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## Harsh Poetry and Art's Address: Romare Bearden and Hans-Georg Gadamer in Conversation

### Abstract

This essay centers on Romare Bearden's art, methodology, and thinking about art, and likewise explores his attempt to harmonize personal aesthetic goals with sociopolitical concerns. Following an investigation of Bearden's work and thought, we turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's reflections on art and our experience (*Erfahrung*) of art. As the essay unfolds, we see how Bearden's approach to art and the artworks themselves resonate with Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness and his contention that artworks address us. An important component of Gadamer's account is his emphasis on the spectator's active yet non-mastering role in the event of art's address – an event that implicates the spectator and has the potential to transform him or her. As we shall see, Gadamer's notion of aesthetic experience sharply contrasts with modern, subjectivizing aesthetics, as it requires not only active participatory engagement, but it also brings about a transformed "vision" and understanding of one's self, others, and the world. In closing, we return to Bearden in order to explore how his art unearths a crucial activity of our being-in-the-world. I call this activity "un-fabricating one's world" and discuss how it expands and enriches Gadamer's account.

### Key words

Gadamer and art, critique of aesthetic consciousness, Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics, Romare Bearden, Bearden's montage technique, art and social construction, participatory aesthetic engagement, art's address, the event of art

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## I. Introduction

Like many African American artists of his day, Romare Bearden created artworks birthed and nurtured in struggle – a struggle both to subvert racialized stereotypes and images and to achieve his artistic ideals. Bearden’s complex understanding of both the individual and the community, as well as the artist and his or her relationship to the art-historical tradition, plays an integral role in the development of his own artistic style. Conversely, Bearden’s search for his artistic voice was deeply tied to his notion of social identity, culture, and art history as dynamic, hybrid social constructions. In order to enter into Bearden’s world, we begin with an examination of his art, methodology, and thinking about art, and likewise explore his attempt to harmonize personal aesthetic goals with sociopolitical concerns. Following an investigation of Bearden’s work and thought, we turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s reflections on art and our experience (*Erfahrung*) of art. As the essay unfolds, we see how Bearden’s approach to art and the artworks themselves resonate with Gadamer’s critique of aesthetic consciousness and his contention that artworks address us. An important component of Gadamer’s account is his emphasis on the spectator’s active yet non-mastering role in the event of art’s address – an event that implicates the spectator and has the potential to transform him or her. As we shall see, Gadamer’s notion of aesthetic experience sharply contrasts with modern, subjectivizing aesthetics, as it requires not only active participatory engagement, but it also has the potential to transform one’s “vision” and understanding of one’s self, others, and the world. In closing, we return to Bearden in order to explore how his art unearths a crucial activity of our being-in-the-world. I call this activity “un-fabricating one’s world” and discuss how it expands and enriches Gadamer’s account.

## II. Bearden’s Art: Subversive Hybridity and “Harsh Poetry”

Critical theorists, philosophers of race, and literary authors have analyzed and depicted the experiences of black people in racialized contexts as an ongoing experience of absence. That is, to be black in a white world is to be rendered invisible and muted – to be treated socially and politically as if you did not exist or did not exist as a human being worthy of respect, civic rights, and mutual recognition. Conversely, theorists have

analyzed blackness as an over-determined, fixed presence. In this understanding, the presence of a black body is magnified and perceived in advance as dangerous, criminal, or sexually deviant. Under this (white) lens, black bodies must be constantly surveilled, hemmed in, monitored, and segregated. Either way, blackness is scripted by dominant (white) discourses in ways that blacks find demeaning, false, and in need of re-formation and re-narration.

One encounters this type of personal and communal identity re-narration in the works of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Aime Césaire, Franz Fanon, W. E. B. DuBois, and many others. The quest to find one's (black) voice often involves a strategic or subversive intertextual performativity.<sup>1</sup> That is, the subjugated writer or artist engages the dominant tradition through serious study of its stylistic practices and masterpieces. The artist, as it were, dwells with the tradition and in many cases acquires a genuine appreciation for its exemplary works. However, the goal is not mere imitation or assimilation; rather, he or she seeks both to make his or her "mark" upon the tradition and – as a black artist working within a racialized context – to affirm the value and beauty of black difference. Given that black artists in America have historically created from a subjugated position, their works not only proclaim the significance of black difference, but also they challenge and seek to expand and even overturn the hegemonic discourses, values, and practices of the society and art tradition in which they live and work.

One finds multiple strategies and even conflicting ideologies concerning how a black artist ought to approach the Western art tradition. At one end of the spectrum, many black intellectuals, including Bearden, criticize certain expressions of *Négritude* and the Black Arts Movement for their latent and at times blatant essentialism and for the constraining demands such positions placed upon black artists.<sup>2</sup> At the other end, there are, presumably, black artists who assimilate or seem to wholly adopt Western artistic styles. Of course, this either/or framework is overly simplistic

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1 On finding one's voice as an intertextual act, see L.S. Glazer, "Signifying Identity: Art and Race in Romare Bearden's Projections," *Art Bulletin*, 1994, 76, pp. 411–426.

2 On the Black Arts Movement, see L. Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review: TDR*, 1968, 12, pp. 28–39. *Négritude*, of course, is a complex notion found in multiple expressions and has undergone numerous conceptual inflections. For an example of Senghorian *Négritude*, see L.S. Senghor, "Negritude," *Indian Literature* 1974, 1/2, pp. 269–273.

and does not account for the historical stages through which oppressed groups move as they seek to redefine their social identity. Thus, the framework implied here is merely intended as a heuristic tool enabling us to understand Bearden's challenge and how he viewed himself in relation to the relevant aesthetic and sociopolitical discourses of his day.

Like other black artists Bearden sought creative ways to foreground black difference in his artistic creations. However, his desire was neither to essentialize blackness, as was often claimed of the *Négritude* movement, nor to become a social polemicist at the expense of his art.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Bearden sought to find an aesthetically rich and complex way to express his love for his community and his concern for its just treatment and social flourishing. Ralph Ellison aptly describes Bearden's aim as a search for a particular technique and method that "would allow him to express the tragic predicament of his people without violating his passionate dedication to art as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing the world."<sup>4</sup> Bearden's love of art and its rich history moved him to study the techniques and works of many different artists and styles. For example, he drew heavily from the methods of 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch masters such as Pieter de Hooch and Johannes Vermeer as well as from 20<sup>th</sup> century Cubists painters. He was especially intrigued by Pablo Picasso's use of the collage technique in the second phase of Cubism often called "Synthetic Cubism." Here not only do we have the typical multi-perspectival presentation of images calling into question a static, fixed, and singular account of a subject matter, but also a new way of constituting the image itself. As Richard R. Brettell explains, in the collage technique of Synthetic Cubism, "the image is constructed not only with painted (or drawn) lines and patches, but also with pasted elements from popular visual culture: wall-paper, sheet music, posters, newspapers, theatre tickets, and other flat urban refuse. The idea that the image is a synthesis of pictorial elements, some of which are hand-made and others of which are borrowed, makes it clear that the representation is not only artificial, but also essentially flat."<sup>5</sup> By lingering with these diverse artists and imitating their styles and techniques, Bearden was preparing the "ground," so to speak, for the emergence of his own unique,

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3 See, for example, R. Bearden, "Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings," *Leonardo*, 1969, 2, pp. 11–19, esp. 18.

4 R. Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," *The Massachusetts Review*, 1977, 18, pp. 673–680, here 673.

5 R.R. Brettell, *Modern Art 1851–1929*, Oxford 1999, pp. 34–35.

hybrid style that combined representational and non-representational techniques and allowed Bearden to harmonize his high artistic yearnings with his passion for social justice and desire to articulate the complex reality – both harsh and beautiful – of black life in America.

### III. Bearden's "Three Folk Musicians" and Social Construction

In Bearden's works we encounter an amalgam of European and African formal influences whose subject matters often combine symbols, rituals, and mythic elements associated with African American history and experience in both its Southern and Northern expressions.<sup>6</sup> The resulting synthesis is clearly modern yet it radiates a distinctively *black*-modern identity. For example, in his 1967 collage, "Three Folk Musicians," Bearden combines Cubist formal elements with his own collage and montage techniques.<sup>7</sup> The content of the work focuses on three African American folk musicians adorned in brightly colored clothing – clothing that unites black rural and urban life as symbolized by the figures donning both overalls and berets. The musician on the left and the one in the center are pictured with guitars, and the musician on the right – the one wearing overalls – holds a banjo, an instrument believed to have been introduced to America via the slave trade. Many of the musicians' facial features and parts of their hands have been cut out from newspapers and popular magazines such as *Ebony* and *Life*. Of particular interest are the guitar players' hands. Both guitarists have one hand that is significantly larger than the other, and the hands have clearly been taken from different images. The disproportionately inflated hand was perhaps used in order to dignify manual labor and to counter stereotypes regarding the value of African American

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6 In works such as "Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism, 1964," Bearden superimposes fragments of an African mask on one of his prominent figures, thus drawing upon not only Western but also African influences. Picasso, of course, also turned to African art for inspiration and as a way to challenge and expand the Western artistic tradition.

7 Bearden's work, "Three Folk Musicians," can be viewed at the following website: <http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2004/10/15/arts/15KIMMCA03ready.html>.

cultural contributions.<sup>8</sup> That is, the same hand that labors physically also creates beautiful music on the guitar. Moreover, the work suggests that the mundane and the artistically beautiful are not two separate realms where the latter serves as an escape from the former; instead, beauty is found and created in and through the mundane with all its difficulties, injustices, and incongruities. Lastly, Bearden's creative appropriation and development of Cubist collage techniques for his own purposes is an excellent example of the strategic "intertextual" performativity mentioned earlier. Bearden found a way beyond the assimilationist/essentialist (false) dichotomy through the notion of dynamic hybridity that is embodied in the very materiality of his works and illustrative of how he understands both art and the social construction of identity.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Bearden's collage technique allowed him to express his sociopolitical concerns while simultaneously fulfilling his high artistic aims. Once again Ellison elegantly sums up Bearden's achievement: "His mask-faced Harlemites and tenant farmers set in their mysterious, familiar, but emphatically abstract, scenes are nevertheless resonant of artistic and social history. Without compromising their integrity as elements in plastic compositions his figures are eloquent of a complex reality lying beyond their frames. While functioning as integral elements of design they serve simultaneously as signs and symbols of a humanity which has struggled to survive the decimating and fragmentizing effects of American social processes. Here faces which draw upon the abstract character of African sculpture for their composition are made to focus our attention upon the far from abstract reality of a people. [...] Here, too, the poetry of the blues is projected through synthetic forms which, visually, are in themselves tragi-comic and eloquently poetic. A harsh poetry this, but poetry nevertheless."<sup>10</sup>

Not only does Bearden fuse different aspects of African American life and history, but he also presents a complex view of social construction and agency. Specifically, our individual lives are both constituted by others – depicted visually in the artwork through the collage assemblage of

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8 See also, K. Mercer, "Romare Bearden: African American Modernism at Mid-Century", [in:] *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, eds. M.A. Holly, K.P.F. Moxey, Williamstown 2002, pp. 29–46. As Mercer explains, the "stylistic exaggeration that Bearden gives to human hands" was an insight that he "appropriated from socialist realism's concern with the dignity of manual labor," *ibidem*, p. 41.

9 On Bearden's art as a working out of "hybrid modernity," see also K. Mercer, *op. cit.*

10 R. Ellison, *op. cit.*, p. 678.

various body parts of others forming the bodies of each individual musician – and (re)formed through the artist's creative fashioning of him- or herself in relation to others. In addition, through his use of symbols of African American life and history – the overalls signifying life in the rural South, the beret signifying urban life in the North (the beret was a popular fashion trend during the Harlem Renaissance), the banjo, and the emphasis on creative activity via music-making – Bearden subverted white discourses demeaning black life and culture and foregrounded black difference as vibrant, complex, and worthy of respect. As Glazer puts it, "in *Three Folk Musicians*, Bearden [... emphasizes] the difference and distinction – in short, the presence – of black creativity."<sup>11</sup> By bringing various fragments together to form a unified whole, Bearden's abstract art presents us not with a world detached and disconnected from our own, but paradoxically with a truer and in many ways more concrete view of ourselves and our world.

By lingering with Bearden's work – meditating on the materiality of the montage's torn images, varied textures (from glossy magazine pictures to fibrous newspaper), intentionally distorted proportions, and fragmented yet unified scenes – we are confronted with the complexity and "harsh poetry" of the real world. Yet at the same time, the work presents something new – possibilities yet unrealized in our present social reality; consequently, it shows us a different way of seeing our world, ourselves, and others. Accordingly, Bearden's art calls us to re-envision our world and to seek to live in accord with our (now) transformed and presumably more accurate understanding. As Ellison observes, Bearden's art helps us to see "that which has been concealed by time, by custom, and by our trained incapacity to perceive the truth. Thus it is a matter of destroying moribund images of reality and creating the new."<sup>12</sup> If we answer its call, art has the power both to correct and transform our vision, showing us not only what is "out of joint," but also calling us to a truer, more just way of being-in-the-world with others. As we shall see, Gadamer's view of art's transformative power has much in common with Bearden's understanding of art. Let us turn to discuss Gadamer's critical engagement with modern aesthetics as well as his constructive contributions.

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11 L.S. Glazer, op. cit., p. 413.

12 R. Ellison, op. cit., p. 674.

#### IV. Gadamer's Critique of Aesthetic Consciousness and Aesthetic Differentiation

Throughout his career Hans-Georg Gadamer was critical of a modern, subjectivized notion of aesthetics, whose source he traced to Kant's third Critique and which he claimed was radicalized by Schiller and the German Romantics.<sup>13</sup> A corollary of this subjectivized aesthetics is a stance toward art that Gadamer calls "aesthetic consciousness." With the rise of aesthetic consciousness, art and reality are set against one another.<sup>14</sup> Art becomes a means of escape from reality or, as the saying goes, the real world. As Gadamer observes, "[b]eauty and art give reality only a fleeting and transfiguring [*verklarenden*] sheen [*Schimmer*]. The freedom of spirit to which they raise one up is freedom merely in an aesthetic [subjective] state and not in reality."<sup>15</sup> Gadamer finds this separation of art and reality to be not only misguided philosophically but also untrue to our experience of art and art's address. Here an appeal to Bearden's art is apropos. As we saw earlier, Bearden's collages were not disconnected from reality and the concrete realities of life-in-this-world. Rather, given the dominant society's distorted depictions of African Americans, they help us to see such distortions for what they are and call us to a truer vision of the world in all its beauty and harshness. If alienation is encountered, it is the alienation found in the social realities of the world itself – realities manifest through contemplating Bearden's artworks; it is not – as aesthetic consciousness would have it – the result of having to awaken from a momentary aesthetic rapture only to return unchanged to the real world.<sup>16</sup>

13 See, for example, Gadamer's discussion of Kant's subjectivization of aesthetics in *Truth and Method*, 42–100. Hereafter, *TM*. [*WM*, 48–100]. For a critique of Gadamer's reading of Kant's aesthetics, see Marie Fleming, "Gadamer in Conversation with I. Kant: Aesthetics and Hermeneutics", [in:] *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, International Studies in Hermeneutics and Phenomenology, Bd. 2, ed. Andrzej Wiercinski, Münster 2011, pp. 353–70.

14 Of course, one could also discuss the contrast between art and reality in ontological terms. Gadamer deconstructs the traditional Platonic notion of art as twice removed from what truly is (i.e. Ideas/Forms).

15 H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, 83. [*WM*, 88].

16 For a similar point about art and art's play as a transformative power in this world, see H.-G. Gadamer, "The Play of Art," [in:] *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. N. Walker, ed. R. Bernasconi, Cambridge 1986, pp. 123–130, esp. 130. Hereafter, *RB*. [H.-G. Gadamer, „Das Spiel der Kunst (1977)“, [in:] *Ästhe-*



As a site of complex social, cultural, and symbolic meaning, art has the power to initiate a transformation of horizons. Through our attentive engagement and response to art's address, we arrive at a more accurate understanding of ourselves and our world. Participating in the event that art is and answering its address is *not* a private experience concerned primarily with one's personal feelings or subjective pleasures. Our ability to respond to art's claims presupposes a communal grounding in language, tradition, social practices, and cultural narratives – all of which condition and inform, in Gadamer's language, the "substance" of our subjectivity.

Here it is instructive to turn to what Nicholas Davey describes as Gadamer's development of a *hermeneutical* aesthetics. As Davey explains, Gadamer's re-thinking of aesthetics strives to liberate aesthetics from "subjectivism, to ground aesthetic claims to truth in the inter-subjective participatory structures of language and tradition, and to legitimise art's claims to 'truth' against those who would have scientific reasoning monopolise the gateway to truth."<sup>17</sup> Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics, in other words, upholds the legitimacy of art's cognitive significance, which requires a reconfigured model for understanding "subjective response and what comes to expression within it."<sup>18</sup> In short, for Gadamer to follow the path of subjectivized aesthetics is to relegate art to its own autonomous realm, which effectually denies art's capacity to communicate truth. Art is then deprived of its "natural" place in the world and its intimate connection with human life and experience. Art becomes an object to be analyzed, used, and even commodified. As such, its aesthetic movement is no longer in play; we are left with majestic, yet muted markings, silent symbols divested of their transformative power.

This brings us to Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness and its attendant act, aesthetic differentiation. In aesthetic consciousness, one understands the artwork as an aesthetic *object* (not as a participatory, meaningful "event"). That is, through an act of aesthetic differentiation, one abstracts the work's moral and cognitive aspects and focuses solely on the

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*tik und Poetik I: Kunst als Aussage, Gesammelte Werke Band 8. Auflage*, Tübingen 1993, pp. 86–93, bes. 92. Hereafter, *GW* 8.] See also, N. Davey, "Hermeneutics and Art Theory", [in:] *A Companion to Art Theory*, eds. P. Smith, C. Wilde, Oxford 2002, pp. 436–447, esp. 442.

17 N. Davey, *Unfinished Worlds: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, and Gadamer*, Edinburgh 2013, p. 23.

18 *Ibidem*.

aesthetic qualities of a work.<sup>19</sup> As Gadamer explains, rather than making judgments on the basis of content, aesthetic differentiation purports to distinguish between the “work proper” or its “aesthetic quality as such” and “the extra-aesthetic elements that cling to it, such as purpose, function, the significance of its content.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, such judgments are grounded in one’s subjective aesthetic experiences (*Erlebnisse*) with the result that the self as subject stands over against the work as object, alienating the work both from its world and that of the spectator. In short, aesthetic differentiation “distinguishes the aesthetic quality of a work from all the elements of content that induce us to take up a moral or religious stance [Stellungnahme] towards it, and presents it solely by itself in its aesthetic being.”<sup>21</sup>

Gadamer also associates a certain approach to history with aesthetic consciousness, viz. simultaneity. Rather than acknowledging the cultural significance, historical shaping, and purpose of an artwork (while attempting to integrate its meaning with one’s own present world and self-understanding), simultaneity erases historical difference by gathering works of every historical epoch into a collection. Thus, with the dominance of aesthetic consciousness we see the rise of “special sites for simultaneity” such as the museum and concert hall.<sup>22</sup> We might update and expand Gadamer’s list and also highlight the commodification and technological reproduction of art via mass-produced fine art prints, records, CDs, and other contemporary venues for “experiencing” music such as Pandora and Spotify. Although important differences exist among these examples, in each case the artwork readily becomes a dehistoricized, moveable object available for one’s momentary aesthetic experience, use, and purchase. Of course, Gadamer’s point is not to call us to return to some nostalgic past – itself an impossibility – nor to deny the power of art in contemporary settings (such as the museum and concert hall) to address and potentially transform us. Rather, as Jean Grondin observes, Gadamer traces the history of aesthetic consciousness, showing it be a distinctively modern development that arose in response to modern science’s colonization of truth.<sup>23</sup> This, as it were, genealogy of aesthetic

19 H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, 85. [*WM*, 91].

20 *TM*, *Ibid.* [*WM*, edb.].

21 *Ibidem* [*WM*, edb.].

22 *Ibidem*, pp. 86–87. [*WM*, 92].

23 See, for example, J. Grondin, “Gadamer’s Aesthetics: The Overcoming of Aesthetic Consciousness and the Hermeneutical Truth of Art”, [in:] *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Vol. 2, ed. M. Kelly, New York–Oxford 1998, pp. 267–271, see esp. 267–269.

consciousness is undertaken for the purpose of his larger project, viz., to reclaim art's truth and to expose the loss that results from disconnecting art from our experience (*Erfahrung*) of self, world, and others. In short, Gadamer is reclaiming art's transformative power.

As a counter to aesthetic differentiation, Gadamer proposes what he calls "aesthetic *non*-differentiation," which rejects the divisions imposed by aesthetic consciousness and unites form and content. Here the notion of a "pure work" is shown as abstraction that fails to do justice to our experience of art as an ongoing presentation or enactment of some meaningful content. By denying the artificial separation of aesthetic qualities and the work's moral and cognitive significance, Gadamer simultaneously opposes historicism and the over-subjectivization of aesthetic consciousness that mutes art's address. As Gadamer explains, "[t]he inseparability of form and content is fully realized as the nondifferentiation in which we encounter art as something that both expresses us and speaks to us."<sup>24</sup> Here he calls us back to our experience (*Erfahrung*) of art's address as that which has the power to confront us, thereby expanding and recalibrating our understanding of our world and ourselves. Art's address and truth is not unleashed via an act of abstracting the formal qualities of art or focusing solely on the technical mastery (or lack thereof) of a musician's performance or a painter's use of symmetry and proportion. Rather, we must linger with the work, allowing ourselves to "hear" its address as we learn to "speak" its language.

Recall, for example, Ellison's commentary on Bearden's collages, in which we encounter "mask-faced Harlemites and tenant farmers" who confront us with a social history of a particular people who "struggled to survive the decimating and fragmentizing effects of American social processes."<sup>25</sup> By lingering with Bearden's collage and allowing it to speak to me, I begin to understand not only something important about the social history of African Americans, but also I am called to reflect on my own world and to consider, for example, the social inequalities that continue today, and how I might challenge present racialized and other unjust practices and discourses. The work's truth summons me to live out the reality of my communal existence and to acknowledge my solidarity with others. By participating in the event of art my former (and perhaps even distorted)

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24 H.-G. Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful. Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival", [in:] *RB*, 51. [„Die Aktualität des Schönen," in *GW* 8, 141.]

25 R. Ellison, op. cit., p. 678.

way of seeing others is challenged and re-formed. Here Gadamer's emphasis on the communal dimensions of aesthetic experience contrasts sharply with modern aesthetics' stress on the subject's individual (in particular, pleasurable) reaction to a particular work. Given that one's subjectivity is historically, culturally, and socially shaped, we should expect that eminent works such as Bearden's – works that present a subject matter in an especially poignant and unprecedented way – will speak not only to me but to others likewise shaped. In short, art's nature as event requires the active participatory involvement of subjects conditioned by already established (yet always dynamic) hermeneutical horizons. Such participation involves a purposed being-present-with-the-other – an *ecstasis* in which, as Davey puts it, “subjects are drawn out of their sense of singularity and are forced to recognize if not yield to the collective dimensions of their being.”<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, the materiality of Bearden's collages – from the torn edges and varied textures of the amalgamated figures to the juxtaposition and conjoining of the African masks with African American symbols – plays an important role in art's address. That is, not just “what” is represented but also “how” it is represented speaks art's truth and facilitates the development of a subject matter. That the figures are (re)constructed of torn (and already socially constructed photographic) images rather than simply painted with smooth, sharply defined lines “says” something about the experience of African Americans in a racialized context. The photographs of African Americans were no doubt shaped in some way – whether taken by white or black photographers – that is, by a “white gaze” that includes, among other things, the dominant culture's ideas of beauty, success, sexuality, and so forth. By tearing these images from their context in a particular magazine and reconstructing them with African masks, berets, and other meaningful symbols, Bearden communicates a polysemous message about the struggle both to expose and dislodge unjust depictions of African Americans and to re-present them more accurately.

To summarize, in stark contrast to the dualism of aesthetic differentiation, Gadamer's notion of aesthetic non-differentiation unites inextricably form and content – after all, this is how we experience art, as a gathered unity that speaks to us in and through an exceptionally poignant arrangement of symbols, textures, figures, and sounds.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, art is an instance of what Gadamer calls linguisticality (*Sprachlichkeit*).

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26 N. Davey, *Unfinished Worlds...*, op. cit., p. 47.

27 Gadamer's notion of linguisticality (*Sprachlichkeit*).

Although this notion is often misunderstood, linguisticality consists in the speculative capacity of words, symbols, bodily gestures, images, musical sounds, and the like to communicate meanings beyond themselves. Thus, linguisticality is a broad concept that encompasses significantly more than verbal or written language. As Gadamer makes explicit in an interview with Jean Grondin, "Language in words is only a special concretion of linguisticality."<sup>28</sup> So here we return with a clearer understanding to Gadamer's claim (with which Bearden would agree) that art addresses or speaks to us. Art speaks to us not through words or by being translated into words or reduced to propositions; rather, art's material content, given its art-ful arrangement of symbols, figures, colors, and sounds, all of which arise from and are shaped by broader historical and cultural horizons, communicates something meaningful. Moreover, these broader horizons of meaning make possible the work's (particular) meaning and can in turn influence and (re)shape the horizons from which it emerges. In short, what Gadamer claims about the speculative capacity of words applies equally to artworks, since both are instances of linguisticality. Both words and artworks carry with them "the unsaid" of multiple horizons of meaning – horizons that both transcend the particular words or work in view and make possible their communicative address. Davey nicely encapsulates Gadamer's notion of the speculative dimensions of *Sprachlichkeit*: "The speculative capacity of a word mirrors or reflects the horizon of meaning that its sense depends on. [...] When Gadamer speaks of an artwork or poem 'bringing forth' a world, what is brought forth is not a world *ex nihilo* but that unexpressed world which prefigures the possibility of all speaking."<sup>29</sup>

## V. Gadamer On Participatory Aesthetic Engagement, Self-Understanding, and Tragedy

As the previous sections have indicated, for Gadamer art is a communal, dynamic, and revelatory event requiring the spectator or auditor's active participation. It involves a call and response, or to use Gadamer's terms, an interactive dialogical "play" between the work and the interpreter. As

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28 H.-G. Gadamer, "Collected Works and Their Effective History," 420.

29 N. Davey, *Unfinished Worlds...*, op. cit., p. 145. See also, H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 458 [WM, 462].

an other, the work calls out to us – revealing, bearing witness – and as Bearden’s art confirms, it demands a response from those who have ears to hear. In fact, the title of volume 8 of Gadamer’s *Collected Works* is *Kunst als Aussage* and can be translated “Art as Message” or “Art as Testimony.” Thus, art as *Aussage* seeks and requires an actively engaged hearer or viewer. It calls out and expects thoughtful engagement. This emphasis on art’s otherness and its capacity to communicate truth allows Gadamer to develop what we might call “participatory aesthetic engagement.” Here the spectator is drawn into the event of art through a decided act of being-with-the work-as-other. In order to attend to the work in this way, the participant must lose herself in the work, as one loses oneself in a captivating conversation, a ritual celebration, or a religious ceremony.<sup>30</sup> This type of self-forgetting is positive and productive, as it has the potential to increase one’s self-understanding which, for Gadamer, is always a self-understanding in relation to others and one’s world and is thus conditioned by communal practices, traditions, and discourses. As Gadamer explains, “Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity [*Selbigkeit*] of the other. Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported [*hineinverzaubert*] for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it...”<sup>31</sup> As we saw earlier in Gadamer’s critique of aesthetic differentiation, here too his emphasis on the participatory, event-character of art speaks against the subject-object division of modern aesthetics. Just as the participant does not control the game or the religious ritual but instead is drawn into its life, spirit, and being, so too with the event of art. Rather than approach it as an object to be controlled, we approach it as an other whose message calls out to us and is worthy of our attention. As we open ourselves to its world, we come to see our world in a different light.

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30 For Gadamer’s discussion of the concept play, see *Truth and Method*, esp. 101–110. [*WM*, 107–116]. For a helpful discussion of play as medial, see J. Sallis, “The Hermeneutics of the Artwork”, [in:] *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Wahrheit und Methode*, ed. G. Figal, *Klassiker Auslegen* 30, Berlin 2007, pp. 45–57, esp. 50–51.

31 H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, 97. [*WM*, 102]. For an extended discussion of self-understanding and self-forgetting, see Gadamer’s essay entitled, “On the Problem of Self-Understanding,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. D.E. Ling, Berkeley 1977, pp. 44–58.

Here I want to return to Bearden's montage technique in order to underscore one final connection with Gadamer's reflections on art and its ability to communicate and disclose truth through its artful materiality. In Bearden's act of gathering given photographic images of African Americans – images conditioned by the racialized discourses of his day – and then tearing them into fragments, and reassembling them into a unified whole, he engages in a double act of negation and affirmation. As Kobena Mercer observes, this interplay of negation and affirmation allows Bearden to unite his artistic explorations with his sociopolitical concerns. Bearden's "cut or the paper tear" became both "a stylistic signature and a mark of critical discrepancy between different regimes of representation."<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, we have the negative moment wherein Bearden de-constructs and annuls the stereotypes of black Americans as found in the photojournalism of the 1930s.<sup>33</sup> Here African Americans are depicted as despondent, passive, impoverished, and culturally bereft. On the other, we have the affirmative moment wherein Bearden reconfigures his subjects as active, communal, creative, and possessing a mysterious depth.

To illustrate the point more specifically, I turn to Bearden's famous montage painting, "The Dove"<sup>34</sup> (1964), in which he creatively and strategically re-presents Harlem's inhabitants. As one views the work, one is drawn into a neighborhood alive with movement: some people are coming, others going, while others sit to smoke and gather their thoughts. Amidst the figures pieced together from disparate photographic fragments of various proportions, a unified whole emerges. Upon closer inspection, we see that nearly all of the "pieced-together" individuals are placed in such a way that they touch at least one other person. At the center of the painting we find a man gazing contemplatively out of an entryway. A white dove – traditionally a sign of peace – perches on the ledge above him, apprehensively eyeing a *white* cat prowling on the sidewalk below.

The fragmented images, multiple perspectives, and rich textures point to a complexity, depth, and reality that both exceed and annul the hollowness of the original photographic images. Yet these images and

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32 K. Mercer, op. cit., p. 39.

33 On the photojournalism of the 1930s and how it negatively depicted American Americans, see K. Mercer, op. cit., esp. p. 40. See also, L.S. Glazer, op. cit., esp. p. 421–23.

34 Bearden's work, "The Dove," can be viewed at the following website: [http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/show\\_fullscreen.php?item=17b\\_1&desc=The%20Dove%2057](http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/show_fullscreen.php?item=17b_1&desc=The%20Dove%2057).

symbols have histories. The familiar white dove qua symbol of peace juxtaposed with a prowling *white* (rather than “unlucky” black) cat – both placed in a predominantly African American neighborhood during a time when racial strife was particularly elevated – simultaneously draw upon already established discourses, traditions, and meanings and bring them to bear on present social realities. That is, the work gathers together familiar symbols and creates new associations, which “speak” to us both meaningfully and powerfully.<sup>35</sup> Again we see that art’s address and ability to communicate truth presupposes a prior acquaintance with meaningful symbols, traditions, and practices, which condition and inform our present engagement with the work.

Lastly, Bearden’s art not only embodies a unified view of form and content but also shows how shared or enduring aspects of human experience can be communicated through particular works whose contents are historically specific. As Ellison explains, through Bearden’s presentation of black life and experience in America, we are confronted with “something of the universal elements of an abiding human condition.”<sup>36</sup> In an essay entitled, “Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings,” Bearden himself echoes Ellison’s point. First, he describes how his process of fracturing and integrating hands, eyes, and other fragments from preexisting materials into a different pictorial space transforms and transfigures the originals, freeing the previously fixed images for new life and expression. Reflecting further on his work, Bearden writes, “often something specific and particular can have its meaning extended toward what is more general and universal but never at the expense of the total structure.”<sup>37</sup>

These considerations offer a perfect segue to Gadamer’s thoughts on how tragedy affects and implicates the spectator. For Gadamer, our experience of the artwork, like that of the festival or ritual, involves the spectator’s ecstatic and active participation. The engaged participant enters into dialogical play with the work, wherein the work’s message, meaning, and truth is integrated and applied in the present. Gadamer calls this mode of interacting with the work “contemporaneity,” which

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35 This is not to claim that what I have described is the *only* possible meaning of the work. The artwork’s ontology is dynamic and its possible meanings are forever in excess of particular interpretations at any give time. Likewise, its communal event-character indicates that multiple interpretations are always possible.

36 R. Ellison, *op. cit.*, p. 676.

37 R. Bearden, *op. cit.*, pp. 291–300, here 298.



starkly contrasts with the simultaneity of aesthetic differentiation. In the former notion, the engaged participant *achieves* contemporaneity – which, as Gadamer explains is “a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it.”<sup>38</sup> That is, the spectator or auditor must intentionally and creatively bring the world and message of the work to bear on her world. Gadamer continues, “[f]or it is the truth of our own world – the religious and moral [*sittlichen*] world in which we live – that is presented before us and in which we recognize ourselves.”<sup>39</sup> Like Bearden, Gadamer affirms that truths and shared, enduring aspects of the human condition can be communicated through a work’s particular content. If one lingers with a work and attends to its message and the truths it embodies – such as our need for genuine recognition, our longing for justice in the face of inequity, our human proclivity for ritual, and the complexity of our social realities – these truths can be meaningfully brought to bear on one’s present world.

This kind of active spectatorial (or perhaps better, participatory) involvement is exemplified by one’s encounter with tragic drama. For Gadamer, Aristotle’s thoughts on tragedy are exemplary and are still applicable today. According to Gadamer, that Aristotle includes the effect on the spectator in his definition of tragedy is a significant contribution to “aesthetic” theory. Gadamer develops Aristotle’s insight in his own emphasis on the spectator’s participatory engagement as an essential feature of art’s ontology. When a spectator truly enters into a tragic drama, he or she does not “stand aloof” but actively participates in the event, affirming the overwhelming and disproportionate consequences emerging from a particular course of action. As Gadamer explains, “[t]he spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate.”<sup>40</sup> To participate in this way is not to “affirm the tragic course of events as such, or the justice of the fact that overtakes the hero.”<sup>41</sup> Rather, it is to come to see that we all experience, take part in, and suffer as the result of decisions and actions – some of which we have no control over – and that such actions have tremendous consequences for us, our loved ones, and our communities. To be affected by the work in this way and to achieve contemporaneity with its claims is to grow in self- and

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38 H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, 127. [*WM*, 132].

39 Ibidem, p. 128. [*WM*, 133].

40 H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, 132. [*WM*, 137].

41 Ibidem.

world-knowledge; it is to be awakened to the reality of the “harsh poetry” of the human condition.<sup>42</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

Bearden’s art and thought, as we have seen, shares several continuities with Gadamer’s reflections. For both Bearden and Gadamer, artworks are not silent objects confined to their own time and place; rather, they call out to us and await a response. They invite us to linger with them and require that we listen to their “poetry” and translate their message into our world. For both, the materiality and particularities of a work are essential aspects of a work and play an important role in its communicative address. As we highlighted, Bearden’s message is not only communicated through the poignant arrangement of meaningful symbols and figures, but also through the *meaning*-ful tears, cuts, and various textures of his collages.<sup>43</sup> Yet the particularity and historical conditioning of the work is no barrier to its speaking in the present and confronting us with difficult truths about justice, tragedy, and the shared concerns of our human condition.

Before closing, I want to mention briefly one final aspect of Bearden’s work that is consonant with Gadamer’s thought but also enriches it. In Bearden’s works we encounter the complexity and depth of social realities and human being-in-the-world-with-others. Not only would Bearden agree with Grondin’s statement that for Gadamer art “induces a transfiguration of the real, in the revelatory sense of the word,”<sup>44</sup> but he would also add that art’s transfiguring of the real often requires a simultaneous act of dismantling negative and harmful images informed by social narratives, discourses, practices, and traditions. That is, in order to transfigure the world so that we might see it with “new eyes,” art must at times disavow and deconstruct the distorted images that have been tak-

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42 On tragedy, contemporaneity, and spectatorial participation, see also, J. Grondin, “Truth of Art,” pp. 46–48. Grondin brings these themes together nicely when he states: “Tragedy, emblematic of all art, always implies a confrontation with yourself. The spectator finds himself led back to his own reality, to the tragedy of destiny and of existence” (48).

43 Of course, one would not truly enter into the work if one merely focused (formally or abstractly) on the materiality of the work and/or concerned oneself only with the artist’s technique.

44 J. Grondin, “Truth of Art,” p. 43.

en as true, natural, and real. Bearden's art does just that (and more) and thus opens a space for what we might call "de-fabricating-the-world."

In other words, Bearden's work not only presents us with a world and its inhabitants, but it also challenges us to think differently about that world and our relation to it. Here Bearden's art, so to speak, "lives" in the in-between. On the one hand, the painting draws us into the life and experiences of African Americans in Harlem in the mid-twentieth century. Such an experience was, as the fragmented figures and torn edges suggest, one of struggle, pain, and difficulty. On the other hand, the inhabitants exhibit a depth, beauty, and communal energy, all of which speak against the dominant discourses and negative stereotypes of black Americans at that time. Thus, the work confronts us with an already-not-yet testimony (*Aussage*) and invites us to enter into the not-yet (here the de-fabricated and re-fabricated depiction of African Americans as creative sociopolitical and cultural contributors worthy of respect and equal opportunities for human flourishing).

The "gap" between present social reality with its negative views of African Americans and the work's truer depiction suggests that (in at least some cases) the work is proleptic. That is, the more complete or transformed social reality that the artwork embodies, although not fully realized, is nonetheless, in some small way, present now. For example, Bearden's collage confronts the viewer with the complexity, profundity, and creativity of African Americans – a message based on his own witness of and interactions with black communities. However, given the extensive and entrenched racialized social world in which Bearden lived, a new and truer way of seeing black Americans was not yet a present reality, but only a future hope. Thus, in Bearden's double movement of negation and affirmation, an important activity of our being in an "out-of-joint" world is revealed: the activity of de-fabricating and dislodging distorted images and narratives that have become sedimented and are hence taken as true, natural, and even necessary.

It is precisely here that Bearden's art offers a valuable supplement to Gadamer's account by expanding it in ways that help us better understand ourselves, others, and the social realities that we make and by which we are made. Gadamer, like Heidegger, speaks often of world-building and how this process is ongoing. Although both acknowledge our thrownness and facticity and regularly deconstruct and reinvent traditional philosophical concepts, neither foreground the need for "de-fabricating one's world" – that is, the need to expose and re-form oppressive

discourses and practices that constitute social worlds. Consequently, by bringing Bearden's approach to art into conversation with Gadamer (and Heidegger) and allowing his works to reveal their truth (*aletheia*), we discover a fundamental activity of our being-in-the-all-too-human-world, viz., "world-de-fabricating." Here the conflictual relationship is truly conflictual, and, unlike Heidegger's description of the *po-lemos* between world and earth, this world-to-world strife is not only discordant but injuriously out-of-tune.<sup>45</sup> What is fixed in place through racialized discourses and practices becomes rigidly fixed. The resultant racialized world creates a context in which the dominant group is empowered and thrives, while the subjugated group(s) is either exploited or denied opportunities for human flourishing. Whatever setting forth occurs in the construction of a racialized world is a setting forth into concealment with detrimental and often deadly consequences. In short, in Bearden's act of un-fabricating the world, the hiddenness of the truth is neither the result of Being hiding itself (Heidegger) nor our human finitude (Gadamer). Rather, it has everything to do with something having gone awry in the human heart, which then, through our collective discourses and practices, takes on a life of its own. Thankfully, art's truth has something to say to that as well.

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