

Cynthia R. Nielsen, *Gadamer's Hermeneutical Aesthetics: Art as a Performative, Dynamic, Communal Event*, Routledge, New York 2023, pp. 172, £ 120.00, ISBN 9781032020372

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Cynthia R. Nielsen's new book, *Gadamer's Hermeneutical Aesthetics: Art as a Performative, Dynamic, Communal Event*, offers a well-conceived examination of Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics, by placing it in critical dialogue with both key aesthetic traditions and contemporary art practices. The first two chapters probe into Gadamer's reflections on Kant, Hegel, as well as Heidegger's aesthetic theories, while the remaining three focus on the practical relevance of Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics to specific artists and forms of art, namely, Romare Bearden's collage, Banksy's street art, and free jazz.

The opening chapter presents itself as a comprehensive investigation of Gadamer's intricate engagement with Kantian aesthetics. We can infer from the author's in-depth illustration that Gadamer's reflections on Kant could be classified into two stages. Firstly, a wide range of themes is covered in the first part of *Truth and Method*, including Gadamer's critique of Kant's subjectivised aesthetics and its relevant impact on the modern development of aesthetic consciousness, his critique of Kant's diminished views of taste, free beauty, and dependent beauty, as well as his appropriation of Kant's notions of an ideal of beauty and genius, in which Gadamer finds an opening for his own aesthetics.

Gadamer returns to Kantian aesthetics in his late essay *Intuition and Vividness* (1980), in which he reconfigures Kant's insights into "the formative or productive role of the imagination" (p. 38) in the experience of art. It seems that Gadamer's overarching aim, beneath all of these critiques and appropriations of Kant, is to strive for the cognitive and ethical dimensions of the experience of art. The author makes it abundantly evident that Kantian aesthetics is crucial to Gadamer's "development of hermeneutical understanding of art as a dialogical, communicative event in which truth is disclosed" (p. 2).

After addressing Gadamer's interaction with Kantian aesthetics, the second chapter focuses on his reworking of Hegel's proclamation of art as a thing of the past. Gadamer appears to be against the thesis of "the end of art", even though he agrees with Hegel that since the 19th-century art has been liberated from its religious task of revealing the divine. What rendered problematic art's role in modern society was not its own deficiency – Hegel would call it art's deficiency in reaching conceptual knowledge due to its sensual forms and materiality – but rather "a loss of [...] the 'common *mythos*' of the Christian-humanistic tradition" (p. 50). According to Gadamer, art in the present still fulfils its high calling to reveal the truth of "what is common to the human condition" (p. 51). To illustrate that, the author refers to Daniel L. Tate's argument that Gadamer's emphasis on the festival character of art involves an innovative reworking of "the ritual and communal dimensions" (p. 43) of Hegel's understanding of art as *Kunstreligion*: "Art as festival speaks of its ability to enact a community as it gathers together dispersed individuals and invites them to learn its language and hear its address" (p. 43). Thus, even in the absence of the "common *mythos*", art nonetheless serves to forge a communally shared sense of meaning and shape our fragmented lives.

The author also includes a discussion of Heidegger's impact on Gadamer's thought on art in the final two sections of this chapter. As for the unspecified reason for including a "Heideggerian Coda" in a chapter devoted to Hegel, the author appears to suggest that Gadamer's departure from Hegel and his idealistic aesthetics is influenced by Heidegger. Gadamer criticises idealistic aesthetics for "its failure to appreciate art as a unique manifestation of truth whose particularity cannot be surpassed" (*RB*, p. 37). In other words, art's sensual forms and materiality are not something that should be overcome for pure conceptualization. Rather, material configurations enable art's manifestation of truth. Gadamer refers to the symbolic character of art to denote this kind of encounter with art that resists pure conceptualization. Art as symbol, "does not simply point toward a meaning, but rather allows that meaning to present itself" (*RB*, p. 34). The author argues that Gadamer's understanding of art as symbols echoes Heidegger's idea of earth, since both involve an ongoing interplay of revealing and concealing. As the author concludes, for both Heidegger and Gadamer, "the work of art embodies this creative tension of concealing and unconcealing, presenting itself in an artfully configured materiality that precludes a reduction to 'pure conceptualization' and gives rise to new meanings over time" (p. 63).

The third chapter illustrates how Romare Bearden's collages resonate with Gadamer's view of art's transformative power. Bearden, in his 1976 collage *Three Folk Musicians* and 1964 montage *The Dove*, reconfigures pre-existing symbols and photographic images into his depiction of African Americans, thus challenging the stereotypes of African Americans. The author argues that Bearden's work well exemplifies and also enriches Gadamer's account of art's address. On the one hand, Beard-

en's work makes a claim on us to a new understanding of African Americans in light of a more authentic presentation or manifestation of their lives. On the other hand, his collages dismantle negative and distorted depictions of black Americans informed by the dominant discourses and traditions. As shown by Bearden's work, art's transformative power consists not only in revealing the world but also in de-fabricating the world. Indeed, although for Gadamer prejudices and customs that function as the historical conditions of understanding are capable of revision, his analysis does not center on "dismantling and interrogating discourses and cultural narratives that facilitate the creation of racialized worlds" (p. 88). Thus, Bearden's collages may further "Gadamer's acknowledgment of harmful prejudgments or prejudices in ways that address racialized discourses and stereotypes" (p. 89).

The fourth chapter explores how the photographs and digital images of Banksy's street art problematise Gadamer's categories of "copy" (*Abbild*), "image" (*Bild*), and their relations to the original (*Urbild*). Gadamer considers photographs "forms of reproduction rather than of representation" (p. 36). Photographs or digital images thus belong to the category of "copy", as their significance is "*not in itself*", but rather in their abilities "to present a likeness of an original for some utility purpose" (p. 97). They do not generate any new interpretation of the original and thus have no "ontological communion" with the original. The author argues that "Gadamer fails to properly understand the being of skilfully created technical reproductions of original artworks when he classifies them as nothing more than *Abbilder*" (p. 111). Taking Banksy's murals as examples, the author claims that those high-quality and skilled photographs contribute significantly to the ongoing life of Banksy's murals, as they are our only access to original works when they are destroyed. Such technically reproduced images of murals

are made for the purpose of future presentations of the subject matter “in and through themselves” (p. 112), and thus should not be considered mere “copies” created for utility functions, but rather “images” that remain in “ontological communion” with the original works.

A comprehensive examination of Gadamer’s notion of play – the central notion in his hermeneutic aesthetic – is provided in the book’s concluding chapter. Apart from the author’s illustration of Gadamer’s understanding of art as a performative, dynamic, and communal event, I find it quite inspiring how the author defends Gadamer against those who criticise his philosophy for not embracing difference and flux. As the author states, the hermeneutic identity of the work of art “is always and ever [...] constituted by difference” (p. 150). By “hermeneutic identity”, Gadamer has no intention of suggesting that the work of art is a static object, but rather that it can be recognised as the same work in its repeated performances and ongoing enactments. The work’s dynamic ontology goes hand in hand with the enrichment of meaning, in that its meaning-whole always exceeds “what is presented or performed at any given time” (p. 149). Thus, the work’s hermeneutic identity as a meaning-whole necessarily entails openness to future possibilities and hence differences.

However, there is a tiny problem in the chapter’s concluding part, as the author says that “[a] successful dialogical encounter with a text or a work of art neither requires agreement about nor a complete grasp of the subject matter” (p. 151). I totally agree that what we achieve in a dialogical interplay with the work is only an incomplete experience of its varied meanings, owing to our finitude and hence limited historical horizons. However, it would be misleading to say that it “requires no agreement”. According to Gadamer, “understanding is always the fusion of horizons” (*TM*, p. 306). In other

words, the experience of art embodies a negotiation between the work's horizon and the spectators' horizons and is aimed at an agreement between the two. In light of this, the dialogical encounter with the work demands not only "the willingness to listen to the work qua other" (p. 150), as the author puts it, but also the willingness to reach an agreement with the work. A genuine understanding of the work, no matter how incomplete it is and how it could be altered or expanded in future enactments, indicates an agreement at the very moment when it is achieved.

Generally speaking, *Gadamer's Hermeneutical Aesthetics* offers an overall study of Gadamer's understanding of the ontology of the work of art. Instead of a plain elaboration of the key concepts, the author places Gadamer in dialogue with Kant, Hegel, as well as Heidegger, to clarify the historical origins and standpoints of Gadamer's thoughts on art. The practical application of Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics to the interpretation of particular artists and their works highlights both its relevance to modern and contemporary arts as well as the aspects that require additional consideration.

Bibliography

RB = Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, Robert Bernasconi (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986

TM = Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall (transl.), Continuum, New York 1989