

Gadamer on the Event of Art, the Other, and a Gesture Toward a Gadamerian Approach to Avant-Garde Jazz

Abstract

Several prominent contemporary philosophers, including Habermas, Caputo, and Bernasconi, have at times painted a 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 later works on our experience of art into conversation with his philosophical hermeneutics, we are able to better assess the viability of his philosophy in contemporary discussions of difference and alterity.

Sections two–five are devoted to (1) explaining key concepts in Gadamer's account of our experience of art and art's dynamic ontology and (2) highlighting how difference and the other's enigmatic dimensions are upheld and integral to Gadamer's account. In section six, I gesture toward a Gadamerian approach to avant-garde jazz, which underscores Gadamer's openness to new expressions of art and alterity.

KEYWORDS: Gadamer and alterity, Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics, Gadamer and avant-garde jazz, hermeneutic identity, art's dynamic ontology, tarrying with a work, Gadamer on contemporaneity, Gadamer and tradition

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 depict Gadamer as naïve regarding the role of power and distorted discourses in forming and maintaining traditions and institutions. Caputo, for example, suggests that Gadamer belongs among those philosophers who "cannot tolerate the ambiguity of the flux."¹ Robert Bernasconi argues that Gadamer's understanding of dialogue and the analyses he tends to foreground "have the common feature of diminishing alterity."² With these critical claims in mind, I aim to show how Gadamer's reflections on art exhibit a genuine openness to and appreciation for

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.

alterity not unrelated to his hermeneutical approach to the other. Thus, by bringing Gadamer's later works on our experience of art into conversation with his philosophical hermeneutics, we are able to better assess the viability of Gadamer's philosophy in contemporary discussions of difference and alterity.

The bulk of my essay—sections two through five—is devoted to explaining key concepts in Gadamer's account of our experience of art and art's dynamic ontology. Such concepts include the play structure of art, hermeneutic identity, tarrying with a work, and contemporaneity. However, I do more than elucidate these important themes. In addition, I draw attention to the various ways in which difference and the other's enigmatic dimensions are upheld and even integral to Gadamer's account. In section six, I gesture toward what a Gadamerian approach to free or avant-garde jazz might "look like." In so doing, I hope to make clear that a Gadamerian approach to art ought *not* be characterized as part of a larger traditionalist hermeneutical project that silences the voice of the other. Rather, Gadamer's philosophical project takes seriously the other's alterity and creates the possibility for the other to come forth, address, and even transform one's world.

II. Play and the Play Structure of Art

Play or the structure of play is central to Gadamer's account of both hermeneutics and the ontology and phenomenology of art. In his analyses of the play structure of games as well as the play of art, Gadamer emphasizes the active engagement of the spectator or auditor. That is, not only do the players

play the game, but also the audience “plays along” and thus participates in the movement or life of the game. Whether this takes the form of a mother watching her children toss a ball back and forth or a baseball fan jumping out of his seat to see whether the batter’s hit cleared the outfield wall, there is genuine sense of “playing with” on the part of those observing the game or playful activity. The audience member, in other words, is not a distanced spectator but an active participant, who, like the player, both contributes to and is simultaneously “caught up” in the game’s life.

Similarly in the play of art, the viewer or listener engages in a back and forth movement or active interplay with the work, which, in the case of art, allows the work to emerge in a communicative event. As Gadamer observes, in the play of art something comes forth—something that is, on the one hand, “*intended as something*” and, on the other, its meaning is not reducible to concepts nor is its activity coordinated for some utility function.³ Moreover, the

³ 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*.

movement involved in the play of art is not completed in a further, external goal or purpose outside itself.

III. Hermeneutic Identity and Tarrying with the Work

The play structure of art as well as the spectator's active participation in art's unfolding constitute essential moments in the event of art, which is another way of speaking of art's dynamic ontology and temporal structure. 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. To prepare for these topics, I turn first to Gadamer's analyses of art's dynamic ontology, paying special attention to his notions of hermeneutic identity and tarrying with a work.

Hermeneutic identity claims that the work's identity necessarily involves difference and thus always entails an openness to future possibilities, which allow for multiple presentations or enactments of the work over time.⁴ More

⁴ 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.

specifically, for Gadamer, the being of an artwork is inseparable from its presentations, as the various presentations bring out new dimensions of the work's reality. Enactment or presentation is thus an essential feature of an artwork's being. Phenomenologically speaking, art exists in presentation and performance. Thus, art as experienced requires others and is necessarily communal. The notes on the page are silent without a performer to give them life. Likewise, the musician, painter, or sculptor creates his or her work to convey something to someone, which is why the work is displayed or performed in a concert hall or an outdoor gathering.

That hermeneutic identity is infused with difference does not mean that a performer or interpreter can simply impose random or arbitrary meanings on the work. To do so would be to silence the work or do violence to the work's integrity or structure. In short, it would be to disregard the other's alterity. Nor does hermeneutic identity mean that interpretations or performances cannot be judged regarding their quality. For instance, 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, every presentation has a relation 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.”⁵ At the same time, the work itself—its very being—is constituted by a built-in indeterminacy or openness to future possibilities enabling new dimensions of the work to come forth 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 manifest. 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. To the contrary, future performances of a work often bring out a depth and richness not manifest in the original. John Coltrane’s performance of the popular Broadway tune, “My Favorite Things,” is one such example. 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

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 122. (Hereafter, *TM*.) [Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Gesammelte Werke Band 1, 4. Auflage (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1975), 116. Hereafter, *WM*.]

Broadway performance and John Coltrane's performance, 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.⁶ In order 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 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 reduplicate as closely as possible the original. Thus, its essence is self-erasure or self-effacement; it points not to itself and its particularity 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.”⁷ A copy's self-effacement indicates its function as a means, not an end. Its independent existence serves this very purpose of self-erasure. In contrast, a picture's essence is not self-erasure, nor does it function as a means to some other end. The picture points to itself and *how* it presents its subject-matter. In other words, “one is not simply directed away from the picture to what is

⁶ Ibid., *TM*, 140. Italics in original. [*WM*, 133.]

⁷ Ibid., *TM*, 138. [*WM*, 131.]

represented. Rather, the presentation remains essentially connected to what is represented [Die Darstellung bleibt vielmehr mit dem Dargestellten wesentlich verbunden]—indeed belongs to it.”⁸ Again, instead of a self-cancelling existence and purpose, the picture’s being is autonomous; its being brings out something new in the reality which it depicts; thus, the picture is more than a mere copy or reduplication of an original; it belongs to the being of the original and expands its being.⁹

To illustrate further, consider again Coltrane’s version of “My Favorite Things.” Coltrane’s performance of the piece is the reality or end to which we are directed. That is, his performance is not a self-effacing copy, nor a sign pointing beyond itself to the original. Rather, Coltrane’s version gives us the reality of 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 (for example, more complex rhythms, harmonies, improvised solos etc.). Yet we identify the performance as a performance of “My Favorite Things.” Coltrane’s

⁸ Ibid., *TM*, 139. [*WM*, 132.]

⁹ 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.

intention was never to merely reduplicate the original, but 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. In short, a work's being is increased in the event of art's unfolding over time in various enactments that bring forth new articulations of the work.¹⁰ The work lives, as it were, only in its presentations, performances, and interpretations.

Thus far I have established that even though the same work is repeated in each new enactment, the subsequent enactments are not mere copies of an original and thus are not understood as ontologically inferior imitations. Instead, Gadamer's 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 and open possibilities; on the other, it speaks of an identifiable structure that emerges in the communicative event of art's appearance. As Gadamer puts it, "[t]o understand [Verstehende] something, I must be able to identify it. For there was something there that I passed judgment upon and

¹⁰ Gadamer says that his notion of a work's "increase in being" through future performances is analogous to the ontological relation that characterizes "an emanation of the original" in Neoplatonic thought. See *TM*, 140. [*WM*, 133.]

‘understood’ [verstand].”¹¹ 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 that requires a response.¹² Here again the emphasis is on the active, engaged listener or spectator. That is, in order to experience a work of art as a communicative event, one must actively participate—one must “play along with” (*mitspielt*) it.¹³

The listener must comport herself to the work as other expecting something

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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).

¹³ 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.

meaningful to come forth. If the viewer or listener approaches the work having already decided that the work has no value and thus nothing to say, the work will remain silent. Art is a dynamic, communal event; its happening or occasioning can be thwarted or foreclosed when we comport ourselves to the other in an attitude of closedness. The same is true of our hermeneutical encounters with others—whether texts or human beings.

B. Tarrying as Ecstatic Participation

Another important theme in Gadamer's reflections on our experience of art is his notion of tarrying or lingering with a work. Here the idea is that one is 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, that is, outside herself. This ecstatic way of being should not be understood as a mere passive or private condition; 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].¹⁴

Thus, 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 world unchanged. To the contrary, one's world and way of being-in-the-world-with-others is affected and 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 tarries with the work, one experiences *both* a self-forgetfulness due to one's fully-being-there with the work *and* a self-enrichment by way of a world-expansion. As Gadamer puts it, "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.]¹⁵ Thus we see that the spectator's absorbed engagement with the work allowing the work to come forth is an achievement; it takes effort to be "wholly with something else." As Daniel Tate explains, "[t]he being present proper to the spectator is therefore the ecstatic

¹⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 126. [*WM*, 119.]

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, *TM*, 128. I have slightly modified the English translation. The italicized word indicates my modification. *WM*, 122.]

condition of being entirely immersed in the work. This genuine way of being in the moment is the disclosive comportment proper to the spectator as one who lets the work present itself.”¹⁶

IV. Contemporaneity and the Work’s Full Presence *and*

Nontransparency

It is not by accident that Gadamer employs the term “claim,” which Søren Kierkegaard developed in conjunction with his theological reflections on contemporaneity. As observed earlier, a claim is not fleeting but lasting, enforceable, and is “concretized in a demand.”¹⁷ For example, when the Gospel is preached, the hearer is presented with a claim of faith and must respond. Here the words themselves, in a way analogous to the sacraments, bring the reality of the past into the present such that the one who receives what is given is transformed, renewed, or challenged—his *world* and his view of *others* is altered. However, the hearer of the Gospel message is not a mere passive recipient. He receives the word; yet he must translate and apply the message of salvation to his particular situation. This type of translation, application, or, as James Risser puts it, “concretization of meaning that defines the present

¹⁶ 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, here 104.

¹⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 127. [*WM*, 120.]

enactment,”¹⁸ is what Gadamer means when employs the term, *Anwendung*, which is often translated into English as “appropriation.” That is, when Gadamer claims that every interpretation is an *Anwendung*, he draws attention to the performative or *Vollzug* dimension of hermeneutic experience. *Anwendung* is thus a “form of practice,”¹⁹ in which one learns how to properly listen to voice of the other so that the other’s claims can be made to bear meaningfully in the present. The result is not, as Gadamer’s critics suggest, to consume the other,²⁰ but to allow the other’s claims to come forth so that my world, practices, and ways of being might be enriched, challenged, or perhaps radically altered.

Gadamer’s emphasis on play, art’s address, and our being drawn in and even arrested by the work can be understood as 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 emerging. In his explication of art’s address,

¹⁸ James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other. Re-Reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 103.

¹⁹ 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).

²⁰ See, for example, Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 115.

Gadamer repeatedly underscores the artwork's ability to address us directly.

Here the immediacy of our experience of art is stressed. Importantly, the work's ability to address me in a communicative event is not dependent upon my knowledge of the particular social and historical factors in which it first emerged.

As Tate observes, the artwork exhibits a "paradoxical temporality."²¹ That is, its temporality is "marked by an immediate presentness in time and at the same time by a rising above time."²² This ability to come forth in the present and communicate meaning in different historical periods should not be equated with timelessness or denial of art's social and historical conditioning. Artworks (and texts) are historically shaped; they arise, participate in, and belong to various traditions.²³ However, art's being as enactment (*Vollzug*) means that in future presentations and performances, the reality of the work itself—not a copy or

²¹ Tate, "In the Fullness of Time," 99.

²² 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.

²³ 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.

lesser derivative—comes forth. The new performance *is* the work in its “increased” or expanded being.

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 aesthetic experience with a painting or a musical work is dialogical and thus by definition requires that the voice of the other be heard. I must allow the other’s voice to sound in and against my own (dynamic) horizon in order for my world and presumptions to 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 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. Thus, to mute the other’s voice would result in a failed hermeneutic and aesthetic experience. Stated otherwise, Gadamer’s notion of an event-ful experience of art, poetry, and the like expects and even *invites* dissonances to sound and to remain. Along the same lines, one need not conclude that a genuine encounter with art requires exhaustive understanding without remainder. On this point, a musical insight proves helpful. Harmony itself and especially complex or extended harmonies require 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 neither demands that the other become fully transparent nor reduced to my unison voice.

On the one hand, we have Gadamer's stress on the independent presentness (what he calls "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."²⁴ On the other, we ought not interpret the work's ability to present itself in its fullness over time as a denial of the artwork's historical conditioning or (re)emergence from a particular tradition. Here it may be helpful to return to the notion of achievement and discuss how it 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."²⁵ In this passage, Gadamer repeats his claim that the reality of the work is fully

²⁴ Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image," 199.

²⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 127. [*WM*, 121.]

present in its various enactments and presentations over time; the enactments are *not* derivative or lesser realities, nor is the initial presentation the standard by which all future enactments are judged. Then he adds that contemporaneity is an achievement, not a given; it is something that the spectator or auditor must actively bring about. Thus, 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 fully present here and now marks the distinctive temporality of contemporaneity. Here historical distance is not a barrier to the reality or truth of the work shining forth; what comes to presence through spectatorial, auditorial, and performative cooperative activity can be re-contextualized and repeated over time.

Before I close this section, I want to comment upon Gadamer's understanding regarding the 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 is at that particular encounter transparent or able to be exhaustively understood. In Yo-Yo Ma's multiple and masterful performances of Bach's cellos suites; the works are both fully present and actualized for him and for the attuned listener; yet for both the musician playing the piece and the listener, 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; yet its being is not exhaustively grasped in my experience of and participation in it here and now. In other words, the work's "absolute presentness" and my being present with the work

can (and does) readily coexist with the notion of an ongoing interplay of hiddenness and manifestation or, in Heideggarian terms, concealment and unconcealment. That something is genuinely or fully present does not mean that I can or will ever grasp all that it is; my encounter with the reality of its presence might in fact be too much for me. In such a situation, we are both fully “there,” as the event of art unfolds. However, it is often the case that the work *qua* other speaks meaningfully to me, yet I am unable to comprehend its totality.²⁶ 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 opaque and enigmatic aspects.

V. Gadamer’s Openness to Modern Art and a Coda on Tradition

When it comes to contemporary and avant-garde 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 shows its relevance in its ability to listen to the voice of the other and thus to move us beyond the previous horizon-al limits 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 along these lines and expresses a genuine interest in taking seriously the works of modern artists.

²⁶ 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.²⁷

Gadamer's phenomenological reflections on art are not focused on what particular artworks as such mean—that is, how one ought to understand and interpret their content. Rather, his aim is to analyze the conditions or structures of aesthetic experience and to clarify “how aesthetic experience is both involved in something larger than itself and, indeed reflects (*speculum*) that larger actuality within itself.”²⁸

Before transitioning to my gesture toward a Gadamerian approach to avant-garde jazz, I want to say a few words 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 our traditions and the practices and norms they embody. As complex, socially constructed human artifacts, traditions

²⁷ Gadamer, *RB*, 22. [GW8, 113].

²⁸ Davey, Nicholas, "Gadamer's Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/gadamer-aesthetics/>.

exhibit a dynamic stability. That is, they can and do congeal for certain periods of time and thus manifest a staying power; yet they are not rigidly fixed. Rather, 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 my consideration of free jazz that follows, I discuss specific ways in which this process of transforming musical traditions and practices occurred in the transition from bebop and hard bop to avant-garde 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 one’s own tradition. For example, 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. Such creative uses (*Anwendungen*) of others’ voices are not understood as violent or consuming acts. Quite the opposite, 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 voice of the other 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 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.”²⁹

VI. A Gadamerian Approach to Avant-Garde or Free Jazz

By way of review, one of the key features constituting our aesthetic experience is the spectator’s or listener’s active participation. Also significant are Gadamer’s notion 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 paragraphs that follow, I highlight how these fundamental aspects of Gadamer’s account manifest in free jazz. In light of my analyses, I conclude that a Gadamerian approach to free jazz allows the voice of the other to sound in its alterity and thus demonstrates an openness to the other that creates the possibility for self and world questioning and even transformation.

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 and musician now recognized as a pioneer or exemplar of free jazz instantiate diverse expressions of the genre. Even so, Ekkehard Jost highlights a “point of agreement” among free jazz groups, namely, they sought to subvert and even negate signature practices and norms of traditional jazz that carried over into bebop and hard bop.³⁰ In particular, free

²⁹ Gadamer, *RB*, 49 [GW8, 139].

³⁰ Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: De Capo Press, 1994), 9.

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 contrast to traditional jazz, where “the primary purpose of the theme or tune is to provide a harmonic and metrical framework as a basis for improvisation. In free jazz, which does not observe fixed patterns of bars or functional harmony, this purpose no longer exists.”³¹

Thus, both the form and content of free jazz pieces are highly particular, consisting neither in typical jazz harmonic sequences (II-V-I etc.) nor in common structural frameworks (for example, the AABA form). As a consequence, one cannot continue to recycle standard chord changes and simply write a new theme, which was a common practice until the New Thing began to challenge these accepted jazz norms. For example, 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 collective and highly 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.”³²

³¹ Ibid., 153.

³² Ibid., 23.

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 ever-changing rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic elements of the work. This creates a dynamic composition in which collective conversation is 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.³³ Rather, the works are "compositions in sound that grow from the spontaneous interaction of [the] musicians."³⁴ 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. 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

³³ When no discernable melody is present, the musical piece exhibits the aural equivalent of an abstract painting. Here the sounds, rhythms, and aural textures and densities are foreground and in a sense become "thematic," just as in a Kandinsky painting, line, point, and color are thematized.

³⁴ Jost, *Free Jazz*, 64.

involved in collective improvisation. That is, 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.³⁵ Given that one's presumptions may be exposed as inadequate, misguided, or radically challenged, one entering a Gadamerian dialogue also takes a risk and makes him or herself vulnerable.

Having sketched and discussed certain key aspects of some expressions of free jazz, I now turn to highlight socio-political factors that impacted the artists and their 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.³⁶ Not only did such practices affect the personal

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ 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).

and communal lives of the musicians, but also the music itself was impacted. For example, 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 brief breaks in between.³⁷ Such pre-set time frames calculated for monetary benefits rather than creating the maximal conditions for artistic exploration were not well suited for 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. Thus, in order to pursue their aesthetic aims, the musicians created the loft movement and performed their music in large loft apartments within their own local communities.³⁸ In such a setting, the musicians were able to develop their art and to allow the music to carry them for as long as the group collectively agreed.

³⁷ John D. Baskerville, “Free Jazz: A Reflection of Black Power Ideology,” *Journal of Black Studies* 24 (1994): 484–497, here 488.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 489.

The acknowledgement of 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, for example, recognizes how cultural and sociopolitical narratives impact 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.³⁹ These aspects are an important part of the work's being, and knowledge of this history provides one with a fuller understanding of and appreciation for the work and the artists. Yet, given Gadamer's understanding of art as a communicative event, a lack of knowledge of the work's sociopolitical conditioning, neither silences the work nor prevents its ongoing "increase in being."⁴⁰ As an other with an independent existence, a musical work such as Coltrane's *Offering* can address, challenge, and make a claim on me, even if I am ignorant of its sociopolitical history. Attentive, anticipatory, and ecstatic listening is thus demanded not only of the musicians but is also demanded of me as an active audience member. Here again Gadamer's phenomenological analysis of art's play-structure proves helpful. Like the players in a game who lose themselves as the game plays them; free jazz similarly plays both the music-makers and the listeners, as each

³⁹ See, for example, *RB*, 6–7 [*GW*8, 97–8].

⁴⁰ However, a lack of such knowledge would impoverish the listener's grasp of the work's extended "horizon."

are absorbed through their active presence in the unfolding movement of the piece.

Lastly, just as the musicians themselves must be intensely engaged and committed to the risks of the (musical) game as they press musical norms and respond to the other players' moves, so too my engagement with the work demands a commitment to listen even when I find aspects of the work disturbing and undecipherable. That is, a Gadamerian engagement with free jazz does not require that I fully comprehend every aspect or meaning that a particular piece expresses. Here the work's otherness and enigmatic dimensions are respected. That is, a Gadamerian approach to art allows—and even expects—the work to manifest itself and speak to me as other *in its otherness*. This comfort with the mystery of the other is, in part, what Gadamer means when he describes the *seeming* “speechless [verstummt] language” of modern art as nonetheless its own sort of speech.⁴¹

VII. Conclusion

To sum things up, Gadamer's stress on a work's event-character means that not only is the work always open “toward the spectator so that he or she is taken up in the dynamic of the work's self-presentation,”⁴² but the work also retains a hermeneutic identity that allows it to stand as an other with something to say. The work's ability to communicate is neither dependent upon my

⁴¹ See Gadamer, *RB*, 83 and 88. [*GW*8, 313 and 319].

⁴² Tate, “The Speechless Image,” 59.

knowledge of its socio-political conditioning nor upon my understanding exhaustively its being or meaning(s). Rather, as an other with an ever-unfolding life, it emerges and makes claims on me in the aesthetic event characteristic of all art. As is the case when I enter into dialogue with a human other, so too with the work of art I will never grasp all that the other is. In other words, Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics is rather "at home" with the enigmatic and nontransparent aspects of human others, texts, and works of art. Furthermore, as I properly comport myself to the work—itsself an ethical commitment—I become absorbed in the work, dwelling with it and attuning myself to its language. My being fully present with it such that it reveals itself to me is completely consonant with its simultaneous concealment. That is, as I intentionally enter into the back-and-forth play with the work, certain aspects of the work come forth. However, at the very same time, other aspects and meanings are concealed and remain enigmatic. Given our finitude, this incomplete yet genuine experience of an artwork's being and meaning is expected. In addition, my partial understanding of the work (or human other) is likewise unsurprising given the complexity and intrinsic opacity of the other's being. That is, as Augustine might say—and Gadamer would agree—we humans are enigmas to ourselves. Our own self-understanding unfolds in time, over time, and in conversation with others, yet it never reaches a final clarity. Such is the human condition as well as our hermeneutical condition. That our dialogical encounters with others will also be of a both/and, dialectical, and unfolding character is completely consonant with Gadamer's hermeneutical project. On

the one hand, when a genuine dialogue occurs, I come to understand the subject matter better, whether or not overall agreement occurs. If my dialogue is with a living human being, I may even come to understand him or her better. Yet, I will never come to an exhaustive understanding of him or her, even if we are lifetime friends and regular dialogue partners. A similar situation exists with great paintings, musical works, and poetry. As I return to contemplate such works over the course of a lifetime, I gain new insights, new ways of seeing the work. However, no single interpretation, nor all of my interpretations combined, will ever exhaust the work's meaning.

In closing, contra Gadamer's critics, difference is not primarily a problem to solve or overcome; rather, both difference and sameness are equiprimordial. Although Gadamer does not thematize exploitative and oppressive social relations in which true dialogue never takes place and the goal is simply to eradicate difference, his philosophical project is in no way fundamentally hostile to difference.⁴³ On the contrary, as I have attempted to show, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and reflections on art contain numerous instances in which difference and otherness are upheld. In its ideal Gadamerian expression, one might say that difference dances with sameness in an ongoing interplay where neither take the lead; instead, they tarry together in a community where

⁴³ 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.

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moves and countermoves are reciprocally recognized, valued, and harmonized
in the truest sense.