
The Act of Consciousness in the Artistic Activity: Focus on Husserl's Theory of Intentionality

芸術活動における意識作用 —フッサールの志向性理論に着目して

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本稿は、芸術家と通常の知覚者の間の事物を見る方法の違いを論じる。とりわけ、画家が芸術活動のなかで対象物にどう関わっているのかを明らかにする。この解明作業にとって、エドムント・フッサールの志向性理論と抽象という絵画的技法が導きの糸となる。

多くの人々が認めるように、画家はあらゆる偏見と先入観から自らを解放することによって、作品のうちに対象物の真の現れを表現する。その一方、ともすると常識から甚だしく逸脱しているために芸術作品を理解することは容易ではない。われわれの多くはそう考えるかもしれない。もちろん、画家がキャンバス上に表現するのは、われわれが日常生活や学問生活のなかで知覚するのと同じ物である。それにもかかわらず、画家にとって対象物とは、日常言語や科学的言語によって記述されるべきものではなく、ひとえに芸術的な真理において実現されるべきものなのである。では、これはいかなる真理のカテゴリーなのか。

本研究は、芸術的真理を解明するとともに、画家が芸術活動においてこの種の真理をどのように把握するのかを明らかにしようとする。筆者の見通しでは、この活動は最も原始的な意識作用を含んでおり、それは直接知覚にすら構造的に先立つのである。

キーワード

- ① 現象学 Phenomenology
- ② エドムント・フッサール Edmund Husserl
- ③ 志向性 Intentionality
- ④ 知覚 Perception
- ⑤ 真理 Truth

Introduction

In this study, I would like to discuss the difference between artists and non-artists (ordinary perceivers) with respect to the way of regarding things. In particular, I am going to highlight how painters relate to the object in their artistic activities using Edmund Husserl's theory of intentionality and the pictorial technique of abstraction.

Many people might think that painters express an object's true appearance in their work by separating themselves from any prejudice or presupposition. On the other hand, most of us might admit that their works significantly elude our discernment that we are unable to understand them. Of course, what painters bring to realization on the canvas is none other than something perceived by us in our ordinary or scientific lives. Nevertheless, what they see is not described either by ordinary or scientific language but realized in the *artistic truth*. In this case, what is this category of truth?

This study aims to clarify the artistic truth and show how painters grasp it in their artistic activity; as per my perception, this involves the most primitive conscious act, preceding even direct perception structurally.

1. Structure of Perception

Husserl regarded perception as a type of intentional experience and explicated the structure of intentionality through his theory of meaning (*noema*).

Under content we understand the “meaning” of which we say that in it or through it consciousness

refers to an objective as its “own.”...

Every noema has a *content*, namely its “meaning,” and is related through it to “its” *object*.¹

It is often said that this is a “content theory” about intentionality, and furthermore, that this theory is equivalent to a “mediator theory.”² These linguistic interpretations were suggested by D. Føllesdal for the first time and supported by many other interpreters, including W. Smith and R. McIntyre. They explain that Husserl’s *noema* is merely a modification of Frege’s term *Sinn* and define these concepts as an abstract entity of a linguistic meaning that our sense organs are not able to feel.³ They accept the schema “consciousness–meaning–object.” In this schema, meaning is treated as the mediator, which enables the consciousness to have a relationship with the object if it is meant by the consciousness and also refers to the object.

There is another famous interpretation called “phenomenalism” or “idealism” derived from the thought of A. Gurwitsch, who studied Husserl’s phenomenology from a gestalt theory viewpoint.⁴ According to Gurwitsch, *noema* is one side of the object that is seen from a particular perspective. Therefore, he explained that the relationship between an object and *noema* is similar to the one between the whole and each of its parts.⁵ If we follow his interpretation, we should accept consequences that differ from Fregean thought. Namely, we do not perceive any abstract entities referring to the object but rather perceive the object itself. Gurwitsch argues that we should employ object theory instead of mediator theory.

Which position is more correct in interpreting Husserl’s thought about intentionality? Moreover, a possibly more interesting question: which theory describes *Sache selbst* of perception more correctly? On one hand, the former theory stresses “transcendence” of the perceived object. On the other hand, the latter theory emphasizes “immediateness” of perception. In my opinion, both are indispensable features of an intrinsic structure that underlies perceptual intentionality, and this perceptual intentionality truly succeeds in going beyond our experience (*Erlebnis*) to grasp the objects themselves.

These two features may seem inconsistent with the “subject–object” dualism approach. This dualism ontologically separates the next two entities: the immediate with which a subject is acquainted (e.g., the red color I

experience) and the transcendent object that is referred to by the former (e.g., an apple on my table). Thus, immediate and transcendent are obviously incompatible characteristics if each of them is identified with subjective and objective.

The conflict between these two theories has provoked a great deal of controversy for several decades. However, this controversy is not our present concern. At the same time, I do not support the position of mediator theory. An “object” in our experience is only an object as long as it is meant: the noematic as an immanent object that belongs to consciousness.⁶ *Noema* is a content meant by consciousness and, at the same time, the very object itself meant through it. Viewed in this immanent light, an immediate mutual relationship between perceiving consciousness and perceived object can be understood without dualistic difficulties because this relationship is an essential correlation called *noesis-noema*. There is no medium in our perception. Perception is an immediate experience that does not grasp representations but objects themselves.⁷ In summary, perception is the experience of truth in a proper sense of *Wahrnehmung*.

2. Listening and Seeing in Perception

Next, what about the object’s “transcendent” feature? I propose to understand this as the repetitive cycle of a noematic system where each appearance or each act interpreting those appearances as noematic meanings is never complete. When I turn my eyes toward the garden, I see a lot of objects. All of them are given to me at the same time, interpreted as “something.” They are given as “tree,” “dog,” and “pound” before I think they exist in the material world. I encounter with them in the “meaning world” for the first time.

When I perceive an object “as ...,” I always anticipate the whole of its own system (horizon) of meaning. In other words, each object is a noematic system and gives us its “internal horizon” in its first contact with us.⁸ However, a single glance is not enough to be able to know the whole of its horizon by intuition. There always remain aspects that are not seen by intuition because objects are only given gradually through their partial appearances.⁹ Furthermore, we cannot eliminate the possibility of making

a mistake. If we want to know the object more accurately, we must go into further depth and prescribe it in detail. This process will never end. Such incompleteness is the intrinsic meaning of transcend.¹⁰ Namely, “transcendent” does not mean independence from our consciousness but the manner in which the object is given. It is more precise to term this manner “immanent transcendent.”

On one hand, an object reveals itself in the frame of “as...” without any mediator. On the other hand, the object is always given with an infinite horizon of meanings that exceeds one’s intuitive experience. Here two important points follow. First, a perceived object has always already been unified with a higher-level meaning of “as...” that subordinates infinite horizontal meanings. Second, although these meanings are never given intuitively as a whole, they are meant explicitly or implicitly under the frame of “as...” From these two points, we can say that one higher-level meaning and multiple lower-level meanings are inseparably meant in perception, and this inseparability makes both immediateness and transcendence a characteristic of perception.

At this point, I am concerned with an ethical problem facing us in our perceptual experience. Suppose there was a tree in front of us.

Indeed, the call resounds as well with respect to the side that is already actually seen: “Draw closer, closer still; now fix your eyes on me, changing your place, changing the position of your eyes, etc. You will get to see even more of me that is new, ever new partial colorings, etc. You will get to see structures of the wood that were not visible just a moment ago, structures that were formerly only viewed indeterminately and generally,” etc.¹¹

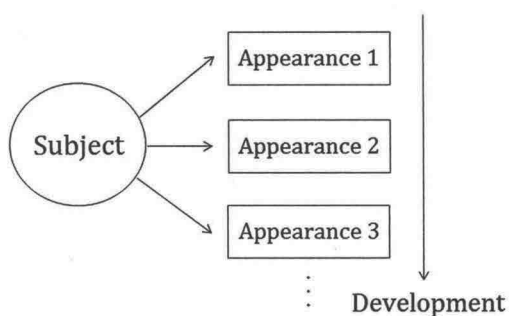


Fig.1

The perceivers have responsibility to listen to this object’s call and fulfill the vacancy of its horizon. They obey the directive to listen to the presentation of the object honestly. I call this the “precept of *Zuhören*.” The perceivers must obey this precept as long as they focus on the object’s own transcendent existence, which is never fully revealed in the limited appearances given to the consciousness. This precept is the driving force that motivates a perceiver to *develop* his experience continuously and further reveal the object (See Fig. 1).

Furthermore, we can explore yet another principle or law of perception. Husserl often describes the process of perception in terms of an increase or decrease of intuition and regards full intuition as correlating with the concept of truth.¹²

*To every object “that truly is” there intrinsically corresponds ... the idea of a possible consciousness in which the object itself can be grasped in a primordial and also perfectly adequate way. Conversely, when this possibility is guaranteed, the object is eo ipso “that which truly is.”*¹³

The concept of *Adäquatheit* can be understood as a goal aimed throughout the process of perception. It is equivalent to the concept of truth that is expected to be realized at the end of this process. Thus, if to perceive is “to grasp the truth (*Wahrnehmen*)” in the proper sense, in addition to the above mentioned precept, perceivers also obey the principle enjoining them to grasp the object in the perfectly adequate way. I want to label this as the “precept of *Wahrnehmen*.” This is another driving force that moti-

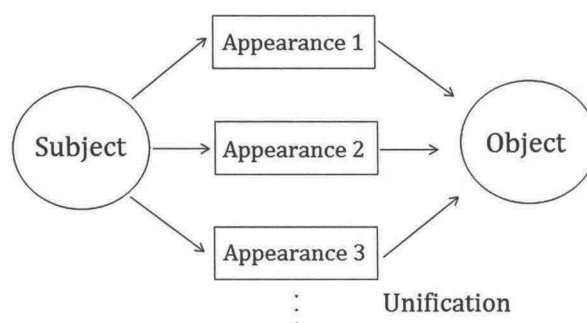


Fig.2

vates a perceiver to *unify* the infinite appearances in order to perceive one and the same unified object (See Fig. 2). Obeying this second precept, in the ideal situation, the possibility of an incoherent appearance that conflicts with the present believed object is excluded. Therefore, the perceived object is *eo ipso*, or “that which truly is.”

However, perceivers are not always honest about both these precepts. If we suppose the aforementioned ideal situation, then we call ourselves a “superhuman observer,” according to M. Dummett,¹⁴ and profess to be in a privileged position where we have already been acquainted with all appearances of the object. It implies that being convinced of the ability to grasp truth consequently abandons the possibility of further exchange with the object. Thus, we are confronted with the rivalry between two ethical perspectives. Thus, we probably need another type of truth: artistic truth.

3. Two Types of Imagination

1) Imagination in Perception

The concept of imagination, especially in the context of artistic activity, offers the key to solving this problem. As the first step in our analysis, however, I will focus on imagination as present in our daily perception.

To perceive an object—e.g., a cup on a desk—it is obviously insufficient to intuit a limited appearance of the cup that I “see” (in a very restricted sense) from a particular perspective. I need to comprehend that I will “see” the bottom of the cup if I pick it up, I will “see” the other side of it if I move my viewpoint to a suitable position, and I will “see” other various shapes of its edge if I approach it from different viewpoints. To perceive is to comprehend a range of these appearances, and the opposite is also true. According to Hintikka, perception intrinsically has an informational character.¹⁵

Let us examine Hintikka’s theory in detail. He provided a good account of Husserl’s content theory by identifying *noema* with the possible worlds semantics function (W_n/O_n), using a possible worlds argument (W_n) with the individual objects (O_n) as the reference in those worlds.¹⁶ Thus, *noema* is a system formed by a series of pairs of

worlds and objects ($\{W_1/O_1, W_2/O_2, \dots, W_n/O_n\}$) and has such a systematic structure. From a phenomenological viewpoint, Mohanty summarizes Hintikka’s opinion about perceptual intentionality in the following theses.¹⁷

- (1) To grasp the meaning intention of act is to know what sort of experience would fulfill that intention.
- (2) All perception is perspectival, such that each act of perceiving as well as its noema carries with it a horizon of pre-delineated potentialities for further determinations.

In *Ideen*, Husserl explained that perceptual *noema* is composed of two distinctive components: X and the predicate.¹⁸ The latter is the determinative content compared to the identifying description. In contrast, X is an empty substratum that does not have any content in itself. However, it possesses some concreteness of “cat,” “tree,” and “desk” as long as it is combined with the predicates and unifies them. Thus, X is a “bearer” of pre-delineated contents and is later called a “type” in *Erfahrung und Urteil*.

Consequently, how is it possible for us to discern whether contents can be fulfilled in intuition or not? When I perceive an apple, I will elect the contents such as “X is the fruit on the table,” “X is the red thing,” and “X is the round one.” Understanding these contents explicitly or implicitly, I exclude many other empty contents: “X is the animal under the table,” “X is the person named Paul,” “X is the white thing,” and “X is the square one.” What makes this election of information possible is the type of “apple.” Type is a criterion of election. We choose only the contents that are expected to be fulfilled in experience concerning the same type of apple.

As I have explained, the contents of perception include others that have not yet been seen intuitively. In addition, the act of perception is an act of synthesis that unifies many different contents under the same type. In other words, perception primarily contains the act of imagination (in a broad sense) and grasps not only the intuited but also the imaginary contents.

2) Neutral Modification as Modification in Art

When an appearance (A_1) appears to us, we do not merely perceive A_1 but induce many other appearances

(A_2, A_3, A_4, \dots). Thus, a whole object ($\exists x (A_1x \wedge A_2x \wedge A_3x \wedge \dots)$) is constituted from multiple appearances. In other words, actual positionality contains and consists of many possibilities. In *Ideen*, Husserl terms this possibility “motivated possibility.”¹⁹ It is connected to the actual world in which each possible appearance refers to a certain type to the exclusion of any other type.

To imagine the possibilities in this sense is not so radical as to commit to other fictional worlds than our actual one. Each imagined appearance is connected to one “objective time” and has a determined position in it. When Husserl characterizes an object as “real,” this character is derived from the concrete connection to an objective time.²⁰ For example, a cat under the table presents various appearances and each of them is connected to specific points of time, time that can be measured by our watches. Thus, the cat is characterized as real.

Husserl explains another type of possibility called “empty possibility.”²¹ For example, I can imagine a flower on the desk, even if there is actually not one there. The existence of the flower is an empty possibility and does not have any connection to the actual world. Nevertheless, each imaginative flower corresponds to each world, and each world is subject to “*quasi time*.”²² The imaginary objects have specific positions in a united time that is not real but *quasi*. For example, in a novel about Sherlock Holmes, Holmes begins investigation after the occurrence of a murder and before the resolution of the case. This time order is determined. In *Erfahrung und Urteil*, the existential character of the empty object is called “*quasi positionality*” to make a distinction from the actual positionality in perception.²³

We should notice that this second imaginative act is indispensable in conducting artistic activities. When the painters observe the subject for painting, they are not interested in its real material or objective features. They are interested in essential appearances (*noemata* is the phenomenological term) through which the object reveals itself to them. To attain such a special perspective, they should achieve “neutral modification” and suspend the belief in the actual existence of objects in the actual world.²⁴

Of course, a single modification is still not enough for us to come close to the object just as it is. The main barrier to achieving this closeness is a fixed idea. As mentioned above, it is true that a type is a frame of interpre-

tation without which we are thrown out into chaos of appearances. At the same time, it is also true that a type is a frame of “prejudice” for us. If we see the object as “tree,” we pre-delineate a lot of appearances that should be given in normal experience of the tree. This generalization makes us deaf to the call from individual objects. Namely, it causes us to immediately place the object into a complex of some patternized contents.

In addition, Husserl often talks about *noema* as if it is a type of medium, but this is misleading. Now, it is worth mentioning that *noema* must not be confused with existing ideas associated with the object. The traditional scheme “given (*hyle*)—meaning (*morphe*)” has often lost sight of the directness of perception. Phenomenologists as well as painters have been trying to turn to original contact with the object by having insight into *noema*, which is not a veil but self-disclosure of the object.

4. Truth in Artistic Activity

1) Idea in Artistic Activity

What is the difference between ordinary perception and artistic seeing? The following considers the imagination in artistic activities in detail. Through this consideration, we understand how artistic activities overcome the conflict between the two types of precepts (the precepts of *Zuhören* and *Wahrnehmen*). By considering this issue, I will now look at the truth that is aimed at in artistic activity.

Painters often change the shape or size of the object in their painting. We wonder at this because what they express on the canvas looks totally different from what we really see. In the museum, we cannot help ourselves from asking, “Did they really see the object as they painted it?” One response to this question includes that the artist lives in a different visible world from ours and attributes the uniqueness of their works to their natural talent, talent that we ordinary people do not have. However, we should reject this argument because it overlooks the painter’s effort to come close to the objects themselves. An important point to emphasize is that true artists should instead be looked up to because of their unceasing efforts rather

than their natural talent. Their efforts are devoted to the pursuit of artistic truth, which is not gained by engaging in metaphysical presuppositions like a superhuman observer but by relating to objects themselves from the beginning to end.

As I mentioned before, truth in perception is a correlation of the ideal situation, where all aspects are given in a primordial and also perfectly adequate way. Now, the question is how to respond to the object's call without engaging in any metaphysical presuppositions that extend beyond the actual exchange between the perceiver and object. Ordinary perception is free from any regulative ideas such as a perfect straight line, perfect plane, or perfect sphere, which lead scientific activities. All these ideas are derived from the refinement of techniques to produce more perfect straight, plane, and spherical materials, or techniques for surveying land with more perfect exactness. While we head straight through the horizon of thinkable perfecting again and again (*immer wieder*), we find the "limit shapes (*Limes-Gestalten*)."²⁵ Thereafter, these abstractive ideas lead our practice of perfecting, although they are originally abstracted from this practice that deals with concrete objects. Husserl calls these types of ideas the "garb of idea" that encompasses our life-world, the world of various perceived objects.²⁶

As I will examine in the next section, prescientific perception is already subject to a type of idea. Of course, this idea is distinguished from one as a limit shape because the former is flexible and lacks strictness unlike the latter. Nevertheless, there is no difference between them in that they are the garb that encompasses the object itself. Viewed in this light, the painters are conspicuous such that they try to abandon these ideas in their artistic activities and come in contact with objects more originally than in perception. Therefore, should they have nothing to do with any type of idea?

No, they seek the artistic idea. Thus, in conclusion, I identify it as the true essence of the naked object that is stripped of all garbs of scientific or prescientific ideas.

A good place to start is to consider the function of an artistic work and how this is different for the appreciators and painters. For the appreciators, the work on the wall plays the role of a guide that helps them to get in contact with the idea (in a platonic sense) such as pure shape and pure color beyond the material work. Namely, they relate to something ideal through the material. This is not the

case with painters engaged in their artistic activities. In the case of painters, the ideal is grasped in the first instance, and then, they realize it through their painting of pictures. Therefore, compared with the case of appreciators, the order of priority between the ideal and material is reversed. In other words, only when people are accomplished in this application of perspective can they get in contact with the artistic idea without using any medium (See Fig. 3).

The artistic viewpoint enables us, as either painters or appreciators, to see the ideal that is normally invisible when viewed in our daily lives. Of course, it is not easy for us to grasp the very same idea as the skilled painters do. For example, painters often use a particular method called "abstraction" in order to be free from any pre-existing viewpoint. Thus, their works often look strange to ordinary men who have no involvement with the artistic effort. At the same time, they challenge our patternized recognition, as discussed in the next section.

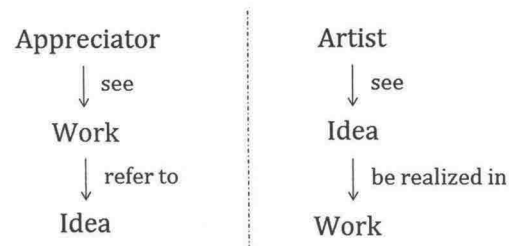


Fig.3

2) Imagination in Artistic Activity

The concept of truth in art has a connection with the imagination of artist. I want to focus on the method of abstraction. This is the act of imagination concerning possibility in the neutral mode. Husserl explains this act with the term "variation," which is distinguished from "alteration" of the same real object that has an objective temporal place.

In all alteration, the individual remains identically the same. On the other hand, variation depends precisely on this: that we drop the identity of the individual and change it imaginatively into another possible individual.²⁷

The abstraction is a type of variation in the above sense or a deviation from the paradigm to which we are accustomed. According to Husserl, in perceiving an object as tree, we potentially know some contents as “invariant” through “free variation” of the imaginative trees.²⁸ These invariable contents form a “general essence” of the tree.²⁹ Similarly, artists find essential presentation through abstraction. Despite this similarity, I would like to emphasize the following difference. A perceiver grasps essence through induction, guided by a type’s already known meaning. On the other hand, an artist gets acquainted with essence immediately, without the help of a type. As mentioned previously, perceivers perceive the original object. If so, we should say that painters see the *more* original one, for they do not presuppose any established “ideas” that are primarily combined with the perceived objects.

In general, a type is acquired in our daily life and possessed as our “knowledge in the form of habitus” that is gained through the process of the “precipitation (*Niederschlag*)” of the “bestowal of a determination (*Bestimmung*).”³⁰ It does not have exactness and definiteness, in contrast with each limit shape as a universal entity that leads scientific activities forever. According to Husserl, the

horizon of typical familiarity “is constantly in motion” and no apprehension of it “is merely momentary and ephemeral.”³¹ What we Japanese see as a “whale” today was recognized as a type of “fish” in the *Edo* period, and this recognition might be corrected in the future, even in the same cultural sphere.

Despite its flexibility, ultimately, a type is taken as an established concept because we unavoidably forget the process of precipitation. In the natural attitude, the fixed concept covered over the object is an obstacle to acquaint with the object itself. When one sees a tree, he restricts his interest to some typical characters that belong to the “tree.” In this case, “tree” is not a type that the object originally presents for him but is his substitution of the determinative contents he has comprehended in advance. In the natural attitude, he does not receive the generative type from the individual object but, on the contrary, attributes the determinations to the already fixed type.

Artistic activity confronts such a fixed viewpoint. Through abstraction, painters shake up the typical familiarity and discover an object’s essential qualities, without which the object no longer maintains its being. Let us see a series of pictures by Piet Mondrian (Fig. 4–7).³² By



Fig. 4

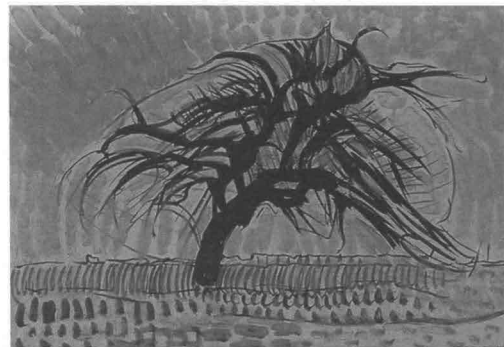


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

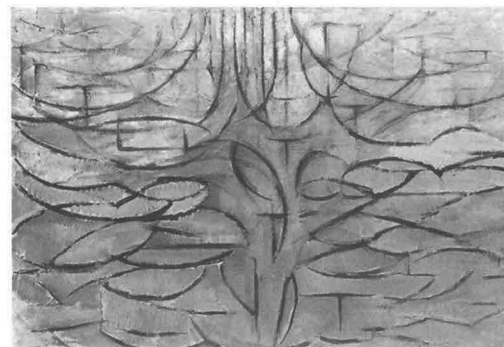


Fig. 7

ceasing to view an object through a certain type, he also ceased thinking about multiple determinative contents (such as being brown in color, having certain shaped leaves and thin branches, and having a thick trunk), which are attributed to the “tree” in our habitual experience. Thus, we discover a remarkable fact that a series of artistic efforts leads to the simplest essential gestalt (especially see Fig. 7).

This essential gestalt is remarkable as it is gained because of abandoning multiple components that compose the preconceived type. In this sense, the essential gestalt is not the type of objects but the “artistic truth” identified in this article: the fundamental quality of objects concealed by preconception of the type. Of course, it is never perceived in an ordinary life-world because it transcends our imagination in perception. However, it is discovered in an aesthetic world by artists when they construct it continuously by means of their excellent imagination, a process identified as “abstraction” in this article.

Conclusion

In artistic activity, painters realize shape or color on the canvas. For painters, the shape and color are neither objective features nor typical determinations covered over the object. Instead, these presentations are artistic truth discovered by the artists as a result of their continual effort to be free from any established idea. Thus, artists are able to both listen to the object’s call and stand near the truth. It is necessary to note that the artist’s truth can be realized only through the process of artistic activity. This process is a continual effort to respond to the objects without any presuppositions. For artists, the precepts of *Zuhören* and *Wahrnehmen* must be in agreement with each other. How is this possible?

The conflict between the two precepts results from a gap between the object and its appearances. If a perceiver obeys the precept of *Zuhören*, he appears to be tossed about by a whirlpool of appearances and never grasps the object itself, the true essence of which continues forever. If he obeys the precept of *Wahrnehmen*, he appears to be so hasty in grasping the object that he fails to have an insight into the essential quality of it. This question of perception becomes more chaotic when it is expressed by

the following question: concerning perception, which is the bearer of truth, the appearances or the object itself?

Perceiving the objects through the veil of type might be the most efficient way to cope with this difficult problem. I want to suggest that the perceivers also judge in the most primitive or “pre-predicative” way. According to this idea, perception is the endless process through which the type X, via innumerable determinations (D_1, D_2, D_3, \dots), is grasped comprehensively, and at the same time is fulfilled by the newly intuited determinations continuously. Type and determinations are unified in the categorical form that can be expressed as “X is D,” and this unit of the (still pre-predicative) judgment is determinative in its truth value. Hence, the problem of the two different bearers of truth is avoided.

This is absolutely not the approach of painters. Their way to relate to objects can be summed up in the following two points:

1. Ordinary perceivers cannot ultimately overcome the division between the typical object and determinations attributed to it. In contrast, painters try to come close to the object by reducing innumerable determinations into a few essential qualities that present the object as it essentially is (See Fig. 8).
2. Perceivers understand their own perceptual experience as a synchronic fragment of a diachronic process of precipitation through which previous determinations are possessed continuously. However, painters limit their artistic experience to the present when they grasp the essence of the object. In this way, they maintain the originality of their relationships to the object.

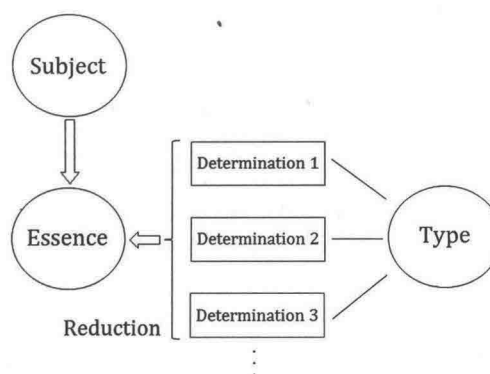


Fig.8

[Notes]

The original version of this paper ("On the Intentionality in Artistic Activity") was presented at the 6th Symposia Phaenomenologica Asiatica: Master Class in Phenomenology for Asian Scholars 2012, which was held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in August 2012.

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9. Husserl, *Ideen*, 91f.
10. Ibid., 347. To borrow Husserl's phrase, "transcendence" of the object "expresses itself in those limitlessnesses in the development of intuitions."
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