

Kamila Biały 

University of Lodz

Dagna Kidoń 

The Polish National Film, Television and Theatre School in Lodz



BETWEEN THE SENSES AND MEANINGS: A STUDY OF THE PATHIC EXPERIENCE OF ART

This article examines the pathic dimension of art experience from a post-phenomenological perspective, investigating how sensory perception relates to meaning-making in art reception. The study combines insights from neuroscience with phenomenological approaches to analyse how viewers engage with artworks at both sensory and cognitive levels. Based on qualitative interviews analysing viewers' responses to contemporary artworks, the research identifies three distinct models of pathic art reception: emanation-based reception, emotional-sensory attunement, and a mixed model featuring greater cognitive distance. These forms of art reception disrupt established perceptual patterns, placing the viewer into a state of sensory-cognitive surprise. They also challenge the dominance of purely mental or structural approaches to art. Instead, they foreground an intuitive sensitivity to bodily signals and a surrender to the immediacy of the encounter. Concomitantly, such a shift draws attention to the broader theme of change—a foundational concern in both the arts and the social sciences, including within the Polish sociological tradition.

Key words: pathic experience; art reception; embodied perception; post-phenomenology; sensoriality

In this article, we attempt to examine the pathic dimension of art experience¹. At the outset, adopting a post-phenomenological perspective, we reflect

Kamila Biały, Department of Sociology of Art, Institute of Sociology, University of Lodz, Poland, kamila.bialy@uni.lodz.pl, ORCID 0000-0003-4933-3570; Dagna Kidoń, Institute of Arts Studies, The Polish National Film, Television and Theatre School in Lodz, Poland, d.kidon@filmschool.lodz.pl, ORCID 0000-0002-1157-7898. Tekst opublikowany na warunkach licencji Creative Commons Uznanie autorstwa-Użycie niekomercyjne-Bez utworów zależnych 3.0 Polska (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 PL).

¹ Despite the growing presence of approaches in art research that integrate broadly defined cognitive studies with cultural studies—such as enactivism (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991), that focuses on biopsychosocial interactions between an organism and its environment—for the sake of clarifying the distinctive character of the approach outlined here, we extend the continuum of art-related inquiry between two poles. On one end lies the so-called reductionist cognitive science, which we refer to as the purely mental approach, focusing on the

on the role of sensory perception of the artwork and its relationship to the layer of meaning, arguing that the “how” of experiencing something becomes the content itself, and the mode of representation is as important as what is represented.

Yet, in the spirit of phenomenology, we also seek to move beyond representationalism, which attempts to derive intentionality from mental content contained within the mind. We are guided instead by a presentationalist perspective, which holds that the intentional content of consciousness arises from the way things present themselves to us. In other words, we are interested in the (lived) experience of the artwork. As such, this experience is embedded in a given world and culture—it does not exist in a vacuum, outside of meaning. At the same time, it cannot be adequately understood through constructivist categories alone (see below for further discussion).

Subsequently, based on conducted interviews, we present three distinct models of pathic art reception: the first based on emanation from the image (characterized by direct sensory engagement with formal aspects), the second grounded in emotional-sensory attunement (involving embodied empathy with the represented content), and the third, a mixed model characterized by a greater cognitive distance.

In the final section, we place these findings in a broader socio-cultural context, analyzing how the pathic reception of art speaks to evolving understandings of subjectivity and its relational entanglement with the world in late modernity, with particular emphasis on phenomena such as hypersensitivity, multisensoriality, and cognitive flexibility.

The entire discussion is grounded in the latest discoveries from neuroscience, especially in the context of the free energy principle and the dynamics of the sensory field.

internal cognitive functions of the brain—such as perception, memory, and attention—that occur between a stimulus (art) and a response (appreciation). On the other end are traditional sociological analyses that address the structural determinants of reception. Both approaches are grounded in the idea of representation. And despite many differences, they are united by assuming minimal or no role of the subject in the process or the interaction taking place. Enactivism, by contrast, aspires to an anti-representational perspective, akin to those currents in contemporary phenomenology that inform our analysis. However, there are fundamental differences between enactivism—which emerges from embodied cognitive science and phenomenology, as does our own approach—and the framework we adopt here. This is not the place to elaborate on those differences in detail. We may, at minimum, note that in enactivism meaning arises not as a given, but through the interplay between the artwork and its recipient—unfolding in the space of their reciprocal engagement. Within the postphenomenology framework artworks are not static representations but *generative fields*. They enact the creation of the world in real time—unfolding “in front of the eyes” of the viewer (Maldiney 2022). This moment of aesthetic encounter reveals not only the object, but also the becoming of the subject in relation to it.

While social and cultural science approaches to art reception have provided valuable insights into how viewers decode cultural meanings and navigate interpretive frameworks, these approaches predominantly emphasize the rational, post-reflective dimensions of aesthetic encounter. The dominant paradigm treats art reception as a process of cultural translation, wherein viewers—positioned as discrete, interpretive agents—act upon artworks to extract socially encoded meanings (Bourdieu, 1984; Sułkowski, 1972, Matuchniak-Krasuska, 1988). This framework, while illuminating the sociocultural dimensions of aesthetic judgment, tends to lose sight of the immediate, pre-cognitive dimensions of aesthetic experience in favor of analyzing how reception reproduces existing cultural hierarchies and symbolic distinctions. Moreover, the prevalent focus on post-hoc reflection—typically gathered through interviews or surveys conducted after viewing—risks losing the dynamic, emergent qualities of the aesthetic encounter itself.

Our study addresses several key gaps in this discourse: first, by foregrounding how viewers are *affected* by artworks rather than how they decode them; second, by examining pre-cognitive, sensory engagement rather than solely rational responses; and third, by proposing an “undivided sensory field” that challenges the conventional subject-object separation that underlies much reception theory. Rather than treating language as a vehicle for reporting experience, we explore its potentially generative role in the aesthetic encounter. Furthermore, we seek to move beyond established disciplinary divisions—individual versus social, emotional versus cognitive, form versus content, experience versus language—that may artificially constrain our understanding of aesthetic experience. By integrating phenomenological, neuroscientific, and sociological perspectives, we aim to capture dimensions of art reception that remain invisible to single-discipline approaches, particularly the pathic, embodied, and emergent aspects of aesthetic encounter that unfold in real time.

The Dynamics of the Sensory Field from the Perspective of Neuroscience and Phenomenology

This article and the art reception research on which it is based draw inspiration from phenomenology and neuroscience. In the latter field, there is a significant epistemological shift. It involves shifting attention from a single mind to an interest in the situational, interactive dynamics of the sensory field. Western thought has long been interested in supra-individual cognition. In the mid-20th century, interest in collective consciousness on a scale larger than individual minds coexisted with the belief that groups of distinct individuals constitute wholes without being the sum of their parts (Lewin, 1951). The approach

focusing on supra-individual cognition – after decades of silence – is gaining momentum again. According to the field perspective, not only is our “being” situated, but also our perceptions, actions, and intentions are dependent on pre-subjective, phenomenal “field forces” that surround us (Sarasso et al., 2022). In other words, within a system or field of sensorily connected parts, we are synchronized and coordinate actions with other parts as a whole (Friston and Frith, 2015). Based on the General Theory of Consciousness Resonance, Young and his colleagues suggest that synchronization between individuals implies a connection in which sensorily linked agents merge into a common cognitive system to which they are subordinated (Hunt and Schooler, 2019).

In accordance with the mentioned idea of interactive sensory field dynamics, an artwork appears as a kind of sensory surprise. Its reception and art experience are influenced by many factors. This is not a simple, causal relationship of stimulus—recipient’s sensory organ—their cognitive system—motor response. Rather, we are dealing with a flow of experience (flux of experience, cf. Cox et al., 2023). It has an emergent nature, existing only in a given moment (soft assemblage), as opposed to fixed representations that would be retrieved from the brain each time a work is viewed. We have written about the complex and variable nature of interactions between components explaining the reception process—socio-cultural, phenomenological, cognitive, and physiological—elsewhere (article in press). In a separate publication (Biały, Ferenc and Kidoń, 2025), based on the same research, we compared the impact of deterministic forces mediating reception (J. Haidt’s moral foundations cf. Haidt, 2012) with stochastic forces emerging during the viewing and discussion of works.

Cognitive schemas activated in the process of art reception are based on the neurobiological principle of free energy (Friston, 2010). According to this principle, the brain constantly generates predictions about incoming sensory information and works to minimize the mismatch between these predictions and actual experience. When predictions fail, the brain can respond in two ways: by updating its predictive models (changing beliefs about the world) or by acting to seek out more predictable situations (moving toward familiar environments or experiences). This process favors established patterns because they align with the brain’s existing predictive frameworks, reducing the computational work of updating beliefs. Attachment to a specific value system (mentioned moral foundations) eliminates the element of surprise, making art reception more predictable. This applies even to sensory-affective reception, which leads to the emergence of certain fixed emotional-cognitive, and even motor patterns in the reception process that can be reproduced.

Pathos and Logos in Experiencing Art

In our approach to understanding and studying the art experience process, inspired by post-phenomenology, sensory feeling of the artwork plays a key role, rather than reference to its meaning. This stems from the affinity between phenomenological and aesthetic experience, which should not be surprising if we recall the double meaning of aesthetics. *Aisthesis* as sensuality and corporeality opaque to itself already appears in Alexander Baumgarten, the founder of aesthetics as a separate discipline.

We analyze this issue through phenomenology, assuming that the artwork is not perceived as a language, because form becomes content here. The work is also not a sentence whose signs refer to some specific meaning. When an art object reveals itself, it expresses itself, becomes an expression (Maldiney, 2022 as cited in Murawska, 2023) and incites a transcendent sense, incites a certain world (Haar, 1994 as cited in Murawska, 2023). According to Monika Murawska (2023), this is a point of intersection with semiotic approaches to art (further discussion on the interplay between experience and language can be found below).

Our focus is on how the subject *responds to the call* that emanates from the artwork—not as an active interpreter, but as a receiver of affective force. We frame this response as *pathic*: a form of passive, embodied openness to what is given. Pathos here refers not to emotion alone, but to a *situational field of forces*—what Francesetti and Roubal (2020) call the *phenomenal field*—in which perception is immediate, sensory, and pre-reflective. It is a mode of attunement in which subject and object are not yet separated, but exist as an undifferentiated experiential whole.

This undivided state draws on a broader epistemological turn in contemporary neuroscience. According to this perspective, there is no abstract subject standing outside of sensory contact with the world. Rather, *being* is always first a *being-there* (*da sein*), grounded in immersion within a sensory field². Sensations arise prior to their attribution—only in a secondary, retrospective act does the subject claim them as their own (Sarasso et al., 2024).

Within this first phase of perception—and of art reception more specifically—the subject does not act upon the artwork so much as submit to it. They

² Similarly, in post-phenomenological thought, *feeling* is not merely the passive reception of sensations—it constitutes an onto-epistemological event (Maldiney, 2022, as cited in Murawska, 2023). Sensory contact with the world becomes the foundation for understanding the subject–object relation: all forms and meanings *emerge* from this primary field of embodied interaction. From this perspective, there is no detached observer; rather, the subject arises in response to a world that gives itself first as sensation. Other strands in post-phenomenology that inform our approach intensify the inquiry into the interplay between language and experience—claiming that the primordial encounter with the phenomenon is always already hermeneutic in nature (Lorenc, 2024).

become *subject to* a flux of impressions, resonances, and felt intensities. It is at this level, as Dufrenne (1953) suggests, that the artwork *gives itself*: not as something to be decoded, but as something that moves, disturbs, or compels. Something happens to the subject. Reception, in this frame, is not a function of will but a moment of vulnerability to aesthetic force.

This perspective emphasizes *pathos*—the bodily, affective encounter with the work—as primary, with *logos* entering only later. Initially, the viewer is not yet an interpreter but a respondent, immersed in an undivided field where subject and object have not fully crystallized. Meaning is not sought but emerges—*given*, rather than *made*. As Waldenfels (2011) argues, the object’s intentionality becomes meaningful only in response: the artwork addresses the subject, and the subject becomes one-who-answers.

It is precisely in this answering that logos begins to take form—not as detached cognition, but as the subject’s active engagement within a *phenomenological field*. The viewer begins to explore, think, select, name, and narrate—not in abstraction, but in continuity with the aesthetic exposure that preceded it (Francesetti and Roubal, 2020).

To recap this section, at the level of the object, we move away from a strictly semiotic understanding of art—where meaning is encoded and decoded—in favor of the view that the artwork *reveals itself* as expression. In this framework, form becomes content: the aesthetic event is not merely about what is represented, but how presence is enacted through materiality and appearance. That said, we do not dismiss thematic or narrative content as a form of enactment.

At the level of the *subject*, we adopt the assumption of *pathic reception*—a form of felt responsiveness rooted in what could be called originary pathos. The subject is not positioned as an agent who interprets from a distance, but as one who is *affected*, drawn into relation with the expressive force of the work.

Together, these assumptions—art as expressive emergence, and reception as affective responsiveness—constitute the methodological foundation of our interview analysis.

Research methodology

This analysis emerges from a broader empirical investigation examining how worldview, political attitudes, and moral foundations influence art interpretation. The primary research focused on how neurologically-rooted moral attitudes and their cultural manifestations shape viewers’ responses to contemporary artworks. Art from the last three decades was selected for its controversial, “differentiating” character—works that touch sensitive social topics and

occupy, in Mitchell's terms, "a place in the first row of social conflicts" (Mitchell, 2013, p. 158). This choice enabled examination of direct perceptual responses less mediated by established interpretations, as subsequent analysis confirmed limited prior recognition of presented works among participants. The complete findings were published in "Morality and Sensation. Notes on the aesthetic and non-aesthetic experience of art"³; however, during analysis, several respondents demonstrated distinctive pathic reception patterns warranting separate investigation, forming the basis of this article.

As a result of precise criteria, ten works were selected: the photograph from the *Lego. Concentration Camp* series, 1996 (Zbigniew Libera), *Olympia*, 1996 (Katarzyna Kozyra), *Emblem of the Potopia*, 2016 (Kacper Szalecki), painting from the *Ali* series, 2015–2017 (Karol Radziszewski), painting from the *Everybody Has Their Heroes* series, 2018 (Ignacy Czwartos), a collage from the series *Barbórka (green diamonds)*, 2021 (Diana Lelonek), *These Cream Cakes After the Matura Exam.../John Paul II*, 1999 (The Krasnals collective), *This Is Not a Shell*, 1999 (Monika Mamzeta), *Tonfa*, 2018 (Jacek Adamas), photograph from *The Healing* series, 2017 (Laura Makabresku)⁴.

The artworks selected for this study were deliberately varied and contextually charged, chosen for their potential to elicit heterogeneous cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. Each piece engaged with themes central to Polish public discourse—historical memory, religion and the Church, statehood, nudity, and sexuality—thereby activating divergent interpretive frameworks among viewers. The interviews that followed proved to be a particularly fertile source of insight, generating a diverse range of reactions and reflections. Their richness allows for multiple interpretive angles, and the present text offers one such perspective within this broader analytical landscape.

The interviews employed a phenomenological approach based on Husserl's epoché (bracketing) and phenomenological reduction techniques. Participants were presented with artworks displayed on a large TV screen and guided to focus on their immediate, present-moment experience of each work. The interview process began with bracketing the natural attitude, encouraging participants to suspend automatic interpretations and prior judgments while focusing instead on direct experiential contact with the artwork. Following Husserl's principle of horizontality, the researchers conducted multi-modal inquiries that addressed different sensory modalities including sight, touch, and taste, as well as bodily sensations, feelings, and emerging meanings (Husserl, 1982). This approach recognized that everything in the sensual, bodily, and emotional field contributes to the overall aesthetic experience. A key element of the methodology was

³ The book is available at: <https://morality-and-sensation.vnlab.org>.

⁴ All illustrations can be viewed at https://morality-and-sensation.vnlab.org/chapter_1-04.

the “continuum of consciousness” technique, in which researchers provided undisturbed space for participants to perceive and allow feelings or sensations to differentiate naturally before introducing additional questions. The researchers then employed specific phenomenological techniques such as “staying with” experiences and exploring emotional polarities—for instance, when joy was mentioned, asking about potential sadness in the same artwork. Additionally, attention was paid to non-verbal behaviors as indicators of phenomenological intentionality, with researchers noting and inquiring about observable physical responses. The analysis operated on two levels: diachronic, focusing on successive descriptions of mental phenomena, and synchronic, examining features of presented objects. Throughout the process, researchers maintained a phenomenological descriptive stance rather than adopting explanatory or interpretive approaches, guided by the Gestalt principle of figure-background emergence.

We invited 21 people to participate in the study, representing young intelligentsia (aged 25–40, all with higher education) via snowball recruitment. The sample deliberately excluded professional artists and art educators to avoid expert language and established interpretive schemas that might impede access to immediate sensory and affective responses. Instead, we sought educated participants with cultural engagement but representing “average” levels of artistic participation—ensuring both cultural competency and receptivity to direct, unmediated aesthetic experience.

Among participants invited to our study, we observed a particularly distinctive mode of reception in three female respondents, which we examine in the following section. Their cases illuminate the varied ways in which sensory, affective, and intellectual forms of engagement with art can manifest.

The remaining participants in the sample did not open themselves to this kind of experience, which presupposes an element of immersion. One could say they remained at the level of cognitive distance (see below for more on immersion and distance). This distance manifested in specific affective and even bodily reactions—responses that were secondary in nature and, as we demonstrated in another study (article in press), mediated by political and ideological attitudes, or more broadly, by culture. In the study, we referred to such responses as *art reception*, and contrasted them with *art experience*. In this article, we use the terms *art reception* and *art experience* interchangeably, as our use of *art reception* specifically refers to pathic art reception.

The fact that only three individuals were selected from this pool may point to limitations in the research technique or in the training of researchers. Alternatively, it may suggest that immersive attitudes—the desire for a “living presence of meaning” (Husserl, 1991, p. 29), as well as the tendency among these individuals to exhibit what studies on neurodivergence refer to as holotropic sensory gating

(see more on that later in the text)—a distinct mode of processing information from the world—do exist within our society. What stands out even more prominently is the opposing stance—marked by distance, a certain nihilistic outlook, and a tendency toward endless deconstruction—which, albeit in differing moral registers (Haidt, 2012), is evident among both left- and right-leaning respondents⁵.

The methodological framework employed for the analysis and interpretation of the material is directly linked to the previously introduced analytical distinction between *logos* and *pathos*. Analytically, one could speak of two levels of interpretation: the first involving the phenomenological field, and the second addressing the phenomenal field (Francesetti and Roubal, 2020).

The *phenomenal field* can be understood as the horizon of the here-and-now, within which potential forms of experience may emerge. It simultaneously opens up a range of experiential possibilities while delimiting them—since not all forms can arise within a given situation. This field is sensually perceptible as the atmosphere of the situation (Francesetti and Griffero, 2019), shaped by dynamic forces that condition the emergence of phenomena. These forces are intentionalities: intrinsic tensions oriented toward the realization of the situation's latent potential.

In the initial phase of encountering an artwork, the subject does not act upon it so much as yield to it. They become receptive to a flow of impressions, resonances, and embodied intensities. This approach foregrounds *pathos*—the affective, bodily engagement with the work—as primary, with *logos* entering only at a later stage⁶. At first, the viewer is not yet an interpreter but a respondent, immersed in an undifferentiated field where subject and object have not yet solidified. Meaning is not actively pursued but arises spontaneously. As Waldenfels (2011) notes, the intentionality of the object becomes meaningful only in response.

When we shift from being absorbed in the phenomenal field to becoming aware of it, the capacity for reflection and verbal articulation begins to unfold—this is the emergence of the *phenomenological field*. From our perspective, however, this is not merely a cognitive act; it involves an embodied attunement to the sensory phenomena arising in the situation. In engaging with artworks, subjects develop the ability to perceive the phenomenal field, to recognize the forces that move within it, and to cultivate curiosity about what is unfolding. In

⁵ Both attitudes can be seen as responses to the unsettling destabilization—or more radically, the destruction—of metaphysical foundations in contemporary life (Vattimo, 1998). That, however, is a subject for another discussion.

⁶ Certain strands within postphenomenology also speak of intellectual immersion, alongside sensory and affective forms. The results of our research point in the same direction — see more in: Respondent S.

this way, the phenomenal field—where one is *subjected to* experience—is transformed into a phenomenological field—where one becomes the *subject of* experience. Reflecting, wording, thinking, telling, giving meaning become possible, and the horizon of possibilities expands.

Language as Evidence of Pathic Reception?

While it may be analytically tempting to distinguish neatly between *pathic* and *active* modes of reception, we acknowledge that such a binary is often untenable. Nonetheless, we can identify moments when respondents speak *from within* the encounter—where their narrative unfolds in continuity with the experience itself. In these instances, they refrain from immediately positioning themselves as detached subjects. Instead, their reflections are not mediated through familiar frameworks such as life biography (“subjective reception”), sociocultural context (“intersubjective reception”), or expert/artistic discourse (“objective reception”) (Kidoń, in press).

Although it is difficult to analytically distinguish these processes of pathic and active reception, and a pure distinction probably does not exist, we can point to moments when the narrators speak „from within” the situation, from this intertwining with the artwork. Instead of immediately making themselves active subjects of reception.

This openness allows for a suspension of immediate categorization and offers a mode of engagement that momentarily resists the symbolic and discursive reflexes of the everyday lifeworld. However, this does not mean that *pathic reception* is devoid of cultural or cognitive inflection. Rather, as we will explore in detail, *logos*—meaning, thought, and reflective interpretation—emerges from *pathos*. The affective resonance of the encounter becomes the generative ground from which meaning takes shape.

The complexity of reception—and its subsequent analysis—increases when we turn to a phenomenological account of the artwork that seeks to trace structuring processes at the level of the senses, feelings, and corporeality in relation to form. In presenting the *pathic* dimension of experience, however, we find ourselves constrained by a paradox: we are limited to the medium of *language*—a tool that risks abstracting or flattening what is visceral, pre-linguistic, and embodied. Goethe’s observation resonates here: “*Art is the mediator of the unspeakable; therefore it seems absurd to want to mediate it again through words*” (Goethe, 1997, p. 196).

This paradox presents a methodological challenge. How can we communicate pre-reflective, bodily engagement with art in and through language? How might we analyze interview narratives in ways that preserve—not reduce—the

immediacy, ambiguity, and sensual vitality of aesthetic experience? To address these questions, we remain acutely attuned to the linguistic textures that might reveal moments of *unfiltered resonance* in the respondents' reflections.

While the linguistic turn (as seen in the works of Lacan, 1996; Derrida, 1997) has taught us to question the transparency of language, our concerns move in a different direction. We ask whether language must always reify experience—turn it into something static, rhetorical—or whether, alternatively, it can *become eventful*, affective in itself. Murawska's concept of *the sensuality of the word* is central here: the idea of a word that desires expression but has not yet been overtaken by intentionality (Murawska, 2024).

From this vantage point—beyond post-structuralist skepticism—we notice something generative in the language of our participants. Their words do not merely *translate* experience; they appear to *generate it*. While we make no definitive claims in this regard, we foreground this ambiguity as a key axis of inquiry.

In analyzing the interview material, we focus on the extent to which language reflects *emergent experience*, moments of unanticipated sensation or cognitive surprise. Although our emphasis rests on *pathos*, we cannot entirely suspend the workings of *logos*—that is, thinking, interpreting, meaning-making. The art experiences our participants describe often defy stable categories and remain in motion.

This dynamic quality of experience integrates sensory, emotional, and cognitive elements—immersion alongside distance. At times, it is primarily immersion with elements of cognitive distance (Respondent M.); at other times, it is chiefly cognitive distance with traces of immersion (Respondent J.). Occasionally, both immersion and distance are present, with immersion itself taking on an intellectual dimension (Respondent S.). This process resembles—using the language of contemporary phenomenology—an opening toward an unknown horizon of sense, followed by a return to familiar semantic forms, and then a detachment from them once again. The transcendence of meaning toward a horizon of sense occurs through immersion—sensory, affective, and intellectual—and remains always entangled with meaning (Lorenc, 2024).

Among the selected respondents, the attitudes of *pathos* and *logos* intertwine most distinctly. This intertwining—an ongoing tension between the multiplicity of meanings within the phenomenal field and the rootedness in a given language and culture as a pre-existing structure of meaning—is, in fact, a defining feature of the modern subject (Lorenc, 2024). When Maurice Merleau-Ponty introduces the notion of *intertwining* (*le chiasme*), he refers not so much to the epistemological order, as we do here, but to the ontological level—radicalizing the relationship between interior and exterior, language and experience, by asserting that the originary experience of the phenomenon is itself hermeneutic (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Nevertheless, we consider it legitimate to invoke the category

of “intertwining”, as we are guided by a similar assumption: that phenomenological analysis is always already a hermeneutic one.

It is reasonable to assume a conceptual affinity with particular directions in neurobiological research referenced here, which appear to gesture toward similar claims – the degree to which these experiences open space for surprise and cognitive-sensory emergence, and the extent to which they reproduce familiar, socially encoded schemas.

Between Pathos and Distance: Case Analysis

The studied subjects show two fundamental variants of pathic reception:

a) **Emanation and Immersion: The Sensory-Driven Reception**

The first mode of reception identified in our study is best described as *emanative*. This form is clearly exemplified by Respondent M, whose engagement with artworks is characterized by *passive immersion*—not in the sense of disengagement, but as a surrender to the perceptual flow initiated by the artwork. Her language is quick, spontaneous, and rhythmically fluid, evoking a kind of sensory stream-of-consciousness. Often, this immediacy surprises even her: “(...) red somehow associates for me a bit with fire, with tongues of fire, somehow strange [laughs].”

Her reception is filled with what we might call *immersion markers*—non-verbal cues such as laughter, sighs, and abrupt tonal shifts, which testify to her embodied involvement. The experience of *temperature and energy* dominates her descriptions: sometimes these are referenced separately, sometimes they merge, and frequently they are conveyed through haptic metaphors or implicit movement—approaching, touching, distancing.

For M, the *pathic experience* is rooted in her sensitivity to form: color, texture, rhythm. Without referring to specialized aesthetic categories, she intuitively links her emotional and sensory reactions to the formal properties of the artworks. Her attention gravitates to color, which becomes both a perceptual anchor and a symbolic entry point. In her analysis of Szalecki’s work, she observes the tension between gold and pink—not simply as hues, but as cultural signifiers. Pink is linked to LGBT identity, while gold evokes hierarchy and sanctification: “There must be a golden eagle in a crown because our Polishness is so, oh Jeeez, important, such pompous patriotism.”

Thus, while her reaction initially emerges at the sensory level, it evolves into socio-cultural commentary. This brings to mind the concept of seeing an artwork as an area of encounters, modulations, and tensions from which it itself emerges (Maldiney, 2022, as cited in Murawska, 2023).

Her haptic responses often override discursive interpretation. In Radziszewski's painting, she notes that the colors "evoke a feeling of warmth almost on the skin." In viewing Makabresku's photograph, by contrast, color registers as thermal discomfort: "The image is very cold... I feel such a chill and it somewhat repels." Her aesthetic judgment operates in tandem with this embodied response: despite finding the image "cold" and "repulsive," she still likes it. This decoupling of affect from evaluation underscores a capacity to *feel through* the work while maintaining a degree of reflective distance.

In the case of Jacek Adamas's neon installation, sensory pleasure eclipses interpretation. "The neon is colorful, pleasant, and warm... it creates an impression that you want to hug it," she says, reflecting a somatic impulse to approach and embrace. Only later does she begin to associate the neon tubes with metaphorical or narrative content—ranging from club aesthetics and musical genres to relationship stages and ultimately, clinical death imagery. These meanings emerge rhizomatically: from warmth to coolness, from color to association, without linear progression.

Crucially, her first-person phrasing—*I feel warm, I feel cold*—collapses the boundary between viewer and image. The work emanates; she receives. Interpretation happens later, and only sometimes. Yet even when iconographic interpretation begins, it does not necessarily dissolve her sensory involvement.

This dynamic is evident in her encounter with Kozyra's work. Here, for the first time, her response foregrounds *content* over form. She "teleports" into the image's world, introducing narratives, assigning voices, animating characters. Her interaction is both *sensorial and symbolic*, culminating in what we might describe as a *maieutic process*—through dialogue, reflection, and self-questioning, she gradually "domesticates" the artwork, converting affective intensity into conceptual clarity.

Thus, M's reception illustrates a pathic mode of art experience that begins in *affective exposure*, moves through a loosely structured sensory grammar, and at times crosses into *logos*—but never fully severs its tie to the body. Her engagement confirms the potential of art to disturb, absorb, and ultimately *recalibrate* the perceiving subject.

Oh, this is something I don't know how to interpret [[laughs]]. So much is happening in this image, and this woman has a terribly ugly face [[laughs]]. I just don't know, it associates with something for me. You know what, this image associates with illness. Because this woman is bald, as I assume. And yes, overall, it feels repulsive to me. Her hands are terribly ugly [[sighs]].

What makes it repulsive, or what repulses here?

It's very naturalistic. The woman's face is completely without makeup, has discolorations, is bald. I feel like she's sick, maybe with cancer or AIDS.

Do you feel it in your body?

Yes. Her gaze is piercing, as if saying, “Don’t laugh, because this will happen to you too.” She looks deep into my soul, and it stirs something inside me.

So what does it communicate?

Simply, it speaks about death. That something is inevitable. On one hand, a flower is associated with life, playfulness. But she looks like she’s about to die. It’s such a strange contrast.

Strange and disturbing?

Not disturbing, but... hard to describe. She’s incredibly calm. The flower might symbolize a fight, a will to live... but then again, maybe not.

While color remains a dominant perceptual anchor for Respondent M.—often catalyzing vivid sensory and emotional engagement—it does not uniformly define her interaction with artworks. In certain cases, notably with Libera’s *Lego* and Czwartos’s painting, the works’ iconographic content is so charged that it preempts direct sensory engagement, instead *inscribing* affect through historical and ideological resonance. The Lego blocks, associated with Holocaust imagery, elicit strong reactions—dehumanization, death, emotional detachment—all of which provoke discomfort that is *linked to sensory impressions*, but mediated by meaning. Czwartos’s work, though more interpretively ambiguous, triggers associations with historical memory and educational milestones (textbooks, final exams), as well as embodied unease: the “dead-looking” soldiers and nationalist-religious overtones cause the viewer to “tense up” and experience “rather unpleasant impressions.”

In these examples—as well as in her reception of feminist (Mamzeta) and ecological (Lelonek) works—the ideological content asserts itself early in the encounter. This results in a reception style that leans more toward the reproduction of inherited meaning than toward the spontaneous generation of sensory or symbolic rhizomes. While there are still moments of sensory-affective intensity—such as M.’s impulse in front of *This is Not a Shell* to “hug this painting”—these responses are pre-framed by prior interpretation. What might begin as a tactile or thermal experience becomes quickly absorbed into a dominant conceptual register, limiting the emergence of associative divergence or surprise. The experience remains emotionally expressive, but circumscribed by a single ideological contour.

Interestingly, these more cognitively mediated receptions shift M.’s focus outward—toward social emotion and collective affect. Her reflections become meta-commentaries on the emotional states of “Poles,” of “people today,” of “us.” Libera’s work, she argues, reflects a social malaise: “people don’t love each other,” and “there is no place at all for empathy, no place for friendship, for love.” In response to Lelonek’s collage, she reflects on “our environment”

and “our destruction.” Even when describing *This is Not a Shell*, she refers to “our wombs” and “our objectification,” explicitly linking the work to a shared female condition. Similarly, works by Czwartos or The Krasnals are described in terms of “our Polishness,” “our religiosity”—foregrounding the national and moral imaginary.

b) Embodied Empathy: The Content-Attuned Variation of Pathic Reception

The second form of pathic reception we observed centers on what we term embodied empathy—the sensory-based perception of affective states inhabiting another’s body. Grounded in research on mirror neurons (Gallese, Eagle, and Migone, 2007), this variation suggests that the viewer’s sensory system attunes not only to formal properties of the artwork but also to the *felt presence* of the represented world and its agents. Here, empathy is not an abstract act of interpretation, but a somatic resonance—the viewer senses *through* the image the emotions and intentions of another.

Respondent S. offers a compelling case of this mode. Unlike M., who immerses herself directly in the emanating form of the artwork, S. maintains a degree of narrative mediation. She does not say “I feel warm” but rather describes the world depicted as “fiery warm”; instead of “I hear bells,” she states “bells are ringing.” In this subtle shift, we see a distinction: the senses remain foundational, but the subject places them in service of interpreting content rather than surrendering to sensation.

Form still affects her—colors, composition, and materials are noted—but they are mentioned primarily insofar as they serve to reinforce the emotional state or narrative context of the depicted scene. For instance, she notes that the pope appears to be laughing even though painted in gray hues, and that the woman in Makabresku’s photograph radiates calm, consistent with the “limited number of colors” used.

From a methodological standpoint, this reception style constitutes a form of *pathic sense-making* that bridges somatic resonance with narrative generation. *The content* that emerges is not merely projected from the subject’s prior knowledge or personal experience; rather, it appears to *arise from a shared sensory field*. In tuning into the image, S. enacts a kind of sensory participation—she does not impose meaning but co-generates it with the work.

In this variation, pathos becomes visualization: the viewer crafts metaphors and associative imagery that move fluidly between affective presence and reflection. The shift from being *subject to* the artwork (as in M.’s case) to becoming *subject with* the work marks a subtle but distinct transformation in how reception unfolds.

We see in S.’s reception a narrative voice attuned to affect, but tempered by reflective distance. It is this balance—between affective sensitivity and narrative coherence—that defines the embodied empathetic mode of art reception.

Unlike Respondent M., whose reception remains rooted in sensory immediacy and is often left untranslated into verbal language, Respondent S. engages with the artwork through an imaginative, narrative impulse. Rather than dwelling in pure sensation, she “activates” the depicted scene—assigning roles to figures, animating imagined dialogue, and constructing internal monologues. In doing so, she does not simply interpret; she plays with the visual field, turning reception into a form of story-making.

This mode of engagement recalls the logic of the *rhizome*—not in the associative, formal sense seen with M., but as a narrative rhizome: a proliferation of meanings and affects that unfold into plot-like structures. Here, too, multiple sensations and impressions arise, but rather than dispersing outward into purely sensorial networks, they are configured as unfolding dramatic scenarios. Characters are not simply seen; they are inhabited, activated within a world that the narrator co-constructs through her embodied empathy and imaginative projection.

S.’s reception thus reflects a pathic style that is less about absorption into the artwork’s form and more about co-creating its inner life. The artwork becomes a stage for perceptual dramaturgy—where visual cues initiate not only emotional resonance, but narrative momentum:

It is so, I don’t know. Fiery warm, as if something bad is happening and one must move, feel such, mhm (.).

Such tension?

Yes, very much.

Yes? Aha, in his posture, right?

Yes. I see as if bells are ringing [[laughter]], and he must escape, must fly, time is urging, something needs to be settled quickly.

Readiness, right?

Yes, as if he were tense—not like a soldier, straightened with pride, but with growing anxiety about problems that must be quickly handled.

Do these associations also evoke some emotions?

I feel tense myself. Yes. I approach this empathetically, and as I look at him, I imagine standing in front of him, wanting him to stop stressing, resolve it, and move forward [[laughs]].

The sensoriality and emotionality of the “narrated” scenes stand out, and we can assume that they originate from an undivided subject-object sensory field, rather than being a secondary sensoriality—as a reaction to (one’s own) interpretation process. The words used bring to mind the aforementioned “sensuality of the word”—of a word that wishes to express itself and is not yet overtaken by intentionality. Many of these narrative descriptions of works are characterized by teleportation, meaning moving into the image’s world and observing the depicted world, or merging with it—S. becomes its protagonist, is in it, transfers into it. Being there, she can also feel empathy towards the observed world, empathetically understand the emotions of that world, and experience/feel/observe her own emotions as a result of empathy (an expression of understanding, compassion, need for care, help, being with the image’s protagonist, some reaction to the protagonist’s emotions).

When describing Makabresku’s photograph, S. also perceives it pathically—in her specific way: seemingly not through form, yet almost in her first words, it’s about form:

– (.) *There is peace in this through the limit..., limited, such a limited number of colors and so on. It is very calming.*

Then, similar to Radziszewski’s painting, she actively enters the narrative, dramatizing it. The naked woman becomes a woman feeling relief after a very difficult moment, such as after childbirth, and in further interpretation, she is also a saint who sacrifices herself and saves the world. Even if here—as in the case of Radziszewski’s painting—she starts with a general interpretation,

– *What first came to my mind when I saw it. Despite the tear and. And this kind of, I don’t know, mother’s self-sacrifice in the sense that it associates, [[laugh]] very much associates with motherhood.*

However, the aforementioned pathic reception fragment largely determines further development into a rich, detailed narrative:

– *There is peace in this through the limit... a limited number of colors and so on. It is very calming. Mhm, but again, on the woman in the photograph, there’s a feeling. As if she were satisfied—that it’s over, that something bad has ended, and now it can only get better. She reached, I don’t know, the peak of problems or pain. Maybe even during childbirth in that sense—now it can only be euphoria.*

Quite often, S. immediately begins her statement with an iconological description, hence it’s clear that she perfectly knows what these works are about, and then allows herself to be carried away by narratives adequate to that reading. At times, she strongly focuses on pre-iconography, reads the work literally, initially relinquishing symbolism and meaning, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t open up to broader, more symbolic senses. Resorting to this literalness is not a result of ignorance or avoidance, but a choice. Her reception is pluralistic,

for example, in interpreting Lelonek's collage, she notices the artistic context, referring to the *Lady with an Ermine*, and earlier to personal memories and associations (home, family), and also reflects on her viewing process (swapping the first and second plans). However, whether following iconology or remaining in a so-called naive reception, she is a narrator in a pathic attitude towards the work. Expressive, extroverted, unpretentious, she speaks freely, fluently, as if it came naturally to her, as if she did it without much consideration, as if she already knew that this is how it is. This again brings to mind the issue of the emergent quality of language.

When describing Kozyra's work, she immediately performs an iconographic interpretation:

Oh, I thought about an attempt to hide the disease, to beautify it, because I have the impression the woman, the main character, is post-chemotherapy, has no hair, no eyebrows, probably no eyelashes either. When I see she has no eyebrows, then probably no eyelashes.

She does, however, pay attention to colors that affect her and can identify this:

Oh, mmhm this blue that dominates here, reminds me of mmhm (.). Coldness, hospital coldness, because these colors are always such >cold, calming<.

As if these two levels—symbolic and phenomenological—were nourishing each other:

They put you into a lethargy, without reflection, just existence. Yes, but on the other hand, I see a strong woman, fighting, almost a goddess, because she is presented like this—red shoes, and again with such strength, to take one more step and keep fighting...

In contrast to the immersive or empathetically tuned responses we examined earlier, some artworks fail to elicit a sensorial or affective engagement. A clear example is found in the viewer's reception of *Czwartos' painting*. Here, sensoriality is notably absent. Rather than opening herself to the work's perceptual or atmospheric qualities, the viewer narrows her response to the *thematic content*—specifically, the critique of conformism, which she finds irritating.

This response signals a shift from aesthetic presence to conceptual reactivity. Instead of engaging with the formal or emotive aspects of the painting, the viewer bypasses the image as event and moves directly into ideological resistance. The artwork becomes a discursive trigger, not a phenomenological encounter. Crucially, she is not reacting to how the work makes her *feel*, but to what it appears to *say*—a form of relation that distances rather than immerses.

This moment introduces an important counterpoint: aesthetic reception may collapse under the weight of ideological reflex. When the viewer relates not to the artwork's affective texture, but solely to its discursive intention, the

image is reduced to a conceptual prompt—something to argue with, rather than something to inhabit.

c) Distanced Aesthetic Competence: A Hybrid Mode of Reception

The third form of reception, illustrated by Respondent J., reveals a complex interplay of *emanation* and *tuning*, integrating both form-driven and content-responsive dimensions. Unlike the immersion seen in Respondent M. or the affective empathy of Respondent S., J.'s mode is marked by fluid transitions between perceptual registers while maintaining a consistent reflective distance.

Emanative moments are present—colors “strike,” forms seem to “attack”—yet J. does not dwell in them. She registers these impressions only briefly before returning to an analytical posture. When attuned to content, she constructs character-based narratives (“sad grandma” in Lelonek’s collage, “grandpa who ate cream cakes” in The Krasnals’ painting), but she does not insert herself into the scene. Her narration is observational rather than identificatory; first-person affect is notably absent.

This reception mode is not simply a blend of the previous two—it may constitute a distinct aesthetic style, shaped by cultivated artistic competence. J. demonstrates a high degree of aesthetic literacy: she identifies formal techniques, traces cultural references, and situates works within wider art-historical contexts (e.g., evoking Marina Abramović or Jan Komasa). Her attention to formal means is sharp, yet it rarely triggers a pathic response; it remains mostly within the realm of cognitive evaluation.

One consequence of this aesthetic disposition is the relative disconnection between formal and iconographic analysis. While earlier cases showed how color or materiality gave rise to meaning, J. frequently engages the two levels in parallel but not in synchrony. This may reflect a strength—an ability to distinguish analytic strata—but also a limitation, a difficulty in *bracketing* knowledge to allow for affective openness.

Even so, there are moments where these levels converge. Radziszewski’s image evokes both admiration for bold form and an interpretation aligned with struggle and remembrance:

“It’s strong—the form, the line is so bold, not delicate painting, but as if done in a hurry. Like, ‘I want to paint something, but must emphasize it with strong colors.’ It has a powerful tone, yet still of freedom, >a fight for freedom and commemorating someone<.”

Szalecki’s painting elicits positive emotion specifically from the interaction of “yellow-gold with pink.”:

“It evoked in me such, (.) very positive emotions. Because it’s pink here, such a combination of >yellow-gold with pink, colors super, super worked”

In these cases, aesthetic pleasure and meaning production briefly align. However, the reception of Czwartos' painting proceeds almost entirely on the basis of emanation, and meanings are born from this pathos. Sensitivity to color helps her interpret an image with complicated iconography. In this semantically unclear composition, the blue faces of soldiers become a point of reference, evoking certain emotions and associations. Her sensoriality and disposition allow her to assign meanings and arrive at conclusions close to the author's intention: "they are so blue, they look a bit like death to me. They are, it's a bit frightening."

More often, however, J.'s affective engagement remains centered on the depicted world rather than herself. She describes the emotions of represented figures without fully registering their emotional effect on her. The sadness of the "grandmother" or the dreaminess of the "pope" is noted, but rarely personalized. Even when interpreting Makabresku's photograph or Kozyra's figure, she avoids sensory identification and maintains commentary at a conceptual remove.

An exception occurs with Libera's *Lego* installation. Although the artist's treatment of Holocaust imagery engages J.'s sense of collective memory, the choice of medium—plastic blocks—feels trivializing. This choice pierces her usual reserve: "It seems unnecessary... diminishes the importance of these events and places." While form emanates here, it is immediately subjected to ethical filtration—a response that can be read through Haidt's moral foundation theory (2012), particularly in terms of the *Sanctity* or *Care* foundations.

J.'s interpretive process also reflects a tendency to title artworks herself, such as "Virgin Mary of Peace, Nurturer" or "Beating the Rainbow," signaling an early imposition of meaning. This strategy both organizes her engagement and reveals her preference for cognitive structure. Yet interestingly, sensory impressions often precede these judgments, even if not immediately verbalized.

In Adamas's installation, J. alone among participants immediately names the intended message—"beating the rainbow"—and identifies its hostility toward the LGBTQIA community. Her moral opposition to its content does not prevent her from appreciating its visual appeal: "It's so nice, looks good... visually it catches my attention because it's colorful." Here, content and form coexist without fusion. She neither rejects the work wholesale nor dissolves in aesthetic enjoyment; instead, she toggles between ethical distancing and formal admiration.

These oscillations continue in her analysis of Kozyra's *Olympia*. Initially engaged by color—"these blues are somewhat Marian"—she soon links them to iconographic tropes (the Madonna) and semantic registers ("divinity," "femininity despite"). While clearly moved, J. does not surrender to the work's affective pull. Rather than enter into aesthetic unknowing, she leans on art-historical knowledge and aesthetic competence to interpret and stabilize what might otherwise remain ambiguous.

In sum, J.'s reception is marked by dynamic modulation between sensory contact, formal analysis, and moral reasoning. She neither merges with the artwork nor remains wholly outside it. Her style is distinguished by intellectual agility, aesthetic fluency, and restrained affect. It is a mode that privileges reflective judgment over embodied resonance—but nonetheless reveals moments of friction, flicker, and contact that signal deeper entanglements beneath the surface of composure.

Towards Contemporary Subjectivity: Pathic Reception in Socio-Cultural Context

The sociology of art has long asserted that art is not autonomous but embedded within socio-cultural and historical contexts—an assertion that applies equally to both the creation and reception of artworks. Gadamer (per Maślanka, 2020) even contends that art is not only integrated into our world and life but also functions as a mode of knowing on par with science.

Post-phenomenology radicalizes this thesis further by shifting the focus beyond the artwork itself—toward subjectivity as situated, culturally embedded, and exposed to systemic structures like institutions, ideologies, and history. The subject receives the artwork not in isolation but through the condition of *being-in-the-world*. For Henri Maldiney (2022), subjectivity is nothing other than *pure sensoriality*—and art, uniquely, is what reveals that sensory foundation.

In this relational exposure, the Self is continually constituted in and through the world—both existentially (*being-in-the-world*) and expressively (as one who receives and gives meaning). Aesthetic experience, then, becomes a site of change. Whether understood in terms of *aisthesis* (the broadly understood sense of sensoriality) or as aesthetic judgment about artworks, the subject and the world remain inseparable. As Murawska writes: “Art is the truth of feeling... Artistic aesthetics constitutes the truth of sensory aesthetics, of which being is revealed in the being of the work” (Murawska, 2023, p. 125).

This entanglement of art and world also finds support in neuroscience. Recent meta-analyses (Leeuwen et al., 2022) reveal that engagement with art activates the same brain networks involved in complex social behavior. Art perception is not cognitively isolated—it is neurologically grounded in the social brain, reaffirming its embeddedness in shared, relational structures.

While our study centers on micro-level interactions—specific subjects responding to specific artworks—we raise broader questions about the nature of the subjectivity that emerges from these interactions. What kind of subject takes shape in a late-modern world characterized by fluidity, fragmentation, and acceleration? Might *pathic subjectivity*—hypersensitive and hyper-sensorial—serve

as an alternative to both emotionally depleted and ideologically overdetermined modes of selfhood?

Byung-Chul Han's critique of modern society (Han, 2022) paints a dark portrait: a world of "neuronal violence," sensory overload, and the "terror of immanence." He argues that contemporary subjects are trapped inside themselves—excessively reflexive but starved of contemplation, narratively thin, temporally fragmented, living "atomized", "point-like" presents. While there is truth in this diagnosis, it is also lopsided. It overlooks the possibility of interruption, of aesthetic experiences that resist repetition and open new relational fields.

The model of subjectivity Han valorizes—citing Merleau-Ponty's reading of Cézanne (1964)—emphasizes *de-internalization*: an openness to things as they appear, even to the point of perceiving "the smell of color." Our respondents echo this mode of perception. Paradoxically, they often arrive at deep "external" truths through intensely personal and first-person accounts. Their immersion often involves *synesthetic* experiences—seeing color and simultaneously feeling temperature or hearing sound. This, too, aligns with contemporary neuroscience.

Post-phenomenology thus remains an essential backdrop to our inquiry, helping us theorize contemporary subjectivity not as a fixed state but as a momentary flare, an event co-produced with the artwork. Our narrators' experiences are rhizomatic—dynamic, non-linear, unfolding in surprising directions. Contrary to the narrative of narcissistic collapse, they exhibit an ability to *respond* to the artwork's call. In Maldiney's (2022) terms, this response indicates *heteronomy*—a moment of submission to something beyond the self⁷. Even within immersive, introspective engagement, they demonstrate an ability to achieve distance and reflection—a movement we describe as the transition from *pathos* to *logos*.

Still, this capacity is fragile. Premature recourse to cognitive filters—such as art-historical knowledge or aesthetic evaluation—risks returning the subject to the safety of the known. As Han (2022) warns, the danger lies in the repetition of the same. This dynamic also resonates with Friston's (2010) free energy principle: the brain minimizes cognitive effort by predicting and reproducing known schemas. Prediction errors signal the need for belief updating, which requires computational resources.

Although we align with cultural critics such as Agamben (2006), Baudrillard (2009), and Sennett (2009) in recognizing excessive sensibility, emotional hyperreactivity, and impressionability as adaptive strategies within the neoliberal order, the interviews we analyzed stood in stark contrast to the predictable and routinized narratives offered by other respondents. Against that backdrop of

⁷ For him, this appeal is tantamount to a call of being, as he views sensory connection with the world as the foundational ground from which the subject-object relation emerges.

neuro-cognitive adaptation to late-modern overload, we turned to *neurodivergence* as an alternative frame—particularly the concept of *holotropic sensory gating*⁸. Unlike traditional gating, which narrows attention to one channel, holotropic processing is modality-independent and synesthetic, synthesizing stimuli from multiple channels into spatialized, coherent wholes.

Neurodivergent individuals, when immersed in the world, adopt strategies of *hyperfocus* or *holistic synthesis* to remain oriented. This coherence is not analytical but *embodied*—a state of flow in which perception, emotion, and meaning form a continuous weave. We observed moments in which our narrators entered this space: intensely immersed, yet narratively coherent; sensorially open, yet cognitively agile.

This brings us back to our guiding question: *To what extent is art reception the reproduction of cultural meanings, and to what extent is it the emergence of something new?* Through the lens of pathic subjectivity, rhizomatic movement, and holotropic processing, we find that aesthetic experience—when it disrupts routine and invites encounter—can serve as a space for cognitive⁹ and affective flexibility, an openness to the unanticipated, and perhaps, a site of becoming.

Summary: Pathic Art Reception and Contemporary Subjectivity

This study identified two main forms of *pathic reception*—**emanation** and **attunement**—as well as a third, non-pathic, mixed type. While these categories offer analytical clarity, actual reception styles often involved hybrids shaped by individual value systems and, at times, aesthetic knowledge. Notably, even sensory-motor engagement showed signs of being modulated by cognitive control, aligning with the principle of *free energy minimization*.

- **Emanation-based reception** emphasizes exposure to the formal, perceptual qualities of an artwork. It is embodied and synesthetic, marked by high sensory and motor awareness.
- **Attunement-based reception** involves immersive, sensory-based identification with the depicted world. This often takes the form of narrative construction, character animation, and emotional resonance.

From this, several key insights emerge:

⁸ <https://hmirra.medium.com/holotropism-1cdf99c00b74> (access: 09.11.2024)

⁹ From a neuroscience perspective, the multiplicative processing of sensory input—particularly in states of intense, immersive experience—can foster cognitive flexibility (Maurer and Mondloch, 2005; Ramachandran and Hubbard, 2001). Under such conditions, decision-making becomes less tethered to prior knowledge and increasingly responsive to present-moment information.

1. **Pathic reception disrupts the assumption of narcissistic, self-enclosed subjectivity**, as described by critics like Han. Although often first-person in tone, this experience is not solipsistic. Instead, the subject emerges *from within* a field that is **not yet divided into subject and object**—a sensorial whole in which meaning arises through exposure, not possession.
2. **Rhizome theory** proved valuable in describing how pathic experience manifests through language—fluid, emergent, and rooted in the here-and-now, bypassing rigid cultural filters.
3. **Holotropic sensory gating** offers a useful analogy for the narrators' synesthetic and multi-sensory processing, suggesting that pathic reception may foster *cognitive flexibility* by transcending habitual perceptual schemas.
4. Finally, pathic reception invites reflection on **emerging forms of subjectivity** in late modernity—hyper-sensorial, fluid, and socially entangled—while also revealing the ongoing tension between openness to novelty and the cognitive system's drive for predictability.

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