

Plasticity.

Lives and Forms of an Aesthetic Concept

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Today, the term “plasticity” is increasingly popular and is being adopted in a great number of scholarly fields, where it circulates with different and sometimes not sufficiently defined meanings. More usually deployed in neurosciences (as brain plasticity) and biology (as phenotypic plasticity), the term also finds application in domains as different as physics and materials science, psychology, sociology, economics. “Plasticity” thus becomes more and more of a buzzword, a trendy catch-all term unable to fully rise to the role of concept.

This is where philosophy comes into play: thanks, above all, to Catherine Malabou’s research, philosophy has attempted to turn plasticity into a full-fledged concept, endowing it with definition and theoretical depth. As a philosophical concept, plasticity brings together form and matter, morphology and materialism. It also combines activity and passivity, referring simultaneously to the donation and to the reception of form (e.g., Malabou 1996, 20-21): it denotes both what is *gestaltend* and what is *gestaltet*, both *Bildung* and *Bildbarkeit*. Finally, plasticity reconciles formative dynamics with destruction and traumatic deflagration (Malabou 2007; 2009), thereby destabilizing any possible dichotomous view that would classify it as exclusively positive or negative. [1]

Within this framework, the intimate connections between plasticity, aesthetics, and artistic practices have always been acknowledged, but seldom have they been thoroughly and specifically investigated. By closely considering a number of specific encounters between plasticity,

[1] It is important to notice, however, that Malabou’s theorization of plasticity is decidedly focused on the human being and biological life. As she sums up: «I have been developing my theory of plasticity over the last twenty years on four main lines of thought: first as an extension of Hegelian dialectics; second, according to the

aesthetics, and the arts, the 22nd issue of *Philosophy Kitchen* offers a polyphonic contribution to this field of research.

Art history and art theory have indeed resorted to the notion of plasticity in recent years. In the early 2000s, French art historian and theorist Georges Didi-Huberman touched on the topic of plasticity by connecting it to materiality (Didi-Huberman 2000) and to anachronistic temporality (Didi-Huberman 2002); in 2012, German art historian Dietmar Rübel turned plasticity into a category for the investigation of 20th-century sculpture and its metamorphic materiality and processuality, understanding the notion in terms of formlessness (Rübel 2012). In the context of art history and exhibitions, plasticity is also increasingly serving as a useful notion for examining artworks made of plastics – a family of materials that endow the concept with yet different meanings (e.g., Davis 2023; Matter & Kittler 2024; but already Rübel 2012, 120-182). And yet, these important discourses do not necessarily encounter the concept of plasticity in all its philosophical and theoretical richness.

Philosophy, in turn, has not yet fully taken into account the fruitful connections between plasticity and the arts, and to these days there is no such thing as an “aesthetics of plasticity”. [2] Nonetheless, the concept of plasticity can be regarded as an actual aesthetic *Grundbegriff*, with a rich tradition in the history of philosophical aesthetics (see Dongowski 2002; for aesthetic accounts of plasticity see also Chateau 1999; Saint-Girons 2000). It therefore seems that the encounter between philosophical plasticity, aesthetics, and the arts still requires careful consideration and promises yet new challenges for both thought and practice.

Framing plasticity within the aesthetic discourse, here, follows three fundamental and often intertwining directions. Firstly, it puts plasticity into fruitful contact with other aesthetic concepts and categories – such as those of imagination, mimesis, or aesthesia – as well as with lines of thought that much have to do with aesthetics (as, for instance, the morphological tradition). [3] Secondly, recalling the etymological and historical roots of aesthetics allows to consider the ways in which plasticity has to do with sensation and perception, thus opening up to discourses on sensoriality, sensibility, and affects. Thirdly, aesthetics is also programmatically intended in the sense of a philosophy of art. This provides the opportunity of thinking plasticity in the close proximity of specific artworks, rather than with relation to an abstract concept of “art”. The essays comprised in this journal issue abound in case studies that should thus not be understood as mere examples, being rather the concrete phenomena from which new theoretical declensions of plasticity can stem.

The volume is organized in four sections. The first one gathers contributions that explore the connections between plasticity and specific *artistic genres or styles*. The volume opens with Ranjan Ghosh’s essay on *Plastic Baroque*, in which the notion of Baroque abandons its historical

Freudian view of the psyche; third, based on the neurological notion of the plasticity of the brain; and fourth, as a vision of ecological plasticity, centered on how an organism relates to its surroundings» (Malabou & Majewska 2019, 146).

[2] On the structural reasons why Malabou has not outlined «any “theory” of art», see Malabou 2022, esp. 643-645. On Malabou, art, and aesthetics, Hannes Opelz has recently made very instructive considerations: «When Malabou ventures (which is rather rare) to speak of art as such [...] it is not [...] to have it say what philosophy is powerless to express, but rather to free it from its aesthetic anchoring» (2022, 629; my trans., my emphasis). His analyses are also very useful to pinpoint «this tendency Malabou has to source [approvisionner] aesthetic concepts in order to tackle the major questions that concern her (subjectivity, ontology, intelligence)» (2022, 623; my trans.).

[3] On plasticity in morphology, see Maggiore 2020.

specificity and transforms into a category that allows thought to address contemporary plastic artworks with distinctive critical sharpness. Pietro Conte's essay on *Cineplastia* turns the attention to the connections between plasticity and (post-)cinema. His exploration does not concern the plasticity of the figures that appear on the screen: with an original gesture, Conte turns to plasticity as concerning cinematic immersivity and emer-sivity instead. Nikola Zmijarević's essay, titled *From Discourse to Figure*, focuses on contemporary painting. By analyzing the works of exponents of Disrupted Realism, Zmijarević confronts plasticity with other classical aesthetic concepts such as mimesis and representation, metamorphizing them in the interaction. Finally, Salvatore Tedesco's *Plasticità e patosofia* explores Scandinavian literature through the combination of Malabou's destructive plasticity and Viktor von Weizsäcker's pathosophy around the fascinating topic of dislocation of the narrative identity.

The essays in the second section consider the ways in which plasticity is intertwined with *senses and affects*, as well as with *perception and sensibility*. My essay, titled *Plastic Imprints*, turns to sculpture, molding, and casting in order to outline a material aesthetics that challenges the hylomorphic residues implicit in the concept of plasticity while paving the way to a consideration of the "sensations" of singular materials. In their essay titled *Ecological Plasticity*, Emanuele Capozziello and Sofia Livi focus on the ways in which the bodies are always affectively entangled in complex ecological systems. By considering olfactory perception specifically, they elaborate on the plastic and affective interplay between an agent and their smellscape. In her contribution titled *Plasticità in arte ed estesia*, Stefania Caliandro adopts a semiotic lens to analyse the role of plasticity for sensitive apprehension. By considering the artworks of Margaret Watts Hughes – who, at the end of the 19th century, invented a method for painting with her voice – Caliandro explores the possibility of framing plasticity as semiotic instability occurring in the dynamic processes of both formation of forms and their reception.

The third section presents contributions that work out the complex interplays between plasticity, aesthetics, arts, and *politics*. Recurrent topics are the temporal and material negotiations of collective memory and personal identity. Kristupas Sabolius' essay on *Revenge, Plasticity and Imagination* brings these three concepts into a fruitful contact and enhances their political meaning with particularly timely considerations. Such political meaning and potential are brought forth by means of close-up analysis of specific artistic projects: Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory* and Sabolius' own sound work *Puota*. With their co-authored essay titled "*Be My Plasticity for Me*", Michelle Ussher and David Stent mirror and redouble Malabou and Judith Butler's co-authored essay *You Be My Body for Me*, challenging the concept of plasticity and its limits. By considering the work of American contemporary artist Nicole Eisenman in its inherent queerness, their essay critically expands the material imaginary of plasticity and ties it to new concepts such as slipperiness and gloopiness. Ursula Ströbele's *Memory Activism* explores the possibility of the digital to turn into a space for political resistance. By extending the concept of plasticity to encompass digital phenomena and processes, Ströbele works out the political meanings of the concept by adopting a speculative and feminist lens through which specific case studies (in

particular, Juan Covelli's *Speculative Treasures*) take on timely relevance.

The fourth and last section concludes the volume with three first-hand accounts. Renowned art historian Horst Bredekamp offers his perspective on plasticity by bringing together the plasticity of the brain with the plasticity of the arts. Juxtaposing neurosurgical operations, on the one hand, and drawing and sculpting on the other, Bredekamp traces an account of plasticity that revolves around a common aspect: the activity of matter. The text was originally presented in English in the context of a symposium organized by Professor Patricia Ribault and Professor Olaf Avenati [4] and here appears in German and Italian. Bredekamp's contribution is followed by an interview to multidisciplinary architect Niccolò Casas.

[4] [For more information on the event, see Editorial note.]

Focusing in particular, but not exclusively, on his engagement with plastic debris in the realization of *Plasticity* (presented at the 2021 Biennale of Architecture in Venice), the dialogue with Casas shows the relevance of the concept not only for theorization but also for actual formative practices. Finally, the volume is wrapped up by a dialogue between Nidesh Lawtoo and Catherine Malabou. These pages brilliantly bring together plasticity and mimesis through the concept of metamorphosis, and are based on an exchange occurred at the end of an international conference organized by Professor Lawtoo and his team. The dialogue confronts plasticity and mimesis also with the troubling dimension of gendered bodies, thanks to an Intermezzo with Isabelle Dahms and Giulia Rignano. The contribution appears in the original English version as well as in the Italian translation.

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