to identify the underlying disease that needs treating. Indeed, echoing Whitehead, Langer holds, "If it were not for the subject, or *interpretant*, sign and object would be interchangeable."<sup>9</sup>

Although many signs and symptoms consist of natural phenomena, they can also be manmade. Door bells or train whistles announce the existence of concurrent or future events. They are *perceived as* having a causal relation with what they mean to signal or announce. Manmade signs like that fulfill the same func-

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7) Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 57.

8) *Ibid.*, 58.

9) *Ibid.*

tion as natural signs and do not alter the logical relation between sign and object. They are perceived and acted upon *as if* they were causally connected.

Signs can be misinterpreted. The misinterpretation of signs, says Langer, is “the simplest form of *mistake*.”<sup>10</sup> A bell can be wrongly understood to signal something other than what was intended or be confused with another bell. Likewise, wet streets can be interpreted mistakenly as the result of rain when, in fact, they are the result of a street clean. Responding “appropriately” to signs is a matter of trial and error and of shared agreement.

## Symbols

When we now turn to Langer’s notion of symbol, we encounter a different type of meaning-pattern. Unlike signs or signals, a symbol does not have a causal relation with what they refer to but is “*a vehicle for the conception of objects*.”<sup>11</sup> For Langer, “*it is the conceptions and not the things that symbols directly ‘mean’*.”<sup>12</sup> According to her, this function of symbols is typically overlooked by genetic and behaviorist psychologists who treat *all* symbols in terms of a stimulus-response relation. Yet, talking *about* something is very different from *announcing* something. Using the word “the queen” in a conversation is different from saying “the queen!” by way of announcement of her majesty’s impending arrival. In the latter case the word “queen” is used as a sign to be acted upon. In summary: the fundamental difference between signs and symbols is a difference in *function*: signs indicate or *announce* their objects whereas symbols enable their objects *to be conceived*.<sup>13</sup>

For Langer symbolic functioning is confined to humans. It is a fundamental human need alongside biological needs, such as breathing and eating. She acknowledges that some chimpanzees may display proto-symbolic behavior in, for instance, their attachments to certain objects or fear for others, but, fundamentally, there is a vast difference between humans and (other) animals in terms of their motivations, behavior and mentality as regards symbolization. Unlike other animals, humans desire to make sense of the world whether in science, language, art, myth, or even dreams. The “new key” in philosophy is the recognition that the basic “sense-data” and “facts” that make up human experience and knowledge of the world are inherently symbolic. “Facts,” on Langer’s terms, are formulated events rooted in the perceptions of patterns and forms highlighting particular aspects of the world.

## Sheffer

This emphasis on the importance of patterns and forms was impressed upon Langer by another mentor, the Polish born logician Henry M. Sheffer (1882–1964), best known for his “Sheffer-stroke.” Sheffer, too, influenced Langer in three important respects. First, his conception of logic as the study of pattern and forms rather than deductive reasoning is shown to have provided the initial basis for Langer’s thinking about forms and structures in general, including those in art. Second, like Cassirer, Sheffer argued that the same reality could be represented by a plurality of different logical patterns, forms and notations. This influenced Langer’s view of art as a different but not less insightful form of representation alongside others. And, third, Sheffer’s repeated insistence on the importance of understanding the meaning of logical concepts over their technical notational refinement inspired Langer’s lifelong interest in “the meaning of meaning.”<sup>14</sup>

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10) Ibid., 59.

11) Ibid., 60–61.

12) Ibid., 61.

13) Ibid.

14) There is some irony in the fact that Sheffer’s own technical notational refinement, the “Sheffer Stroke,” was hailed as one of logic’s major innovations at the time. In his introduction to the second edition of *Principia Mathematica*, Bertrand Russell even proposed re-writing the entire book in light of Sheffer’s supposedly radical insight.

## Wittgenstein

Finally, a fourth source who approached very similar themes but from yet another angle was the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Langer recognized in Wittgenstein a similar recognition of the plurality of possible forms of expression in which reality could be captured as in Sheffer, Cassirer and Whitehead. As he wrote, for instance, in thesis 4 of the *Tractatus*: “The gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to each other in that pictorial internal relation, which holds between language and the world. To all of them the logical structure is common.”<sup>15</sup> The term “logical structure” can thus refer to a plurality of descriptions or “projections.” In Wittgenstein's words:

In the fact that there is a general rule by which the musician is able to read the symphony out of the score, and that there is a rule by which one could reconstruct the symphony from the line on a gramophone record and from this again – by means of the first rule – construct the score, herein lies the internal similarity between these things which at first sight seem to be entirely different. And the rule is the law of projection which projects the symphony into the language of the musical score.<sup>16</sup>

Or as he put it elsewhere: “The possibility of all similes, of all the imagery of our language, rests on the logic of representation.”<sup>17</sup> Reading the *Tractatus* through the lenses of Sheffer, Cassirer and Whitehead, rather than those of Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer, Langer is one of the first American philosophers to recognize the *Tractatus* as part of a broader linguistic, or, on Langer's terms, *symbolic turn*. The *Tractatus* is often presented as a naïve correspondence theory that was later rejected by Wittgenstein himself. Langer's reading, however, reveals a much greater continuity between his earlier and later works than is often assumed, including an early awareness about the ambiguity or “inexpressibility” of most human experience. As he once wrote in a journal entry in 1915: “My difficulty is only an – enormous – difficulty of expression.”<sup>18</sup> And then, famously, in the last thesis of his *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must stay silent.”<sup>19</sup>

However, Langer argued, this conclusion also revealed Wittgenstein's limitations and blindspot. Throughout his *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had only considered discursive forms of symbolism in which each element has independent meaning, or, as he had put it, where “One name stands for one thing, and another for another thing, and they are connected together.”<sup>20</sup> He had not taken into account the possibility of non-discursive forms of representation, which (if accounted for) would invalidate the assertion just cited.

In short, whereas Wittgenstein urged his readers to stay silent about matters that lay outside discursive language because they had no adequate form in which they could be expressed, Langer argued that there are non-discursive or “presentational” forms that *can* articulate non-verbal lived human experience in terms of their structural analogies with human feeling. And one of those non-discursive forms was art.

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15) Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.014.

16) *Ibid.*, 4.0141.

17) *Ibid.*, 4.015.

18) Ludwig Wittgenstein, Journal entry, 8 March 1915, in *Notebooks 1914–1916*, first edition, 1961, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, second edition (1984), p. 40. Quoted in Eli Friedlander, *Signs of Sense: Reading Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674418172>.

19) Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7.

20) *Ibid.*, 4.0311.

Case Study: *The People's Gallery*

In order to illustrate Langer's point I want to turn to a series of murals in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, and explore whether Langer's distinction between signs and symbols can illuminate the difference between, on the one hand, sectarian murals presenting political messages and, on the other, political mural art addressing issues of lived experience. The murals are painted by the Bogside Artists and are collectively called *The People's Gallery* and can be found on Rossville Street in the Bogside, where many of the incidents depicted on the murals took place.

The mural *Annette*, for example, is based on a photograph of Annette McGavigan, the 14-year old cousin of one of the artists who was killed by a British bullet when, on her way home from school, she was caught in cross-fire between the IRA and the British Army on 7 September 1971. The mural is very close to the actual site where she died.

The mural depicting a British soldier entitled *Motorman* is a reference to the large-scale "Operation Motorman" by the British Army in 1972 to retake "no-go areas" and involving extensive house searches.

The mural *Bernadette* shows political activist and later MP Bernadette Devlin addressing the crowds, whereas the *Hunger Strikes* mural refers to the hunger strikes undertaken by Republican prisoners in the early eighties in order to be recognized as political prisoners. Refusing to wear the normal prison outfit, they would wrap themselves in blankets instead. *The Runner* shows a young boy in full flight after a canister of CS gas has been fired. All three boys pictured in the mural lost their lives during the Troubles, one of them 15-year old Manus Deery, a cousin of artist Tom Kelly.



*Annette* (1999) Photo credit Kevin Hasson



*Motorman* (2001) Photo credit CAIN

The last mural on the street is *The Peace Mural*, designed by children from protestant and catholic schools. The colored squares symbolize the equality amongst people as well as their diversity.

### Sectarian Murals and *The People's Gallery*

It is important to point out that, although often not immediately obvious to a casual viewer, these murals differ significantly from the vast majority of murals in Northern Ireland that are classified as sectarian. Murals like that represent one of two sides: *either* the side of (mainly) Catholic Republicans, who campaign for Northern Ireland to be united with Ireland, or the side of Protestant Loyalists, who want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. Sectarian murals typically serve as territorial markers of a particular group or neighborhood and are meant to deter those from "the other side."

They usually contain paramilitary emblems or party political slogans, and appeal to national identity rooted in the historical or mythical past. By contrast, the murals of *The People's Gallery* do not carry any emblems or flags that would link them to a para-military or political organization. They do not carry any threats or slogans promoting a political cause. There are no harps, shamrocks or Gaelic writings appealing to Irish history, mythology or national identity. They do not glorify violence or demonize the enemy, nor do they romanticize the past. Instead, they are about the lives of ordinary citizens, many of them women and children, who got caught up in a conflict not of their own making. Many of the images are based on photos of *actual* people and events. If anything, the murals are *laments*.

### Langerian Analysis

In Langerian terms, it might be possible to say that the function of these murals is not that of signs which call for certain actions based on unequivocal messages. Instead they appear more open-ended. Even though they are *about* the Troubles and thus political, they serve primarily as vehicles for contemplation, reflection, and commemoration. They articulate the complex lived experience of the Bogside community that cannot be easily captured in simple words and slogans. Indeed, they have become important sites for local residents to remember



*The Peace Mural* 2004 Photo Credit Kevin Hasson



Loyalist paramilitary mural (anon)  
(Copyright © 2019 Extramural Activity)



the past and process painful memories. On Langer's terms, they do not function as signs but as *symbols*. More to the point, they are *art symbols*.

### The Petrol Bomber

Like all good art, these images are not unambiguous. This can be illustrated by the mural called the *Gas Mask* or the *Petrol Bomber*. A cursory glance often takes this particular mural as an aggressive sign of Republican defiance. This reading is enforced by the longstanding custom of the media to use it as a backdrop for television news and interviews dealing with Republican violence and attacks. It also featured on the front page of the *The Times* as the backdrop for Martin McGuinness' funeral cortege in March 2017. Yet this mural has a more complex history. It is based on a photograph by British press photographer Clive Limpkin taken during the "Battle of the Bogside," a three-day riot that took place between 12 and 14 August 1969. The riot was triggered by a contentious loyalist Apprentice Boys parade and eventually led to the employment of the British Army to restore order. In order to defend themselves against attacks from the largely Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and their supporters, local residents put up barricades and women and children made home-made petrol bombs or "Molotov cocktails" out of empty milk bottles and cloth wicks. For protection against the army's CS or "tear" gas they covered their faces with handkerchiefs and old WW2 gasmasks.



*The Gas Mask* (1994) Photo credit Kevin Hasson

The young boy in the photo is a cousin of Tom and William. His gasmask is defunct and he is just wearing it for show. In his right hand he holds a petrol bomb. The image of the boy shows the inherent ambiguity of the times: on the one hand an innocent victim of a brutal and biased police force, on the other an active participant in the struggle holding a lethal device.

### Art and Erasure

There is currently much debate about the removal of sectarian murals that incite hate and violence. Ruling politicians from either side are eager to rebrand the country as a safe and inclusive post-conflict society that is economically viable and forward looking. In that context there is no place for aggressive public images asserting power over or demonizing other communities. But to remove all public art that refers to the Troubles would be an act of erasure of historic memory that would benefit the perpetrators, many of whom now occupy high political positions, yet silence many of the victims, the survivors of three decades of civil war.

In a powerful article in *The Guardian* not long ago, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei berates the West for its complicity in the cover-up of the Tiananmen Square massacre. In the course of that he writes: "To remove

the memory of the past is to rob what is left of an individual, because our past is all we have.... Any attempt to destroy, remove or distort memory is the act of an illegitimate power.”<sup>21</sup> Ai Weiwei's observation echoes Langer's belief that “Any miscarriage of the symbolic process is an abrogation of our human freedom.... The most disastrous hindrance is disorientation, the failure or destruction of life-symbols and loss or repression of votive acts.”<sup>22</sup>

In that context, Langer's distinction between signs and symbols can be used as a way to explain the unique character of the murals of the Bogside Artists as distinct from the sectarian murals that can be found all over Northern Ireland. Unlike sectarian murals, the twelve murals of the Bogside Artists do not function as territorial signs or message boards promoting particular political positions, but as vehicles for conception, reflection and commemoration. Langer's notion of art as an open-ended, multi-interpretable, non-discursive symbolic form can thus become an important tool to defend the value of the murals against their detractors.

The murals of the Bogside Artists are important expressions of the lived experience of ordinary citizens in the Bogside during the Troubles. With ongoing tensions and questions about the legacy of the conflict – rekindled by the debates about Brexit in the UK – they give a voice to those who are often left voiceless. They keep alive the memories of situations and events that those in power may prefer to erase and forget. Langer's recognition of the possibility of meaning beyond discursive symbolism, and her insight into the potential of symbols in general, as distinct from signs, can thus contribute to a compelling argument for the importance of their preservation.<sup>23</sup>

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21) Ai Weiwei, “The West Is Complicit in the 30-year Cover-Up of Tiananmen,” *The Guardian*, June 4, 2019, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/04/china-tiananmen-square-beijing](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/04/china-tiananmen-square-beijing).

22) Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 290

23) Over the last five years I have been working with the artists on a travelling exhibition featuring their work, called “Art, Conflict and Remembering: the murals of the Bogside Artists.” For more information and the catalogue see [www.bogsideartistsexhibition.org](http://www.bogsideartistsexhibition.org)

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