

Gadamer on the Event of Art, the Other, and a Gesture Toward a Gadamarian Approach to Free Jazz

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Abstract

Several prominent contemporary philosophers, including Jürgen Habermas, John Caputo, and Robert Bernasconi, have at times painted a somewhat negative picture of Gadamer as not only an uncritical traditionalist, but also as one whose philosophical project fails to appreciate difference. Against such claims, I argue that Gadamer's reflections on art exhibit a genuine appreciation for alterity not unrelated to his hermeneutical approach to the other. Thus, by bringing Gadamer's reflections on our experience of art into conversation with key aspects of his philosophical hermeneutics, we are able to better assess the viability of Gadamer's contributions to contemporary discussions of difference and alterity.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, hermeneutical aesthetics, aesthetics, philosophy, jazz, philosophy of music

I. Introduction

While appreciative of Gadamer's contributions to philosophical hermeneutics and what we might call "hermeneutical aesthetics" (Nicholas Davey's term), several distinguished contemporary philosophers have at times painted a somewhat negative picture of Gadamer as not only an uncritical traditionalist, but also as one whose philosophical project fails to appreciate difference. For example, Jürgen Habermas and John Caputo criticize what they see as Gadamer's oversimplified account of power relations and distorted discourses in his explanation of the formation and maintenance of traditions. Caputo suggests that Gadamer belongs among those philosophers

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who “cannot tolerate the ambiguity of the flux.”¹ Robert Bernasconi argues that Gadamer’s understanding of dialogue and his notion of assimilation and the fusion of horizons “have the common feature of diminishing alterity.”² However, an examination of Gadamer’s reflections on art exhibits a genuine openness to and appreciation of difference, not unrelated to his hermeneutical approach to the other. Thus, by bringing Gadamer’s reflections on our experience of art into conversation with key aspects of his philosophical hermeneutics, we are able to better assess the viability of Gadamer’s contributions to contemporary discussions of difference and alterity.

The first part of my essay (sections two through six) focuses on key concepts in Gadamer’s account of art’s dynamic ontology and our experience of art. Such concepts include the play structure of art, hermeneutic identity, tarrying with a work, and contemporaneity. The opening sections provide not only a discussion of these central themes, but they also (1) draw attention to the various ways in which difference and otherness are integral to Gadamer’s account, and (2) utilize relevant musical examples that prepare the reader for a more focused discussion of a Gadamerian approach to free jazz in section seven. By highlighting how Gadamer’s understanding of art possesses a dialogical play structure, is characterized by identity and difference, requires actively engaged spectators and auditors, and is amenable to what many criticize as an unintelligible musical expression, viz. free jazz, Gadamer’s project is shown as other-affirming and open to ambiguity and dynamism. That is, the essential structures and concepts characterizing Gadamer’s reflections on art are likewise central to his overall hermeneutical project, and hence are not rightly described as un-attuned to difference or other-negating. Rather, Gadamer’s philosophical project upholds difference, since it requires a dialogical interplay between self and other that creates the possibility for a transformative experience.

II. Play and the Play Structure of Art

Play as a participatory structure is central to Gadamer’s account of hermeneutics and the ontology and phenomenology of art. In his analyses of play in general and the play of art in particular, Gadamer emphasizes the active engagement of the spectator or auditor. That is, not only do the players play the game, but also the observers actively participate in the movement or life of the game. One frequently witnesses this type of spectatorial “playing along with” in organized sports. For example, fans bring their baseball gloves in anticipation of catching a ball and in so doing intensely follow the movement of the game - sometimes even diving onto the field itself. The spectator, in other words, is drawn into the spirit of the game and thus is “played by” the game just as much as the players themselves. As Gadamer puts it, “The real subject of the game [...] is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself.”³

¹ John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics. Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 263. See also, Jürgen Habermas, “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality,” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, eds. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 245-72.

² Robert Bernasconi, “You Don’t Know What I’m Talking About: Alterity and the Hermeneutical Ideal,” in *The Specter of Relativism*, ed. Lawrence Schmidt (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 178-94, here 180.

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 106. (Hereafter, *TM*.) [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I*:

Similarly in the play of art, the viewer or listener engages in a back-and-forth interplay with the work, which, in the case of art, allows the work to emerge in a communicative event. Here too, the artwork draws the viewer or auditor into its movement and expects a countermovement or response. As with the game, spectatorial participation in the event of the work is not reducible to the subjective experiences of the players or audience members. Rather, as Davey observes, “The game analogy implies that the act of spectatorship contributes to bringing what is at play within the artwork into fuller being. The spectator just as much as the artist performs a role in realizing the subject-matters art brings into play.”⁴

Play by nature requires an other. This other may be another human, an animal, or an object such as a ball, a child’s toy, or an imaginary object. Even in the most basic expression of play, one finds a move and a countermove. This same to-and-fro movement structures our experience of art. As Gadamer is fond of saying, the artwork address us; it calls out to us and expects a response. Given an artwork’s complexity, we must continually return to its call, lingering with its message as we attempt to grasp its meaning(s) and allow them to impact our present understanding of our world and ourselves. Thus, our very experience of art, as Gadamer understands it, requires an intense listening and responding to the other’s “voice.”

III. Hermeneutic Identity and Tarrying with the Work

Both the play involved in art and the spectator’s active participation in it constitute essential moments of the dynamic ontology and temporality structuring art’s event. In section four, I discuss art’s temporal structure and how Gadamer’s notion of contemporaneity describes art’s unique temporality in relation to the spectator’s participation and comportment. Here I turn first to Gadamer’s analyses of art’s dynamic ontology, paying special attention to his descriptions of hermeneutic identity and tarrying with a work.

Hermeneutic identity claims that the work’s identity necessarily involves difference and thus always entails openness to future possibilities, allowing for multiple presentations or enactments of the work over time.⁵ More specifically, for Gadamer, the being of an artwork is inseparable from its various presentations, which bring out new and previously unrealized possibilities of the work. Enactment or presentation is thus an essential feature of an artwork’s being. Phenomenologically speaking, art exists only in presentation and performance. Accordingly, art as experienced requires an ongoing “rebirth” and sustaining through both players and audience participants. The notes on the page are silent without a performer to give them life. Likewise, the

Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik, Gesammelte Werke Band 1, 4. Auflage (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2010), 112. Hereafter, *WM*.]

⁴ Nicholas Davey, *Unfinished Worlds. Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 48.

⁵ On Gadamer’s notion of “hermeneutic identity,” see Donatella Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), esp. 59–60. As Di Cesare explains, “[a]ny new identity that comes to light is an identity that forms itself only in *difference*. Thus difference becomes indispensable for identity” (ibid., 60). See also, Gerald L. Bruns, “Ancients and Moderns: Gadamer’s Aesthetic Theory and the Poetry of Paul Celan,” in *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy. A Guide for the Unruly* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006,) 33-54, esp. 35-9.

musician, painter, or sculptor creates his or her work to convey something to someone, requiring the work to be displayed or performed in a concert hall or an outdoor gathering.⁶ Art, perhaps even more than simple play, is a communally constituted event.

That hermeneutic identity is infused with difference does not mean that a performer or interpreter can simply project arbitrary meanings onto the work. Doing so would be to silence the work or do violence to its integrity or structure, thereby disregarding the work's otherness. Nor does hermeneutic identity mean that interpretations or performances cannot be judged regarding their quality. In the case of a poor performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2, Opus 18, competent musicians or critics may judge the performance as presenting, albeit poorly, the structure (*Gebilde*) of Rachmaninov's work. If there is a true engagement with the work, then every presentation relates to the work's structure and, and Gadamer puts it, must "submit itself [*sich unterstellt*] to the criterion [*Maßstab*] of correctness [*Richtigkeit*] that derives from it."⁷ At the same time, the very being of the work itself is constituted by a built-in indeterminacy or openness to future possibilities enabling new dimensions of the work to emerge over time.

However, that we can discern a failed presentation of a work does not imply that there is only *one* excellent or ideal way for the work to be manifested. On Gadamer's view, it is possible to have many correct, fitting, and even exemplary presentations, enactments, and performances of the same work. Here the notion of structure should not be equated with the original composition or entity, as if the original is the ideal or standard that future performances and presentations must copy. On the contrary, future performances of a work often bring out a depth and richness not present in the original. John Coltrane's performance of the popular Broadway tune, "My Favorite Things," is a case in point. In Coltrane's version, the standard and rhythmically simple three-four waltz time is transformed into a polyrhythmic and densely textured six-eight (and beyond) time. In addition, Coltrane adds lengthy improvisatory solos and complex harmonic textures to the original composition. In both the 1959 Broadway performance and John Coltrane's, the work emerges and a common structure is discerned; yet Coltrane's performance displays a level of harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic complexity not present in the original.

A. The (Performed) Work as Reality Not Copy

Gadamer also argues that through presentation (and performance) an "*increase in being*" [*Zuwachs an Sein*] occurs.⁸ To understand his claim, one must examine his account of the complex relationship between *Bild* and *Urbild*. If presentation (*Darstellung*) is the artwork's mode of being, how does a symphonic performance or a painting present the work? For Gadamer, a

⁶ As Gadamer observes, in the play of art something comes forth that is "*intended as something*." Moreover, its meanings are reducible neither to mere concepts nor to some activity coordinated with a utility function. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful. Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker and ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 24. (Hereafter, *RB*.) [Gadamer, Hans-Georg, "Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest," in *Ästhetik und Poetik I: Kunst als Aussage*, Gesammelte Werke Band 8. Auflage. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993), 115. Hereafter, *GW8*.

⁷ *TM*, 122. [*WM*, 127].

⁸ *Ibid.*, *TM*, 140. Italics in original. [*WM*, 145].

presentation or a performance of a work is not a copy of some original or more “real” entity, being, or object. The defining task of a copy is to duplicate as accurately as possible the original. Thus its essence is self-erasure or self-effacement; it points not to itself and its particularities but away from itself to what it copies. “[I]ts nature [*Bestimmung*] is to lose its own independent existence [*sein eigenes Für-sich-sein aufzuheben*] and serve entirely to mediate what is copied.”⁹ A copy’s self-effacement indicates its function as a means, not an end. Its independent existence serves this very purpose of self-erasure. By contrast, a painting’s essence is neither self-erasure, nor does it function as a means to some other end. The painting points to itself and *how* it presents its subject matter. In other words, “one is not simply directed away from the picture [painting] to what is represented. Rather, the presentation remains essentially connected to what is represented [*Die Darstellung bleibt vielmehr mit dem Dargestellten wesentlich verbunden*]—indeed belongs to it.”¹⁰ Again, instead of a self-cancelling existence and purpose, the painting’s being—the painting itself—brings out something new in the subject matter that it depicts. Thus the painting is more than a mere copy or reduplication of an “original” or more “true” reality; rather, the painting brings out new possibilities and new ways of seeing the “original.” Thus, the original becomes more than it was; hence, its being has increased, and yet the two are integrally connected as both participate in presenting the same subject matter—yet a subject matter that itself is always in motion.¹¹

To illustrate further, consider again Coltrane’s version of “My Favorite Things.” Coltrane’s performance is the reality or end to which we are directed. That is, his performance is not a self-effacing copy, a sign pointing beyond itself to the original, as if the goal is merely to reduplicate the original. Rather, Coltrane’s version presents us with the work in a new key—that is, new possibilities of the work come forth, and we encounter dimensions of the work that did not exist previously (e.g., more complex rhythms, harmonies, improvised solos etc.). Yet we identify it as a performance of “My Favorite Things.” Coltrane never intended to merely replicate the original, but rather to enact his version of the work, which has its own independent existence while remaining connected to the original and extending, as it were, its life or being. In short, a work’s being is increased in the event of art’s unfolding over time in various enactments that bring forth new aspects of the work.

So far I have established that even though the same work is repeated in each new enactment, subsequent enactments are not mere copies of an original and thus are not understood as ontologically inferior imitations. Instead, Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutic identity shows itself in a phenomenon of repetition in presentation that harmonizes structure and freedom. Hermeneutic difference thus describes a dynamic yet discernable identity.

On the one hand, hermeneutic identity is ever and always infused with difference, dynamism, and open possibilities; on the other, it indicates an identifiable structure that emerges in the communicative event of art’s appearance. As Gadamer puts it, “[t]o understand [*Verstehende*]

⁹ Ibid., *TM*, 138. [*WM*, 143].

¹⁰ Ibid., *TM*, 139. [*WM*, 143].

¹¹ The discussion here pertains to non-abstract paintings in which some resemblance relationship with another object(s) can be discerned. Even so, Gadamer’s point is that the traditional model of art as representation does *not* capture the essence of what art *is*. In modern, abstract paintings, the notion of representation has been abandoned, and the artists themselves, as it were, “show” Gadamer’s point.

something, I must be able to identify it. For there was something there that I passed judgment upon and ‘understood’ [*verstand*].”¹² Stated otherwise, the work’s identity consists in its presence before me as other, in its being there as something addressing me. The work asks to be understood; it issues a challenge requiring a response.¹³ Here again the emphasis is on the active, engaged listener or spectator: in order to experience a work of art as a communicative event, one must actively participate—one must “play along with” (*mitspielen*) it.¹⁴ The listener must comport herself to the work as an other expecting something meaningful to come forth. If the viewer or listener approaches the work having already decided that it has no value and thus nothing to say, then the work will remain silent. Art is a dynamic, communal event; its happening or occurrence can be thwarted or foreclosed when we comport ourselves to the other with a closed attitude. The same is true of our hermeneutical encounters with others—whether texts or human beings.

B. Tarrying as Ecstatic Participation

Gadamer also emphasizes the importance of tarrying or lingering with a work. To tarry or linger is to become so intentionally absorbed in a work of art that one forgets oneself. As one attunes herself to the work and becomes wholly captivated by it, she is able to see beyond her projects, concerns, and cares; she exists ec-statically, or outside herself. This ecstatic way of being should not be understood as merely passive or private; rather, as Gadamer explains:

being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else. This kind of being present [*solches Dabeisein*] is a self-forgetfulness [*Selbstvergessenheit*], and to be a spectator [*es macht das Wesen des Zuschauers aus*] consists in giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching. Here self-forgetfulness is anything but a private condition, for it arises from devoting one’s full attention to the matter at hand [*denn sie entspringt aus der Zuwendung zur Sache*], and this is the spectator’s own positive accomplishment [*Leistung*].¹⁵

When one actively enters into a condition of self-forgetfulness, the occasion for the event of art to emerge in a communicative address becomes viable. As the work comes forth, it makes a lasting claim on the spectator or listener. In other words, the experience of art’s address is not a fleeting aesthetic pleasure wherein one anesthetizes oneself momentarily only to return to one’s

¹² Gadamer, *RB*, 25. [*GW8*, 116]. The English translation deletes the scare quotes in the German text around the word “*verstand*.” Since Gadamer placed the scare quotes in the original and likely did so to emphasize the openness and non-exhaustive character of understanding, I have included them in the English translation.

¹³ Gadamer, *RB*, 26. [*GW8*, 116-17]. See also, Daniel L. Tate, “The Speechless Image. Gadamer and the Claim of Modern Painting,” *Philosophy Today* 45 (2001): 56-68, esp. 59-61. Tate provides a helpful analysis of Gadamer’s view that even the most abstract modern art manifests a “unity in tension” capable of addressing us (*ibid.*, 60).

¹⁴ See also, Bruns, “Ancients and Moderns,” esp. 35-6. Bruns highlights the similarities between Gadamer’s theory of our experience of art and our experience of play, noting the emancipatory aspects of each. In both experiences we are caught up in the self-presentation of the work or the game, and we also actively participate in the event.

¹⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 126. [*WM*, 131].

world unchanged. Rather, one's world and way of being-in-the-world-with-others is affected—at times radically so.

Once again, the emphasis is on an engaged, rather than detached spectator or auditor. As one intentionally and with great effort and commitment carries (repeatedly) with the work, one experiences *both* a self-forgetfulness due to one's fully being-there with the work *and* a self-enrichment via a world-expansion. As Gadamer says, "What rends him from *everything* at the same time gives him back the whole of his being" [*Was ihn aus allem herausreißt, gibt ihm zugleich das Ganze seines Seins zurück.*]¹⁶ Thus the spectator's absorbed engagement is an achievement allowing the work's otherness to emerge.¹⁷

IV. Contemporaneity and the Work's Full Presence *and* Nontransparency

Gadamer intentionally employs the term "claim," which Søren Kierkegaard developed in conjunction with his theological reflections on contemporaneity. As observed earlier, a claim is not something fleeting but enduring, enforceable, and is "concretized in a demand."¹⁸ For example, when the Gospel is preached, the hearer is presented with a claim of faith and is beckoned to respond. Here the words themselves, in a way analogous to the sacraments, bring the reality of the past into the present transforming the one who receives them by altering his world and his view of others. However, the hearer of the Gospel message is not merely a passive recipient. She is also challenged to translate and apply the message of salvation to her particular situation. This type of translation, application, or, as James Risser puts it, "concretization of meaning that defines the present enactment,"¹⁹ is what Gadamer means by the term, *Anwendung*, which is often translated into English as "appropriation." When Gadamer claims that every interpretation is an *Anwendung*, he draws attention to the performative (*Vollzug*) dimension of hermeneutic experience. *Anwendung* is thus a "form of practice"²⁰ whereby one learns how to listen properly to voice of the other so that its claims can be brought to bear meaningfully on the present. The result is not, as Caputo suggests, to consume the other,²¹ but to allow the other's claims to come forth so that my world, practices, and ways of being might be enriched or challenged.

Gadamer's emphasis on play, art's address, and our being drawn in and even arrested by the work are aspects of his critique of the over-subjectivization of aesthetic consciousness; yet his critical remarks should not be interpreted as denying the subject's experience or, as we have seen, her contribution occasioning the work's emergence. Gadamer repeatedly underscores the artwork's ability to address the engaged participant directly. However, it appears that one can be

¹⁶ Ibid., *TM*, 128. I have slightly modified the English translation. The italicized word indicates my modification. [*WM*, 133].

¹⁷ See also, Daniel L. Tate, "In the Fullness of Time: Gadamer on the Temporal Dimension of the Work of Art," *Research in Phenomenology* 42 (2012), 92-113, esp. 104.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 127. [*WM*, 132].

¹⁹ James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other. Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 103.

²⁰ Ibid., 105. See also Risser's discussion of the crucial differences between Gadamer's hermeneutical project and Ricouer's (102-5). As Risser observes, Gadamer, unlike Ricouer, does not claim that "every interpretation is an *Aneignung*" (103).

²¹ See, for example, Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 115.

drawn into the work in varying degrees of depth (or not drawn in at all.) That is, given its materiality, the immediacy of one's experience of art's sensual qualities does not require that one possess knowledge of the particular social and historical factors in which the work first emerged. Yet, that person may still be drawn to the work through the "pull" of the work's sensuous qualities (e.g., dissonant sounds, complex rhythms, a striking juxtaposition of geometric shapes and lines). Gadamer's stress on art as a *communicative* event and art as addressing us with meaningful content, which requires one to linger repeatedly with the work, suggests that something beyond a (subjective) experience of art's immediacy is required. In order to respect the otherness of the work, we must take the time to learn its "language." That is, we must enter into its world, pondering how the interplay of its symbols, sounds, colors, and gestures says something not only in its time and context but in one's own as well.

Here it is helpful to mention what Daniel Tate describes as the artwork's "paradoxical temporality."²² That is, its temporality is "marked by an immediate presentness in time and at the same time by a rising above time."²³ Building on Tate's notion, one might add that the work's ability to come forth in the present and communicate meanings in different historical periods should not be equated with timelessness or a denial of art's social and historical conditioning. Artworks (and texts) are historically shaped; they arise, participate in, and belong to various traditions.²⁴ Yet great works of art have the ability to draw us in, to captivate us by their sensuous elements—but sensuous elements arranged meaningfully in languages of sound and symbols, which are themselves communally shaped via artistic, social, and other practices and traditions.

What I have outlined above suggests a movement beyond *Erlebnis* and to *Erfahrung*. Since both words are translated into English as "experience," the difference between the two is lost. *Erlebnis* is associated with Wilhelm Dilthey and "emphasizes the distinctness and singularity of the perceived moment." In contrast, Gadamer is concerned with *Erfahrung*, which "emphasizes the cumulative and formative character of experience, as when one speaks of an 'experienced' artist or musician."²⁵ *Erlebnis* highlights the intensity of the present moment and is concerned not with the work's meaning but with its sensual qualities and sophistications. *Erfahrung* stresses the unfolding, cumulative, and unfinished character of experience; moreover, *Erfahrung* "implies an involvement in the meaning and significance of what is experienced."²⁶ Hence, for Gadamer, our experience (*Erfahrung*) of art is something more than an intense, momentary subjective experience (*Erlebnis*); yet, our subjective experience plays an important role in drawing us deeper into art's communicative address.

²² Tate, "In the Fullness of Time," 99.

²³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image: 'So True, So Full of Being!'" in *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, trans. and ed. Richard E. Palmer, 192-224 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 196.

²⁴ For an instructive explication of Gadamer's understanding of tradition as "an event of repetitive disclosure," (81) see Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, esp. 65-81. In chapter two, Risser engages Caputo's (and to a certain degree Habermas') concerns regarding Gadamer's alleged conservatism and backward-looking orientation.

²⁵ Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

As we have seen, Gadamer stresses what he calls the “absolute presentness” of the work - that is, the artwork’s ability “to build bridges that reach beyond the enclosure and space in which it originated.”²⁷ I have suggested that this is in part due to the work’s immediacy, its ability to draw us in via its materiality and sensual qualities. However, this is a structured materiality; the work’s sounds and colors are artfully arranged. Its structure has a discernable movement that can be perceived even if its meaning(s) remain in many ways opaque and enigmatic. Here it may be helpful to consider how achievement relates to contemporaneity. As Gadamer explains, contemporaneity means that when a particular work of art presents itself to me, it “achieves full presence [*volle Gegenwart*], however remote its origin may be. Thus contemporaneity [*Gleichzeitigkeit*] is not a mode of givenness in consciousness [*eine Gegebenheitsweise im Bewußtsein*], but a task [*eine Aufgabe*] for consciousness and an achievement [*eine Leistung*] that is demanded [*verlangt wird*] of it.”²⁸ Thus understood, contemporaneity is not a given, but instead something that the spectator or auditor must in some sense actively bring about. This suggests that the co-productive, participatory activity of the spectator, listener, or interpreter is necessary for the work’s coming-into-presence. The spectator’s or auditor’s achievement of making a past reality present here and now marks the distinctive temporality of contemporaneity. Historical distance is not a barrier to the work’s meaningful address; what comes to presence through spectatorial, auditorial, and performative *cooperative* activity can be re-contextualized and repeated over time. Here the event of art—its happening via active participatory engagement—points both to its hermeneutical identity (i.e., identity and difference) and dynamic ontology. The artwork is not a static object whose meaning remains the same; rather, as new performances and interpretations emerge, new (multiple) horizons are fused among the work and its performances and audience members. As is the case in a genuine dialogue among persons, the work as other can challenge and (re)shape one’s horizon. Likewise, a community of performers (e.g., musicians) can creatively (yet non-violently) expand the work as they bring out new possibilities over time. Still, whatever meanings emerge in art’s event, those meanings are always socially and historically conditioned by communal practices, traditions, and shared discourses.

Before closing this section, it is important to clarify what Gadamer means when he speaks of a work’s “full” or “absolute” presence. Although the language is somewhat misleading, he does *not* mean that when the work is “fully present,” every aspect of the work in that particular encounter is transparent or exhaustively understood. In Yo-Yo Ma’s masterful performances of Bach’s cellos suites, the works are fully present for him as performer and for the attuned listener; nonetheless something new and unexpected emerges in each performance. In this sense, the reality of the work is fully present in its various presentations and performances; however, its being is not exhaustively grasped in one’s experience of and participation in it here and now. In other words, the work’s “absolute presentness” and one’s being present with the work can (and does) readily coexist with the notion of an ongoing interplay of hiddenness and manifestation or, in Heideggerian terms, concealment and unconcealment. That something is genuinely or fully present does not mean that one can or will ever grasp all that it is; one’s encounter with the reality of its presence might in fact be too much to take in. In such a situation, both participants are fully “there,” as the event of art unfolds. However, it is often the case that the work *qua* other

²⁷ Gadamer, “The Artwork in Word and Image,” 199.

²⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 127. [*WM*, 132].

speaks meaningfully without one comprehending its totality.²⁹ In short, Gadamer's understanding of art and our experience of art's alterity not only permit but also expect and affirm the work's enigmatic dimensions.

V. Art as Dialogical Interplay

In order to bring together several strands of my argument, I turn to discuss our experience of art as a form of dialogical interplay that requires letting the other's voice—whether dissonant, consonant, or disorienting—sound. As noted previously, the structure of the work manifests an integrity and autonomy—an otherness—that resists my attempts to force arbitrary meanings upon it. Such a move would amount to remaking the work in my own image and thus silencing the other's voice. To interact with it in this way is to do violence to the work and would amount to a monologue rather than a dialogue. For Gadamer, a proper (hermeneutical) aesthetic experience with a painting or a musical work is dialogical, and thus by definition requires the other's voice to sound in and against my own (dynamic) horizon so that my way of seeing the world might be challenged or expanded.

As I linger with the work and open myself to its address, what formerly appeared strange may become more intelligible, remain enigmatic, or be a combination of both. Nonetheless, as I abide with the work and allow it to come forth, it addresses me in a communicative event that requires my participation and response. Hence, to mute the other's voice would result both in a failed hermeneutic and aesthetic experience. Stated otherwise, Gadamer's notion of an eventful experience of art, poetry, and the like expects and even *invites* dissonances both to sound and to remain. As noted previously, one need not conclude that a genuine encounter with art requires exhaustive understanding without remainder. Here a musical insight proves helpful. Harmony itself—especially the complex or extended harmonies of jazz and 20th century music—requires the differences of the notes to sound in their fullness. To eradicate or remove dissonance (i.e., difference) from musical works would render them dull and monotonous. Analogously, an authentic or harmonious hermeneutic or aesthetic encounter demands neither that the other become fully transparent nor be reduced to my unison voice.

VI. Gadamer's Openness to Modern Art and a Coda on Tradition

When it comes to modern art, Gadamer is aware that many artists repudiate or seek to redefine traditional accounts of beauty, form, and proportionality. It is precisely here that Gadamer's position proves particularly insightful in its ability to listen to the voice of the other and thereby to move us beyond traditional understandings of art's ontology. For example, toward the end of his introductory remarks in his essay, "The Relevance of the Beautiful," Gadamer poses a series of questions expressing a genuine interest in taking seriously the works of modern artists.

²⁹ Perhaps this is something akin to Jean-Luc Marion's idea of the bedazzling event of the saturated phenomenon. See, for example, Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given. Being Given. Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 1st ed., trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), esp. 199-247.

How can we understand the innovative forms of modern art as they play around with the content so that our expectations are constantly frustrated? [...] How are we to understand what Duchamp is doing when he suddenly exhibits some everyday object on its own and thereby produces a sort of aesthetic shock reaction? We cannot simply dismiss this as so much nonsense, for Duchamp actually revealed something about the conditions of aesthetic experience.³⁰

Here Gadamer exhibits a genuine openness to artists such as Duchamp, whose works are meant, among other things, to provoke and challenge our thinking about what art *is* and how our experience of art is conditioned by social, historical, and other communal practices.

For Gadamer, our experience of art is not chiefly about our subjective responses to artworks (although our subjective responses do play a role in our experience). Nor is the goal to try and uncover the artist's intentions or to teach us the proper way to interpret what particular works mean. Rather, his aim, from a hermeneutic point of view, is to analyze the conditions or structures of our experience of art in order to clarify "how aesthetic experience is both involved in something larger than itself and reflects (*speculum*) that larger actuality within itself."³¹ Thus, one's meaningful encounter with an artwork always has a "backstory," and Gadamer's interest lies in understanding what informs, shapes, and conditions that encounter. One aspect of that conditioning is the fact that we belong to multiple traditions - linguistic, sociopolitical, aesthetic, etc.

Prior to my discussion of a Gadamerian approach to free jazz (and relevant to that discussion), I want to speak briefly about Gadamer's notion of tradition. That we are situated within and shaped by traditions does not mean that we are unable to oppose, challenge, or alter them and the practices and norms they embody. As complex, socially constructed human artifacts, traditions exhibit a dynamic stability: they can and do congeal for certain periods of time and thus manifest a staying power, yet they are not rigidly fixed. Instead, they change over time as new infusions from other voices expand and alter what in an earlier phase were standard practices and established norms. In the following consideration of free jazz, I discuss specific ways in which this process of transforming musical traditions and practices occurred in the transition from bebop and hard bop to free jazz.

Here I mention briefly one element of tradition-transformation: namely, the creative application of other musical voices - whether voices of past, or present musicians in one's own tradition, or voices of those outside it. Jazz luminaries such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane creatively applied musical insights from earlier jazz masters, 20th century classical music, and Afro-Cuban and Indian music in order to go beyond (trans-gress) jazz norms and develop new practices and musical styles. Their creative uses (*Anwendungen*) of others' voices are not understood as violent or consuming acts. On the contrary, they communicate a profound respect for the others' achievements and contributions to the tradition(s). Thus, by dwelling with the (musical) other in order to learn the other's language and style—imitating it and yet creating something new—the other's voice continues to sound into the future, acting as an ongoing tribute to the other's greatness while also expanding the tradition beyond its previous limits. As Gadamer

³⁰ Gadamer, *RB*, 22. [*GW*8, 113].

³¹ Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, 47.

himself explains, “tradition means transmission rather than conservation. This transmission does not imply that we simply leave things unchanged and merely conserve them. It means learning how to grasp and express the past anew. It is in this sense that we can say that transmission is equivalent to translation.”³²

VII. A Gadamerian Approach to Free Jazz

We have seen that a key feature of our aesthetic experience is the spectator’s or listener’s active participation. Also significant are Gadamer’s understanding of art as an event, tarrying with a work, the play-character of art, art’s communal dimensions, and the primacy of art’s address. In the following paragraphs, I highlight how these fundamental aspects of Gadamer’s account apply to free jazz. I conclude that a Gadamerian approach to free jazz not only allows but requires the voice of the other to sound in its alterity; consequently, Gadamer’s hermeneutical aesthetics demonstrates an openness to the other that creates the possibility for self- and world-questioning and even a transformation of one’s way of seeing the world.

Free jazz, also called the “New Thing,” burst forth on the jazz music scene in the late fifties and is frequently associated with names such as John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor. An adequate definition of free jazz is notoriously difficult, as each group or musician now recognized as a pioneer or exemplar of free jazz instantiates diverse expressions of the genre. Even so, Ekkehard Jost highlights a “point of agreement” among free jazz groups: namely, they sought to subvert signature practices and norms of traditional jazz that carried over into bebop and hard bop.³³ In particular, free jazz musicians were unsatisfied with the constraints of the harmonic, metric, and structural norms that constituted jazz up to hard bop. Although the harmonic elements of bebop and hard bop had become increasingly complex compared to earlier expressions of jazz, the structures of standard jazz pieces had become rigid and formalized. As Jost explains, in traditional jazz the main purpose of the melody or theme is to establish the harmonic and structural framework for improvised solos. However, “[i]n free jazz, which does not observe fixed patterns of bars or functional harmony, this purpose no longer exists.”³⁴ Thus both the form and content of free jazz pieces are highly specific, consisting neither in typical jazz harmonic sequences (II-V-I, etc.) nor in common structural frameworks (e.g., the AABA form). As a consequence, one cannot continue to recycle standard chord changes and simply write a new melody, which was a common practice until the New Thing began to challenge these accepted jazz norms. Even within the very same free jazz composition, the form itself can continually morph, as bar lines are porous and allow for new melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, and interactive motifs to develop. Given this freedom from functional harmony and rigidified forms, “the members of a group are forced to listen to each other with intensified concentration.”³⁵

Another aspect of certain expressions of free jazz is collective or group improvisation. When group improvisation becomes central, the motivic development of the piece is in constant flux as each player responds to and builds upon the work’s ever-changing rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic elements. This creates a dynamic composition in which collective conversation is

³² Gadamer, *RB*, 49 [*GW*8, 139].

³³ Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: De Capo Press, 1994), 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

foregrounded rather than traditional jazz's emphasis on a single soloist improvising over relatively stable chord-changes. Moreover, as is the case with works such as Ornette Coleman's "Sound Gravitation" and "Falling Stars," numerous free jazz pieces contain no traditional melody or theme.³⁶ Rather, the works are "compositions in sound that grow from the spontaneous interaction of [the] musicians."³⁷ As one can imagine, such sonic "happenings" are risky and require not only intense, responsive listening among the players, but also high levels of trust, openness, and vulnerability.³⁸ Even when one does not fully understand what another member plays, one must listen and respond to the other, anticipating and trusting that s/he has something valuable to say and worth the effort to puzzle through. Here one might highlight an ethical dimension involved in collective improvisation: namely, the trust and vulnerability required among the improvisers is not unlike Gadamer's emphasis on the need for openness to the other in order for a genuine dialogical engagement to succeed. After all, Gadamer's notion of openness implies not only that one listen attentively and expectantly to the other, but also that one approaches the other with respect and trust.³⁹ Given that one's presumptions may be exposed as inadequate, misguided, or may even be radically challenged, entering a Gadamerian dialogue requires vulnerability and a willingness to take risks.

In addition to internal developments within the musical practices themselves, socio-political factors played a role in shaping the music. As many commentators and jazz historians have documented, jazz musicians in America were subject to racialized laws, customs, and practices both in society at large as well as in the more narrow confines of the music industry.⁴⁰ Such practices affected not only the musicians' personal and communal lives but also the music itself. White club owners were by and large apathetic to aesthetic concerns. Driven by profit motives and operating on the basis of stereotypes of black musicians as mere "entertainers" rather than serious artists, they set up obstacles that free jazz musicians had to overcome in order to develop their music. For instance, in order to maximize alcohol sales, club owners frequently demanded three short performances with small breaks in between.⁴¹ Such pre-set time frames, calculated for monetary benefits rather than artistic exploration, were ill-suited for the dynamic and open character of the New Thing. As noted earlier, free jazz musicians created pieces that neither conformed to the common time frames for a work nor to traditional formal structures—much less to predetermined sets established by club owners. Hence, in order to pursue their aesthetic aims, the musicians created the loft movement and performed their music in large loft apartments

³⁶ With no discernable melody to serve as a "grounding point," rhythmic and sonic textures and densities are foregrounded and in a sense become "thematic," similar to the way that in a Kandinsky painting, line, point, and color are thematized.

³⁷ Jost, *Free Jazz*, 64.

³⁸ See also Bruce Ellis Benson's discussion the vulnerability and risk required in musical dialogue in *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue. A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 168.

³⁹ For a detailed discussion of the ethical dimensions of Gadamer's hermeneutics, see Monica Vilhauer, *Gadamer's Ethics of Play. Hermeneutics and the Other* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010), chapter 5. See also, Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, chapter 5.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Eric Lott, "Double V, Double-Time: Bebop's Politics of Style," *Callaloo*, 36 (1988): 597-605, Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds. Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: De Capo Press, 1994).

⁴¹ John D. Baskerville, "Free Jazz: A Reflection of Black Power Ideology," *Journal of Black Studies* 24 (1994): 484-497, here 488.

within their own local communities.⁴² In such a setting, jazz artists could develop their music and let it to carry them for as long as the group collectively agreed.

Acknowledging music's socio-political conditioning is consonant with a Gadamerian approach to art, as Gadamer's understanding of our historical conditioning, our belonging to various traditions, and our thrownness can be readily applied to the history of American jazz in its multiple expressions. Gadamer, no doubt, recognizes how cultural and sociopolitical narratives shape both a societies' conception of art and its function, as well as how an artist views his or her role in relation to the society.⁴³ These aspects are an important part of the work's being and meaning, both of which always exceed what is presented or performed at any given time and change with every performance and enactment. Art's dynamic nature and ongoing movement of revealing and concealing go hand in hand with an excess of meaning. Davey sums this up nicely with his hermeneutical axiom $x = x+$, which emphasizes that "words, symbols and images all point beyond themselves. All mean more than initial acquaintance suggests."⁴⁴ For example, when a musical work (x) presents itself to an engaged participant, the work also discloses the broader horizons of meaning or speculative fields ($x+$), which constitute it and give it its significance. The part (x) discloses the whole ($x+$) but only partially, as the whole ($x+$) can never be fully captured in images or concepts.

As is the case with any dialogical encounter, one must approach the other with a spirit of openness. Here free jazz (along with other expressions of modern art) often proves challenging. For example, the intense and often harsh sonic textures and rhythmic densities of free jazz may draw a listener in or repel and frustrate her. The complexity of free jazz, its trans-gressive character, and heightened alterity, places significant demands on the listener, requiring her to spend time with the work in order to learn its "language." Thus, a genuine encounter with free jazz precludes casual listening. One doesn't listen to free jazz as a way to escape from the mundane, nor does free jazz work well as background or "atmosphere" music. Free jazz demands intentional engagement; it asserts itself as a singular, unrepeatable other that simultaneously invites and eludes understanding. Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics not only expects but also welcomes interpretative tensions and ambiguities. Modern art's complex alterity requires the listener to slow down, to dwell with the work, and to readjust his or her expectations. We must be fully there with a work in order for any understanding to occur. Given our sound-byte world, replete with iPhone distractions and interruptions, modern art's demand for intentional involvement serves as a reminder of what genuine dialogue requires. Likewise, the uniqueness of free jazz—its rejection of standard harmonic structures and musical forms—speaks against what Gadamer calls the "rule of number" so characteristic of modern life. "The rule of number is visible everywhere and manifests itself above all in the form of the series, aggregate, addition and sequence. [...] It is the exchangeability of parts which typifies the sum and series. The fact that an individual part can be exchanged and replaced is an essential component of the kind of life we lead."⁴⁵ A free jazz improvisation is a unique event whose very nature resists the "rule of number." As such it speaks against a consumer culture where objects are mass produced and easily replaced. One does not consume free jazz; one participates in its non-repeatable event.

⁴² Ibid., 489.

⁴³ See, for example, *RB*, 6–7 [*GW8*, 97–8].

⁴⁴ Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*, 6.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *RB*, 89. [*GW8*, 321].

VII. Conclusion

Gadamer understands the artwork not as a static object to be analyzed, but rather as an event in which one actively participates. The work's dynamic ontology can also be described in terms of its hermeneutic identity, which is always identity constituted by difference. As a communicative event, the artwork has the capacity to speak. That is, the work is an other, whose communally constituted "language" of symbols and sounds, can and does speak meaningfully to those willing to learn its language and hear its address. Yet as with any dialogical encounter, a genuine engagement with an artwork results in both clarity and opacity. Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics assumes and embraces interpretive tensions; art's truth is not only a play of revealing and concealing, but it also resists a reductionist propositional "capture" as well as hermeneutical closure.

Furthermore, participation in art's event demands an openness and willingness to listen to the work *qua* other. This comportment can be understood as an ethical commitment, wherein one resolves to be "fully there" with the work even when its language is frustrating and difficult to understand. Such attentive dwelling allows the work to come forth, revealing certain aspects and simultaneously concealing others. That is, as one intentionally enters into a back-and-forth play with the work, one comes to understand its message but never with a sense of finality, as if everything has been grasped and no additional meanings could ever surface. Given our finitude and the work's dynamic ontology, this incomplete yet genuine experience of an artwork's varied meanings and unfinished character is to be expected.

Here our hermeneutical condition mirrors our human condition. Just as one's self-understanding unfolds over time and in conversation with others, but never reaches final clarity, so too one's understanding of the work is always incomplete. That our dialogical encounters with others will also be of a both/and, dialectical, and unfolding character is fully compatible with Gadamer's hermeneutical project. On the one hand, when a genuine dialogue occurs, one comes to understand the subject matter better, which is not to say that one must agree with the other. A successful dialogical encounter with a text or a work of art neither requires agreement about nor a complete grasp of the subject matter. As one repeatedly contemplates works over the course of a lifetime, new insights emerge; one comes to see the work, oneself, and the world differently. Nonetheless, no single interpretation, nor a combination of interpretations, will ever exhaust the work's meaning.

Contra Gadamer's critics, difference is not primarily a problem to solve or overcome. Both difference and sameness are equiprimordial. Although Gadamer does not thematize exploitative and oppressive social relations in which true dialogue is prevented and the goal is simply to eradicate difference, his philosophical project is in no way fundamentally hostile to difference.⁴⁶ On the contrary, as I have argued, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and hermeneutical aesthetics embrace difference and otherness. In its ideal Gadamerian expression, one might say that difference dances with sameness in an ongoing interplay where neither takes the lead, but

⁴⁶ In his discussion of Gadamer's notion of "fusion of horizons," Bernasconi discerns a diminishment and even antagonism to difference. See, for example, Bernasconi, "You Don't Know What I'm Talking About," 187.

each carries together in a community where moves and countermoves are reciprocally recognized, valued, and harmonized in the truest sense.

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