

***The phenomenology of embodied heuristics in contemporary art:
exploring novel modes of cognition and thought***

La fenomenología de la heurística corporal en el arte contemporáneo:
explorando nuevos modos de cognición y pensamiento

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Artículo de Investigación

Resumen

En este escrito la atención está centrada en el problema de la totalidad del conocimiento del mundo, en particular, el problema del conocimiento de lo “invisible”. Las autoras se basan en un método fenomenológico complementado con elementos del método naturalista. Esta complementación metodológica permite una nueva comprensión del cuerpo, de lo corpóreo y de sus capacidades funcionales. El arte contemporáneo utiliza esta síntesis metodológica y crea contextos para formar nuevos significados culturales. Se muestra que el objetivo del artista es encontrar contextos semánticos que encajen orgánicamente en la teoría de la mente encarnada. El arte arquitectónico y escultórico activa indirectamente

cuestiones de conocimiento, creando una sensación de “altura” a través del propio cuerpo como camino hacia lo trascendente y al misterio de lo “invisible”. El paradigma cognitivo moderno está en crisis: el desarrollo de la cognición, basado en herramientas racionales, no capta la objetividad del mundo en su totalidad. El artista activa una sintonía interna con trayectorias específicas de pensamiento, ampliando los límites del conocimiento. El análisis filosófico de la activación de lo sensorial, teniendo en cuenta las capacidades corporales y la racionalidad encarnada, señala un posible camino para el desarrollo del conocimiento en el futuro.

Palabras clave: fenomenología, cognición, invisible, cuerpo, trascendental

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the problem of the entirety of knowledge of the world, in particular the problem of knowledge of the “invisible”. The authors use a phenomenological research method, complemented by elements of the naturalistic method. These methods complement each other and create the conditions for a new understanding of the body, the corporeal and its functional capacities. Contemporary art uses this methodological synthesis and creates context to form new cultural meanings. It shows that the artist’s aim is to search for new semantic contexts that fit organically into the theory of the embodied mind. Architectural and sculptural art indirectly activated questions of knowledge, creating a sense of “height” through one’s own body as a path to the transcendent and access to the mystery of the “invisible”. The modern cognitive paradigm is in crisis: the development of cognition based on rational tools is unable to grasp the objectivity of the world in its totality. The artist activates an inner attunement to specific trajectories of thought, thus destroying the limits of knowledge and expanding its boundaries. The philosophical analysis of the activation of the senses, taking into account bodily capacities and embodied rationality, points to a possible path for the development of knowledge in the future.

Keywords: phenomenology, cognition, invisible, body, transcendent.

Introduction*

The contemporary paradigm of cognition is largely rooted in the philosophy of Francis Bacon, emphasizing a rational comprehension of the world as the central aspect of cognitive processes. This paradigm focuses primarily on the study of the visible, material aspects of the natural world. However, throughout human history, there has been a persistent interest in transcending these limitations, a desire to comprehend the ‘invisible’. This inclination is evident in works of art, ethical principles, and the very essence of human existence, which both inspire and confront human heuristic endeavours. These aspirations, in their pursuit of new cognitive horizons, frequently encounter inherent boundaries.

Today we are seeing deep contradictions in absolutely all spheres of life, in other words, we are faced with a crisis in cognition, a change in thinking and, as a consequence, a change in both the cognitive and anthropological paradigms. Understanding of the world is always built on certain meanings, which formulate the logical line of our reasoning and indicate the connections between the nodal points of the article. The latter will make it possible to describe the crises noted above in the understandable logic of philosophical analysis.

This article employs the phenomenological method to explore an innovative perspective on the role of the human body in cognition and the significance of the relationship between the body and its spatial context. This unique approach offers a novel framework for understanding the meaning of bodily actions and serves as a rationale for the necessity of embracing new cognitive formats in human thought. In this study, the authors employ a combination of methodologies to explore the role of bodily practices and sensory experiences in cognition and semantic constructions.

These methodologies include the phenomenological method, which we utilize to investigate semantic constructions and new semantic contexts; the culture of presence method proposed by H. U. Gumbrecht (2003), the concept that finds its expression in modern monumental sculpture, providing insights into the embodiment of meaning; as well as methodological principles of the naturalistic and linguistic turns in epistemology.

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Phenomenological reflection as an indication of the crisis in knowledge

When we consider the initial readers of Husserl, such philosophers as Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Heidegger directed their attention toward the meanings embedded in the art of their time. For instance, Heidegger suggested the possibility of ontological justifications within artistic works. Subsequently, within the French phenomenological tradition, scholars explored the concept of transcending to the ‘invisible’, a central theme in modern phenomenology. Thinkers like Ricoeur, Levinas, and Derrida continued the endeavor to substantiate this phenomenological experience within the framework of new modes of thinking.

The method of aestheticization of knowledge, as reimagined by H. U. Gumbrecht in his concept of the culture of presence, underscores a fundamental skepticism toward the coherence of Enlightenment rationality. Gumbrecht’s work displays a bold evaluation of subjectification within the context of an emerging comprehension of humanistic practices. He contends that a thorough analysis of culture can only transpire by reinstating human presence in reality. This restoration involves a nuanced examination of intricate semantic configurations, with particular attention to the spatial and bodily dimensions. In “the culture of presence, the world is conceived as a realm in which individuals endeavor to establish profound connections with their surroundings, including a reconnection with themselves, their bodies, and the wider environment” (pp. 88-89).

In the realm of epistemology, we have witnessed two significant intellectual turns: “the linguistic turn” and “the naturalistic turn” (Dolska and Lobas, 2021). The naturalistic turn draws inspiration from various natural sciences, with key influence stemming from Chilean biologists such as Maturana and Varela. On the other hand, the linguistic turn, while rooted in neopositivism (e.g., Wittgenstein), originates in Husserl’s ideas regarding the formation of meanings as human consciousness engages with the world.

Building upon the phenomenological framework established by Husserl, the heuristic nature of cognition comes into sharper focus, particularly as sensory, affective, and non-rational elements contribute distinct nuances to the shaping of meanings. In our perspective, contemporary art plays a pivotal role in activating this cognitive sphere. By transcending the boundaries of the purely rational, art extends the semantic horizons of cognition, illustrating

how human experiences evolve and acquire new dimensions that influence the construction of semantic content within consciousness. Through the analysis of modern sculpture, we aim to demonstrate how art continues to deepen and enrich the aforementioned turns in the theory of knowledge.

Classical phenomenology, as developed by Husserl, offers valuable conceptual tools for analyzing human heuristics. Among these tools, corporeality, or embodiment, stands as a fundamental concept. Corporeality encompasses a cognitive process through which an egoistic subject is constituted as a worldly and bodily entity, giving rise to a unique form of lived experience. This process entails the ego's perception of the sensations inherent to the object and the knowable reality. It represents a distinct phenomenological boundary, where the ego navigates the interface between self and the external world. In the second volume of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Husserl delves into the examination of bodily capabilities and the nuances of bodily heuristics within the context of synthesizing naturalistic and egoistic perspectives. In essence, Husserl proposes that naturalistic and phenomenological research should not be viewed as opposing paradigms in the construction of semantic space but rather as complementary perspectives enriching our understanding (1989). Phenomenologist Sara Heinämaa underscores a key characteristic in the phenomenology of embodiment, often culminating in a fundamental dichotomy between the body as the subject of experience and the body as the object of cognition. This distinction is rooted in the epistemological differentiation between "the subjective and objective qualities of things, and the ontological separation between subjective and objective being" (2018, p. 536).

These assertions about bodily tools in phenomenology inherently challenge the ideals of the classical cognitive paradigm. It is important to recall that, according to Enlightenment ideals, the concept of the body was primarily associated with a biological, natural entity. In this view, medicine played a significant role in reinforcing this perspective by transforming the body into an organism through scientific understanding.

Phenomenology as a new way of discussing the body

Husserl's ideas regarding the role of the body were adopted by numerous thinkers, yet the thesis concerning the profound importance of the body in the cognitive process, particularly in terms of comprehending complex

phenomena like the mind's reliance on the body, found its most extensive development in works dedicated to the analysis of art. This juncture was not a fortuitous occurrence in both phenomenology and cognitive studies, as sensuality plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's existence, constituting a vital element of the irrational. This sensuality exerts a considerable influence on the operation of the mind and consciousness. For instance, in 1910, Kandinsky defined art as the embodiment of our emotions, noting, "every work of art is a product of its era, often it is the source of our emotions. Thus, each cultural period engenders its own art, a unique creation that cannot be replicated" (1951, p. 15).

One of the earliest thinkers to highlight the departure of art from the confines of rationality in the construction of meanings was Merleau-Ponty. While contemplating Cézanne's paintings, he endeavored to characterize the foundational principles of Cézanne's aesthetics, which stood outside the conventional dichotomies of his era. Merleau-Ponty's insights were influenced by Cézanne's dialogues with Émile Bernard. He articulated, "Cézanne consistently sought to evade the stereotypical dichotomies imposed upon him, such as emotions versus reason, the perceiving artist versus the thinking artist, nature versus composition, primitivism versus tradition" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 13). Merleau-Ponty's approach involved developing a unique optical perspective, denoting a form of logical vision. Rather than employing dichotomies better suited to academic traditions, he delved into the genuine essence of Cézanne's work, repeatedly questioning established conventions (1964). In Merleau-Ponty's view, Cézanne concentrated on procedures that considered "(...) the influence of individual parts of the painting on each other, perceiving the body as a consequence of these interactions" (p. 18). In essence, the body serves as a foundational element for the creation of cultural meanings.

We aim to support this thesis by drawing upon the insights of contemporary aesthetics and theorists of contemporary art. In alignment with Merleau-Ponty's ideas, Martin Seel, a prominent figure in modern aesthetics, contends that aesthetic experiences do not necessitate discursive interpretation. He posits that cognitive experiences, rooted in sensory perception, suffice to grasp the essence of aesthetic encounters. Seel advocates a paradigm shift in aesthetics, centering it on the category of "appearance". We posit that this notion resonates with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "ontology of vision" (Merleau-Ponty, 1985). Seel's concept of 'appearance'

encompasses the conditions through which the world is presented to us, primarily rooted in our senses and sensuality. This “aesthetics of appearance” essentially assumes the form of aesthetically framing cognition. It serves as a poignant reminder to our consciousness of the materiality of the body, the intricacies of bodily sensations, and the novel perspectives through which we perceive and engage with the world (Seel, 2014). It is worth noting that phenomenology is actively seeking new avenues to engage with the body, and it can be boldly asserted that contemporary aesthetics provides both naturalistic and semantic justifications for understanding the body and corporeality. To support this assertion, we can turn to the artistic developments that began at the beginning of the 21st century. These developments, set in motion by figures like Jérôme de Gramont in his work *Au commencement*, introduced innovative ways of discussing the body and novel forms of bodily manipulation (2013).

Notably, these artistic explorations have given rise to entirely unexpected discourses on the corporeal. One illustrative example is the artistic duo Art Orient Object, comprising Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin, who have been collaborating since the 1990s. They have been actively involved in performance art practices with a strong emphasis on addressing political and environmental concerns. Their recent work includes the incorporation of biomedical experiments into their creative endeavors, particularly focusing on the utilization of human and animal microbiota (Laval-Jeantet, 2020).

In our quest to address the questions at hand, we find valuable insights from representatives of French phenomenology, including Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and Jean-Luc Nancy. These thinkers delved into the realm of art and significantly contributed to the emergence of novel meanings, a fundamental pursuit within the realm of phenomenology. They often grounded their work in biblical texts, which served as a foundational context and platform for their explorations (it is no coincidence that Jérôme de Gramont, in *Au commencement*, characterizes phenomenology as a ‘struggle with an angel’, underlining the profound and often spiritual nature of this endeavor).

Furthermore, Marc Jimenez has aptly observed that their conceptual tools were compelling enough to warrant the introduction of the term “augmented aesthetics” (*esthétique augment*) (2010). All these seemingly “insignificant”

elements contribute to shedding light on new dimensions of the body and corporeality, underscoring the intricacies of contemporary phenomenological discourse. For example, according to the Polish researcher Monica Murawska, these shifts received the status of an “aesthetic turn in phenomenology”. She posed a rather fundamental question: does the artist violate the post-phenomenological framework or expand the boundaries of heuristic discourse? (2020). A profound question posed by Murawska centers on whether the artist challenges the post-phenomenological framework or expands the boundaries of heuristic discourse (2020). In our perspective, the burgeoning interest in art from a heuristic-phenomenological standpoint unveils new internal tensions and gaps, offering insights that directly pertain to the mechanics of cognition and the evolution of thought.

Heuristics of the body in contemporary sculpture

To bolster our thesis, we examine the works of contemporary renowned sculptors. The concepts and artistic expressions of certain modern sculptors provide evidence for the emergence of fresh conceptions of the body situated within specific spatial contexts, thus contributing to the body’s role as a novel cognitive tool. Our attention is directed toward the works of two highly acclaimed artists in the contemporary art world: Antony Gormley and William Kentridge. We will begin with Gormley. He is one of the most renowned contemporary British monumental sculptors, is widely recognized for his iconic works, such as the 20-meter “Angel of the North” and the 30-meter “Quantum Cloud” in Greenwich, among others. Gormley’s artistic fascination lies in the realm of space and its profound significance for both the viewer-subject and the author-subject, introducing entirely new dimensions to the comprehension of space. Through his works, we are compelled to pay attention to and experience space as it exists within us and around us, all the while acknowledging that we are but ephemeral points in the vast expanse of space and time.

In the context of Gormley’s artistry, it’s pertinent to mention projects in which the master deconstructs his own body and engages in experiments involving the curvature of empty space with the use of mirrors. These endeavors are fundamentally rooted in the processes of cognition, introducing novel mechanisms for understanding and interaction. The human body, in this context, emerges as both a unique subject of cognition and a distinctive

tool, mechanism, or element of heuristics, thus expanding our comprehension of sculptural space, both within and outside of our own perceptions. At the end of the 1990s, Gormley's artistic focus centered on the theme of collective community and the relationship between the Self and the Other. This thematic shift was manifested in his compelling installations, including "Allotment", "Critical Mass", "Another Place", "Domain Field", and "Inside Australia". However, as the 21st century unfolded, Gormley's artistic interests evolved, directing his attention toward matters related to energy fields, both on a collective and individual level, and the vectors governing their distribution within the human community.

It should be noted that the decentralization of artistic objects within the cultural environment and their impact on public spaces have attracted the attention of both scholars and artists. In the aesthetic context, space is clearly transformed, not only culturally and socially but also cognitively. Gormley is interested in the bodies of his viewers, which he skillfully incorporates into the intricate spaces he constructs. And so, without noticing it, you find yourself part of the artistic design. It turns out that the main body at the exhibition is your own!

William Kentridge, a South-African artist, is no less interesting. He is indeed a cult avant-garde artist in the world today. Kentridge is a performer, sculptor, video artist, author of collages, animated films, installations, and he is also known for his contributions as a theater and opera director. The body has evolved into a potent conduit for perceiving numerous dimensions, and within the postphenomenological framework (a term we consider fitting for the works of accomplished artists like William Kentridge), the body amalgamates both the sensory and the spiritual. It is the fusion of these two elements that proves alluring, as the yearning to connect – both from the artist's and the viewer's perspective – or to venture into the transcendental sphere requires a comprehensive exploration of these two components within the realm of cognition.

It is imperative to highlight that contemporary artists consistently underscore the body's role in the perception of continuity, emphasizing not merely visualization but also the sensation of one's own body's "elevation" in the continuum of space. This amalgamation functions as the primary sensory-energetic internal framework for thought. It transcends the realm of rational

discourse and instead constitutes an appeal for a fresh impetus in the quest for the irrational in human knowledge. Discursive knowledge is inherently clear and logical, yet it has its boundaries –thresholds we cannot traverse due to the limitations of the rational factor. This threshold bears a distinct label –the aspiration to transcend or discover a path to the transcendental. Notably, every exceptional work of art serves as a symbolic step towards the transcendental, facilitating an entry into the imperceptible. The aestheticization of knowledge offers a clear affirmation of this paradigm shift.

The optics of the physical as a way out to the “invisible”

Contemporary phenomenology, from its inception, has offered substantial support to the significance of affects (emotions) and the sensory realm, beginning with critical assessments of Descartes’ ideas regarding the division between body and thought. In this context, our reflections serve to reinforce the contributions of modern phenomenology in France, specifically the works of Henry, Marion, Chrétien, and Nancy. These philosophers operate at the confluence of materialist phenomenology and the phenomenological approach to understanding the transcendental, particularly in their exploration of religion as a “manner or mindset”, a unique way of contemplating the invisible within art.

It is essential to underscore that the aforementioned thinkers delve into the themes of thinking and inquiry, in their quest to grapple with the transcendent and the divine (God). Consequently, they approach metaphysics with a critical lens, scrutinizing its modes of thinking. Notably, it was M. Henry who, influenced by his reading of Kandinsky’s work *About the Spiritual in art*, articulated original ideas during the period spanning his publication of *The Essence of Manifestation* (1963) to the release of his treatise *Seeing the Invisible* (1988). These original ideas were subsequently developed by Marion, Chrétien, and Brougue.

Michel Fichant in his analysis of the works of M. Henry, has drawn attention to Henry’s ideas regarding the profound significance of the living body (subjective) and its diverse interpretations within the realm of transcendental inquiries. Fichant highlights the intrinsic necessity of the living body, stating: “It is precisely because of the immanent necessity of the thing itself that this unity is identified with the subjective body” (2009, p. 8). This perspective underscores the radical divergence of the body from other transcendental

entities. These entities encompass, firstly, a body objectified by biological science, secondly, a living body presented as such in natural perceptual experiences, and finally, a human body, which possesses distinctive characteristics in relation to the living body but remains contingent upon the specifications of the structures of transcendental being. Simultaneously, as Henry delves into non-rational forms of cognition within the intricate process of accessing the transcendental (invisible), he offers critiques of these approaches.

It is important to acknowledge that both philosophy and art engage in perpetual questioning, each within its unique interpretation, and they unfold in the context of *hic et nunc* (Latin for “here and now”). Heidegger recognized this aspect, leading him to introduce the term “facticity of life experience” (1995). He argued that the facticity of human existence necessitates distinctive approaches to addressing the transcendent. Heidegger critiqued Aristotle for proposing formal guidelines that, in his view, restricted thinking to fixed categorical meanings, prohibiting any deviation from them (2013).

Let us revisit the reflections of contemporary phenomenologists who openly emphasize the necessity of cultivating new modes of thinking. Their discussions are rooted in the ideas of Heidegger, who explicitly delineated the shift toward new thinking along the following trajectory: “formal instruction abandons the final understanding, which can only be given in genuine religious experience” (1995, p. 67). We are delving into the philosophy of factuality, where understanding blossoms from the “experience, feeling” of life. Postphenomenological thinkers have engaged with questions of subjectivity and methods of cognition, particularly in overcoming the primacy of contemplation when considering matters related to God (i.e., the question of the invisible). In this intellectual journey, such prominent figures as John Caputo and Richard Kearney have taken center stage. Caputo, fundamentally, advocates for a rethinking of God beyond the confines of onto-theology. While critiquing metaphysics, he prompts an exploration of the potential for justifying new modes of thinking (Caputo, 2013). Kearney argues that there is another type of thinking – poetics, since it sets the limits of “conceptual reflection”. He calls this type of thinking “understanding with the heart” (2011). In our perspective, this intersects with the aestheticization of cognition as an avenue toward new thinking. In such a mode of thinking, the precision of reason converges with a unique resonance of the imagination, offering a means to sidestep the dogmatism that Heidegger vehemently opposed.

In substantiating the approach to a new paradigm of cognition and thinking, it is beneficial to consider the statements of George Lakoff, one of the founders of the modern transdisciplinary field of cognitive science, regarding the role of the body and the emergence of a “(...) new form of rationality – embodied rationality” (1999, p. 477). Lakoff asserts that fundamental ideas are shaped by the functioning and interaction of our bodies with space. He posits that the genuine theory of rationality involves thinking through frames, metaphors, and narratives. According to him, our brains adapt incoming information, leading to varied conclusions. This theory is termed embodied rationality, a departure from the anti-scientific Cartesian theory of rationality. Lakoff does not negate rationality; instead, he seeks to provide it with a truly scientific definition (1999). The author contends that many past thinkers perceived logic as detached from bodies and the environment. They considered thinking to be automated programs directed by the human brain and conceptualized reason as universal, pure, and abstract.

Art emerges as the pinnacle of human efforts to comprehend thinking, simultaneously serving as evidence of a crisis in knowledge. This crisis is also reflected in scientific endeavors. In the contemporary scientific paradigm, characterized by materialism, there is a conflict between the ability to engage with the visible and the challenge of apprehending the invisible. Quantum physics introduces a unique perspective, suggesting that, in artistic-aesthetic terms, the role of the body/consciousness is enacted by an entity referred to as the “observer”. This implies a redefined understanding of the subject and its associated meanings, which the current scientific paradigm struggles to elucidate. It is crucial to acknowledge the significance of continuum perception in the cognitive process –a vital background for new thinking that is oriented towards non-rational forms of knowledge.

Final considerations

If reason ensures the survival of man as a species, as the improvement of this biological representative of nature, then thinking is a tool of a heuristic nature. The modern paradigm of cognition faces an obstacle, perhaps one of the most significant for people today: the (scientific) paradigm does not work with the invisible. Contemporary art confirms this and leads us to the idea that the human mind does not rise above the body, the body has the same weight in the design of the semantic contexts of the world, among which the

main one is a possible exit to the invisible, bypassing rational discourse. Art has always guided a person or acted as a tool for accessing the transcendental. The cognitive structures of the mind for such an exit today remain closed.

Representatives of phenomenology, postphenomenology, and cognitive science are increasingly focusing on the possibilities of new thinking, starting precisely from the idea of seeing the invisible. Their research is related to the idea of possible “communication” or the desire to think about God, but the impetus for such thoughts is given not only by religious discourse: the spheres of aesthetics, architectural and sculptural art indirectly activated issues of cognition and thinking. It has become absolutely clear that the logical structure of knowledge, which relied on reason, does not work today in the broad aspirations of man. It is working with the invisible that demonstrates the limits of the mind. This indicates a crisis in the format of thinking, the format of cognition. We need new justifications for the possibilities of thinking in a situation where it strives to “look” beyond the horizon of logical thinking.

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