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## BEING STRUCK: GADAMER ON THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF ART

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With this article I offer a close reading of Gadamer's *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*. The reason I draw attention to this essay is as a response to criticism aimed at Gadamer's hermeneutic account of art. In its reception, it has occasionally been viewed as too hermeneutical, too focused on understanding. I maintain that *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics* can be considered exempt from this critique. Here, Gadamer offers us the hermeneutic experience in its most aesthetic guise: in *being struck* by the significance of the artwork. The main purpose of this article is to clarify this experience. This task I undertake in two steps. First, I emphasize the aesthetic nature of this experience of "being struck" by the artwork in an answer to Figal's critique. As a supplement to Gadamer's theoretical remarks in *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, I consider the performance piece *Faust* by Anne Imhof. The second step of my argument intends to show that Gadamer does not "reduce" the aesthetic experience to a hermeneutic experience of meaning but *grounds* the experience of art hermeneutically. I will argue for my thesis by closely reconstructing Gadamer's argument in *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*. The guiding question is, what is the significance of this aesthetic experience for Gadamer's hermeneutics? Gadamer conceptually clarifies the experience of "being struck" in terms of the notion of *contemporaneity*. In my interpretation, the experience of art shakes us with a sense of self-implication.

*Keywords:* Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics, aesthetics, art, experience, contemporaneity.

# БУДУЧИ ПОТряСЕННЫМ: ГАДАМЕР ОБ АКТУАЛЬНОСТИ ИСКУССТВА

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В статье я предлагаю внимательное прочтение «Эстетики и герменевтики» Х.-Г. Гадамера. Причина, по которой я обращаю внимание на этот текст — ответ на критику, направленную на герменевтический подход Гадамера к искусству. Он иногда рассматривается как чрезмерно герменевтический, чрезмерно сосредоточенный на понимании. Я собираюсь показать, что «Эстетику и герменевтику» можно избавить от этой критики. Здесь Гадамер предлагает герменевтический опыт в его эстетическом облике: в том, чтобы испытать потрясение от значимости произведения искусства. Эту задачу я решаю в два этапа. Во-первых, в ответ на критику Фигалья я акцентирую внимание на эстетической природе этого переживания. В дополнение к теоретическим замечаниям Гадамера из «Эстетики и герменевтики» я обращаюсь к перформансу «Фауст» Анне Имхоф. Второй шаг моей аргументации состоит в том, чтобы показать, что Гадамер не «сводит» эстетический опыт к герменевтическому опыту смысла, но герменевтически обосновывает опыт искусства. Я буду отстаивать этот тезис, внимательно восстанавливая аргумент Гадамера в «Эстетике и герменевтике». Основной вопрос состоит в следующем: каково значение этого эстетического опыта для герменевтики Гадамера? Гадамер концептуально проясняет переживание «потрясения» в терминах актуальности. В моей интерпретации переживание искусства потрясает нас чувством самотождественности.

*Ключевые слова:* Ханс-Георг Гадамер, герменевтика, эстетика, искусство, опыт, актуальность.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to offer a close reading and interpretation of Gadamer's succinct essay *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*. The reason I draw attention to this text is initially as a response to criticism aimed at Gadamer's hermeneutic account of art. In its reception, it has occasionally been viewed as too hermeneutical, too focused on understanding. In other words, in the difference between hermeneutics and aesthetics—and its associated distinctions (e.g. between understanding and feeling)—it has been maintained that Gadamer sides with understanding, thus downplaying the significance of the aesthetic. I argue that *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics* can, to some extent, be considered exempt from this critique. Here, Gadamer offers us the hermeneutic phenomenon in its most aesthetic guise: in *being struck* by the significance of the artwork.

My argument is centred around this experience of *being struck by the meaning of what is said*, as Gadamer phrases it. In his words, it is an experience of *Betroffenheit*.

The ultimate purpose of this article is to clarify this experience that Gadamer points us to in *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*. This task I undertake in two steps. First, I will focus on this experience as an answer to Figal's critique. I ask, has the aesthetic experience been "hermeneuted," as Figal suggests? In my answer, I will emphasize the aesthetic nature of this experience of "being struck." My argument is that "being struck" constitutes the aesthetic moment of the hermeneutic experience. One can say that Gadamer is talking about the experience of being overwhelmed by the artwork. I will make the most of the rather scant remarks Gadamer offers us in *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics* and supplement his theoretical remarks by considering the performance piece *Faust* by Anne Imhof.

Thus, the first step of my argument aims to show that Gadamer does not disregard the aesthetic element of the experience of art. The second step of my argument, then, aims to show that what Gadamer does is to *ground* the experience of art hermeneutically. I will argue for my thesis by offering a close reading of Gadamer's text, reconstructing his argument. The guiding questions are, what does the experience of "being struck" reveal about the hermeneutic experience? What is the significance of this experience for Gadamer's hermeneutics?

## 2. HAS THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE BEEN "HERMENEUTED"?

The question informing my venture into *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics* is, has the aesthetic experience, in Gadamer's hands, been "hermeneuted"—to borrow Shusterman's (1997, 38) formulation? One could argue that Gadamer's hermeneutics articulates an *aesthetics of truth* (Bubner, 1989; Martin, 2018). The expression is something of an oxymoron. It indicates that art is judged based upon a *perceived truth* and not any *felt* aesthetic qualities as such. One could say that an "aesthetics of truth" is contrary to what we usually have in mind when talking of aesthetic judgements: i.e. if a judgement is based primarily upon a perceived truth, then whether or not the artwork pleases our senses becomes a secondary issue.

So, how does Gadamer handle the aesthetic aspect of the experience of art? Is it discarded with his critique of aesthetic consciousness<sup>1</sup>? I will develop this critical line of questioning by considering Figal's (2016) criticism of Gadamer's account of art. What supposedly questionable aspects does he find in Gadamer's hermeneutic account of art? In short, I would say that Figal is reacting to the tension between hermeneutics and aesthetics that is succinctly present in Gadamer's thesis that "*Aesthetics*

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<sup>1</sup> See also Gadamer (1986a, 112; 1989, 489; 1990, 493).

*has to be absorbed into hermeneutics*” (1989, 164; 1990, 170). Figal’s conclusion is that “the relation of philosophical hermeneutics to aesthetics has to be conceived anew, and in a way that basically differs from Gadamer’s” (Figal, 2016, 224).

How does Figal argue for his position? He claims that Gadamer intertwines the domains of hermeneutics and aesthetics in a way that does not bring us closer to either experience. Figal’s argument revolves around the observation that the aesthetic experience is not always hermeneutical, nor is the hermeneutic experience always aesthetic. There is no necessary overlap. Therefore, according to Figal, it is more purposeful to investigate these experiences separately. He concludes that the aesthetic experience “cannot be reduced to the hermeneutical experience of meaning. Accordingly, aesthetics [...] cannot be included in hermeneutics” (Figal, 2016, 224).

It is certainly true that Gadamer blurs the lines supposedly separating the domains of hermeneutics and aesthetics. However, I think Figal potentially misconstrues Gadamer’s basic line of argument: i.e. the reason these spheres are blurred by Gadamer. Furthermore, I am not sure Gadamer argues for a “reduction” of the experience of art to the hermeneutic experience<sup>2</sup>. I will argue that Gadamer *grounds* the experience of art hermeneutically. This is a fine distinction but just as decisive.

The crucial question Figal brings to the fore is, what do we mean by the *hermeneutical experience of meaning*? What does Figal take this experience to be? What is Gadamer referring to? In other words, the question is, how fundamental is this experience? Does it refer to something such as an experience of the world? Or is it limited to a specific practice: e.g. reading literature? Figal opts for the latter suggestion. Accordingly, he notes that, on the one hand, we have simple ceramic bowls, which are aesthetic objects without a “hermeneutical character,” even though we recognize their utility. On the other hand, there are “complex artworks, which, because of their complexity, are a challenge for understanding” (Figal, 2016, 224). Now, Figal’s distinction is not as crude as that. Nevertheless, the problem with *any* differentiation along these lines is that Gadamer is arguing more generally, more ontologically. One could say that Gadamer is partly articulating an existential hermeneutics—following the hermeneutics of *Sein und Zeit*<sup>3</sup>. However, this is not an uncontroversial claim to make (Grondin, 2001, 82). Nevertheless, it is not difficult to find remarks where Gadamer defends the fundamental nature of the hermeneutic experience. For example, in his “debate” with Ricoeur, Gadamer notes

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<sup>2</sup> However, in Figal’s defence, Gadamer does, in the afterword to *Truth and Method*, make the rather puzzling remark that with the notion of *aesthetic non-differentiation* he aims to distinguish “the real experience of art—which does not experience art as art—from aesthetic consciousness” (Gadamer, 1989, 573).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Bertram (2002, 26).

that “understanding a text is very much like encountering reality” (Ricoeur, 1991, 217). Such a remark, which does not limit the hermeneutic experience to a specific practice, makes it difficult to uphold the distinction Figal suggests.

So, what “experience” is Gadamer talking about? If he is not primarily talking of a specific experience (e.g. reading) but something like “encountering reality,” then to what extent is he justified in speaking of a hermeneutic “experience”? In what cases can we speak of an “experience of the world”? Also, if, as I claim, Gadamer aims to ground aesthetics in hermeneutics, then this implies that hermeneutics articulates the condition of possibility for the experience of art. If this is the case, then what is the hermeneutic “experience”? Is it the experience of being fundamentally shaken? When do we actually “encounter reality”? How commonplace could such an experience be? Of course, it could be argued that the rare experiences of being shaken to the core constitute experience proper. Anything less than this *experience of groundlessness* would be merely sensations (Zabala & Marder, 2014, 7).

These questions are only meant to indicate that it is not immediately clear what is meant by the “hermeneutical experience of meaning.” When I now move on to consider Gadamer’s text, I will, therefore, initially focus upon the experience in question. My guiding question is, has the experience of art really been “hermeneuted” by Gadamer? What aesthetic quality—if any—is there in the hermeneutic experience of art? Can we speak of an experience of art without reference to an element of being moved? The worrisome doubt behind these questions is succinctly captured by Dewey: “Without emotion, there may be craftsmanship, but not art” (2005, 72).

### 3. INTRODUCING “AESTHETICS AND HERMENEUTICS”

With that said, I turn to Gadamer’s *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*. What is the essay about? It is essentially about the notion of contemporaneity. I will not, however, begin by considering this concept, following Gadamer’s line of argument, but rather with the experience Gadamer points to in the essay: namely, the experience of *being struck* by the artwork—or *Betroffenheit*. I take this to be the experience of contemporaneity in its most forceful and visceral form. Gadamer introduces this experience on the last pages of his essay, but it will be my initial focus. After having introduced this experience, I will read the “first part” of Gadamer’s essay as a conceptual development of this phenomenon.

Let me begin by briefly sketching Gadamer’s argument. He (2007a, 124; 1993b, 1) introduces his essay by pointing to the “absolute contemporaneousness”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> „absolute Gleichzeitigkeit“ (Gadamer, 1993b,1).

of art and mentions that the encounter with art is experienced as a self-encounter. Already, in the opening paragraph, Gadamer neatly introduces the reader to the phenomenon at hand and foreshadows his conclusion. However, he does not continue phenomenologically but turns to the philosophical tradition. As concerns this experience of self-encounter that art offers us, Gadamer refers the reader to Hegel and the account of art as a form of Absolute Spirit or self-knowledge. This is somewhat indicative of Gadamer's style of argument. In other words, rather than talk "directly" about the matter at hand, the discussion is turned towards our tradition. There is an initial attempt to come to terms with the philosophical tradition and its notions.

Accordingly, Gadamer first turns his attention to the traditions of aesthetics and hermeneutics. He engages Kant's *Critique of judgement* and asks whether our concern is with art or aesthetics. He turns to the disciple of hermeneutics and asks, what is the task of understanding, what has it been hitherto? Only thereafter does he (2007a, 129; 1993b, 6) describe the experience of "being struck by the meaning of what is said"<sup>5</sup> in the artwork. Concluding his essay, Gadamer additionally makes some remarks about the language of art and clarifies what he intended with the much-quoted thesis that "Being that can be understood is language" (2007a, 130; 1993b, 7).

In short, these are the twists and turns of Gadamer's argument. He covers a lot of ground and addresses many different issues. Therefore, when I argue that the essay is *essentially* about the notion of contemporaneity, this is not immediately clear to the first-time reader.

#### 4. "BEING STRUCK"—BETROFFENHEIT

What is this experience of "being struck by the meaning of what is said" that Gadamer presents us with? In short, with this phrase Gadamer describes the experience of art. In what follows, I will first recount Gadamer's description and then offer an example of what this might be like. Gadamer introduces this notion of "being struck" in contrast to the usual process of (coming to an) understanding. He remarks that our desire to understand is usually driven by an "anticipation of meaning" (2007a, 129)<sup>6</sup>. However, with the experience of art there is something more at

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<sup>5</sup> „Betroffenheit von dem Sinn des Gesagten“ (Gadamer, 1993b, 6).

<sup>6</sup> „Sinnerwartung“ (Gadamer, 1993b, 6). I take this "anticipation of meaning" to be largely synonymous with what Gadamer in *Truth and Method* calls „Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit“ (1990, 299), which Grondin translates as *anticipation of perfection* (Grondin, 2002, 47). In Weinsheimer &

play, something more than this anticipation: namely, “being struck by the meaning of what is said.”

Gadamer explicates this experience by way of the following contrast. He argues that whereas the historian recognizes only the already familiar, the experience of art is an experience where “Everything familiar is eclipsed” (2007a, 129)<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly, this experience comes as a surprise, which prompts Gadamer to call it an *experience* (*Erfahrung*) in the true sense of the word. This indicates that we are not far from the conclusions of *Truth and Method*. This contrast also shows us why the experience of art is of interest to Gadamer and his conception of hermeneutics: it is not susceptible to a simple model based on correspondence, i.e. where both points of reference would be known.

So far, this points to an experience in which we are overwhelmed. A philosopher might use the term *sublime*—but Gadamer does not. The important point, for him, seems to be that in this experience we are confronted with ourselves. The insight that the work of art affords us amounts to a self-encounter. In his words, art, the language of art, “speaks to the self-understanding of every person” (2007a, 129; 1993b, 6). The task it presents us with is one of “integration”: i.e. integrating the experienced “into the whole of one’s own orientation to the world” (2007a, 129; 1993b, 6), alternatively, “into the self-understanding of each person” (2007a, 128; 1993b, 5).

How are we to understand the experience of art that Gadamer describes? So far, these are rather abstract considerations. If we are to achieve any clarity here, then we need to grasp, for lack of a better expression, the aesthetic valency of the experience. What kind of self-encounter does this experience represent? In reply, Gadamer presents us with the following characterization:

The intimacy with which the work of art touches us is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and demolishing of the familiar. It is not only the impact of a “This means you!” that is disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock; it also says to us: “You must change your life!” (2007a, 131)<sup>8</sup>

In other words, we are not simply overwhelmed by something beyond our comprehension (as in “Everything familiar is eclipsed”) but shaken by a “demolishing of

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Marshall’s English translation of *Truth and Method* it is termed “fore-conception of completeness” (Gadamer, 1989, 293–4).

<sup>7</sup> „Alles Bekannte ist übertroffen“ (Gadamer, 1993b, 6).

<sup>8</sup> „Die Vertrautheit, mit der das Kunstwerk uns anrührt, ist zugleich auf rätselhafte Weise Erschütterung und Einsturz des Gewohnten. Es ist nicht nur das ‚Das bist du!‘, das es in einem freudigen und furchtbaren Schreck aufdeckt — es sagt uns auch: ‚Du mußt dein Leben ändern‘“ (Gadamer, 1993b, 8).

the familiar.” Some might call this an *aesthetic shock* or *Stoß*—Gadamer does not<sup>9</sup>. In Gadamer’s words, the experience of art strikes us with a sense of self-implication (“This means you!”) upon which follows an appeal for change (“You must change your life!”).

This last admonition is from a poem by Rilke called *Archaic Torso of Apollo*. According to Grondin, this is a passage “Gadamer loves to quote” (Grondin, 2003, 47). The last two stanzas of the poem are as follows:

This stone would stand disfigured, marred, small / below the shoulders’ sheened fall / and would not glimmer, like predatory pelt; // and would not burst right through its confines, like / a star: for there’s no place in it / that does not see you. You must change your life. (Rilke, 2011, 83)<sup>10</sup>

According to the poem, the artwork would be a lifeless stone, were it not for presence of the perceiver. Interestingly, however—counter to our expectations—it is not the perceiver that animates the star, it is the star that lights up the perceiver. It is precisely such an experience of art that I aim to describe with Anne Imhof’s *Faust*.

## 5. ANNE IMHOF’S “FAUST”

The purpose of introducing Anne Imhof’s *Faust* is twofold. First, it is an attempt to describe a particular experience of art. Secondly, this description serves to clarify and “evaluate” Gadamer’s account of the experience of art. The problem is that—as Gadamer notes—the intense experience of art leaves us speechless, at a loss for words. As he says, “Everything familiar is eclipsed” (2007a, 129; 1993b, 6). This implies that “evaluating” the validity of Gadamer’s account is tricky, if not impossible. Either Gadamer’s description rings true, or it does not. Either it captures the experience, or it makes no sense to us. There is no middle ground. This is the case, for me, with the experience of Imhof’s *Faust*. Gadamer’s vocabulary gives me the words to make sense of this experience, but I am not certain I could describe it in any other way. Therefore, what follows is less an “evaluation” of Gadamer’s account than an attempt to use the vocabulary Gadamer offers us to make sense of an experience of art.

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Vattimo (2008, 67). However, in “The relevance of the beautiful” Gadamer does describe the experience of art as a shock: “The peculiar nature of our experience of art lies in the impact [*Stoß*] by which it overwhelms us” (Gadamer, 1986b, 34; 1993a, 125).

<sup>10</sup> „Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz / unter der Schultern durchsichtigen Sturz / und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle // und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern / aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle, / die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern“ (Rilke, 2011, 81).

In addition, Gadamer is referring to a forceful experience, which implies that it will not be that common. One can, of course, philosophically argue that it is only rare and intense experiences that allow us to see clearly the structures present in all similar experiences. I claim that Gadamer is arguing in this manner: his description of *Betroffenheit* represents an extreme case, which serves to illuminate the contemporaneous nature of all art. However, this only adds to the difficulty of “evaluating” what Gadamer is talking about.

Before moving on to the example of Imhof’s *Faust*, I must put forth a disclaimer. I will not attempt to give an integral interpretation of the performance. Imhof’s *Faust* is both long and complex. What follows pertains only to an instance of the performance, which corresponds to Gadamer’s notion of *Betroffenheit*. In short, Imhof’s *Faust* is a performance, which turns the spectator into an inadvertent participant. The realization that one is no longer merely a spectator, following the performance safe from a distance, unfolds into a sense of “This means you!” This realization potentially carries with it the shocking admonition “You must change your life!”

How does the performance accomplish this? Let me first describe the stage, or better, the situation one enters in order to follow the performance. The stage of *Faust* is a whole building. Before entering, you are encouraged by the personnel to use your smartphone to record the performance. As you step into the building, you see people with smartphones watching the performers. Inside the building there are areas sealed off by plexiglass, which are reserved for the performers only. But the performance is not limited to this area only: the plexiglass does not serve to separate the performers from the audience. On the contrary, the performers will move right in the midst of the spectators, intentionally invading their space, disturbing their sense of observational safety.

This shared space carries with it a sense of participation on the part of the audience. However, I would not say that this shared space immediately or necessarily carries with it a sense of self-implication proper to “This means you!” Rather, the shared space invites the question, does this mean me? With this question raised, one cannot but start to observe the audience. What kind of interplay is taking place? Looking at the spectators with their smartphones, there is the sense of visiting a human zoo. This sense is underlined, at one point, by the phlegmatic comportment of the performers behind the glass, lying on the floor.

At this point, I did not yet feel the admonition of “You must change your life!” But soon after finding myself in this human zoo, a performer, behind the plexiglass, stands up and gazes right back at the smartphone-spectators. I see this gazing back as an attempt to make contact, which necessarily fails in that the spectators act as spec-

tators would: detached, not really part of the performance. Then, the performer slams his fist on the plexiglass, which I cannot help but see as a gesture of “let me out!” The spectators stand unresponsive, not even flinching with the sudden blow. This moment of seeing the audience stand non-responsive, flaunting their smartphones, apparently indifferent in the creation of a human zoo, this moment carried with it the sense of “You must change your life!”

Now, I grant that my interpretation is selective and unfavourably subjective. It is selective in that it almost exclusively focuses on the non-responsive demeanour of the audience. It seems highly subjective in that the representation of the participators stands in clear contrast to the character of the experience felt. Yet, Gadamer’s words captures the *experience* of Imhof’s *Faust*.

## 6. READING OF “AESTHETICS AND HERMENEUTICS”

Now, I will turn to my reading of *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*. As mentioned, Gadamer begins his essay by accounting for the conceptual framework required for understanding such an experience of “being struck.” With Imhof’s *Faust*, I have attempted to bring forth the phenomenon in question as clearly as possible. The purpose is now to follow Gadamer’s conceptual elucidation of this experience.

With this focus upon the experience of “being struck,” I have distinguished two parts in Gadamer’s text. The structure of Gadamer’s argument can be taken as moving from conceptualization to example. Accordingly, at issue is initially the notion of the contemporaneity of art. Later, “being struck” is presented as a clarifying example. More pointedly, however, Gadamer’s text constitutes a relationship between a general experience and a particular case. This relationship presents us with the question, why focus on the notion of contemporaneity? Art might well exhibit this characteristic of being contemporaneous, but why highlight this characteristic? What is the significance of this notion of contemporaneity? For Gadamer, of course, it comes back to hermeneutics, its task and territory. It will be this latter relationship that guides me in reconstructing Gadamer’s argument in “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics”. Therefore, in following the text, I will ultimately offer an interpretation that answers the question, why is *Gadamer* concerned with the contemporaneity of art?

As said, Gadamer (2007a, 124; 1993b, 1) immediately introduces the reader to the central notion of the contemporaneity of art. In the opening paragraph, he claims that art appears to us as if *absolutely contemporaneous*. With this remark, he is not primarily referring to *contemporary art* but rather to the mode of being of art. The initial problem tackled has to do with the different, seemingly contrary implications

that this notion of contemporaneity entails for the being of art. On the one hand, being contemporary means that art *speaks* to us directly, as our contemporary. On the other hand, as a historical determinant, being contemporary entails that something is apparently without any historical determination. The problem is, from where does art “speak”? As contemporary, i.e. as applicable throughout time, the artwork seems to become like the word in a dictionary: always available, yet, cut loose from any context that would clearly determine its meaning.

This is the first issue Gadamer turns to. He is adamant that art “says something,” it “has something to say” (2007a, 125; 1993b, 2). Therefore, the first implication entailed by the notion of contemporaneity needs to be developed so as to cohere with the second meaning: i.e. that art says something, something that does not become dated. One might easily say that art remains more or less relevant throughout time, e.g. as aesthetically pleasing. However, Gadamer wants to make a stronger claim: art is not only relevant for its immediate audience, the contemporaries of the author, but continues to remain *true* despite time, despite losing its original determining context. What are the implications of claiming that art is able to address us throughout time? Gadamer notes that the contemporaneity of art seems to imply that it is “open in a limitless way to ever new integrations” (2007a, 125; 1993b, 2). Does this mean that art can be interpreted in any which way? Gadamer says no and notes that there is still a legitimacy to historical hermeneutics. The artwork still bears witness to its origins<sup>11</sup>. To the sceptic, who maintains that the work of art is *only* ever fully determined in its “own time,” Gadamer (2007a, 125; 1993b, 2) quips, is it really the case that once alienated from its lifeworld the artwork can only ever be an object of aesthetic enjoyment?

Gadamer (2007a, 126; 1993b, 2) continues to pursue this line of questioning in more general terms. He asks, is our primary concern art or aesthetics? In reply, he attempts to transform the traditional problem of aesthetics into a problem of the experience of art. In order to argue for the priority of art over aesthetics, he engages with Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* and shifts the question into one concerning the relationship between pure and dependent beauty. He presents us with two reasons in favour of the priority of art over nature. First, Gadamer (2007a, 126; 1993b, 3) claims that what really *interests* us “as aestheticians” is art. Secondly, he sides with Hegel and maintains that pure beauty is not really all that pure: beauty in nature must be seen as a reflection of beauty in art. To substantiate this claim, Gadamer quickly

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<sup>11</sup> See also Gadamer (1989, 155–156; 1990, 160–161).

considers how our sensibilities change with regard to nature and refers to landscapes as a case in point<sup>12</sup>.

His conclusion is that “We are justified, therefore, in proceeding from the work of art rather than from natural beauty if we want to define the relation between aesthetics and hermeneutics” (2007a, 126; 1993b, 3). In other words, for Gadamer, the phenomenon of art invites the question of hermeneutics. How does Gadamer reach this conclusion? The crux of the matter lies in a fundamental difference he sees between art and natural beauty. Art speaks to us. Natural beauty might appeal to us, but it does not, for Gadamer, “say” anything in the sense that works of art [...] say something to us” (2007a, 126; 1993b, 3). This distinction seems to be something of a self-evident presupposition for him, in that it is one that we simply “must admit” (2007a, 126; 1993b, 3). I, for my part, do not find this distinction self-evident, which is why I will come back to this issue. It is not clear *how* art “speaks”—or for that matter *when*. One could well argue that art does not “say” anything. What we first encounter in art is a dumb obstinate presence (Noë, 2015, 114).

### 6.1. The question of hermeneutics

After having argued for the priority of art (over aesthetics) and “established” the so to speak hermeneutical character of art, Gadamer continues by looking into the question of art in relation to hermeneutics. The question under consideration is, what is the place of art within traditional hermeneutics? Can we legitimately approach the question of the experience of art from within the framework of traditional hermeneutics? In the simplest of terms, the traditional task of hermeneutics has been that of helping us to understand tradition. Art certainly belongs to tradition, but Gadamer is asking, does art fit the conception of tradition put forth by traditional hermeneutics?

In this regard, Gadamer critiques Droysen. Gadamer asks, do we recognize art among the objects investigated by the historian? According to Gadamer, Droysen’s hermeneutics makes room for (literary) *sources* and *vestiges* (or fragments). Art belongs to “a hybrid form” designated as *monuments* (*Denkmäler*) (2007a, 128; 1993b, 4). Gadamer’s retort is that this may well be the case for the historian, but this does not capture the *experience* of art. Gadamer argues as follows:

the work “speaks” not only as remnants of the past speak to the historical investigator [...] What we are calling the language of the work of art [...] is the language the work of

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<sup>12</sup> See also Gadamer (1989, 59; 1990, 64).

art itself speaks, whether it is linguistic or not. The work of art says something to the historian; it says something to each person as if it were said especially to him, as something present and contemporaneous. Thus our task is to understand the meaning of what the work says and to make it clear to ourselves and others. (2007a, 128)<sup>13</sup>

What Gadamer is interested in is how the artwork manages to address each person directly. Therefore, the experience of art he envisions seems to fall outside of the domain of traditional hermeneutics. To elaborate, the traditional task of hermeneutics is presented as that of *bridging a personal or historical distance* (Gadamer, 2007a, 124; 1993b, 1). However, if art addresses us directly and speaks to us intimately, then what distance is there to bridge? Thus, the traditional task of hermeneutics does not correspond to what Gadamer sees as *the task of understanding*. With the last quoted sentence, he is redefining the task of hermeneutics, defining it for his philosophical hermeneutics. To reiterate the key claim above, “our task is to understand the meaning of what the work says and to make it clear to ourselves and others” (Gadamer, 2007a, 128; 1993b, 4). This is the task of hermeneutics for Gadamer. Of course, the generality of this formulation hardly indicates anything markedly different from traditional hermeneutics.

The expression “to bridge a distance” offers us an opportunity to point out a clear difference between traditional hermeneutics and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. From Gadamer’s point of view, it would be misleading to follow this metaphor and claim that we first need to build a “bridge” in order to cross it—which is how he presents the position of traditional or historical hermeneutics. In this case, understanding would primarily be a task of placing ourselves in the other person’s shoes (e.g. resituating ourselves historically). Gadamer, conversely, claims that understanding is partly driven by an “anticipation of meaning” (2007a, 129; 1993b, 6). Language has already created our “bridge.”

## 6.2. To let something be said

Still, Gadamer does not discard the traditional definition of the task of hermeneutics but appropriates it. Thus, I ask, where is there a distance to be overcome, a foreignness to be unveiled? Gadamer distinguishes between two types of distance. One

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<sup>13</sup> „spricht es‘ nicht nur, wie die Überreste der Vergangenheit zu dem historischen Forscher sprechen [...] Denn was wir die Sprache des Kunstwerks nennen [...] ist die Sprache, die das Kunstwerk selber führt, ob es nun sprachlicher Natur ist oder nicht. Das Kunstwerk sagt einem etwas, und das nicht nur so, wie ein historisches Dokument dem Historiker etwas sagt — es sagt einem jeden etwas, als wäre es eigens ihm gesagt, als etwas Gegenwärtiges und Gleichzeitiges. So stellt sich die Aufgabe, den Sinn dessen, was es sagt, zu verstehen und — sich und anderen — verständlich zu machen.“ (Gadamer, 1993b, 5).

he disregards, the other he embraces. First, there is temporal or historical distance. Time makes the past world unfamiliar. On this point, Gadamer again “dismisses” the efforts of historical hermeneutics. Secondly, he notes that there is *also* an unfamiliarity lurking in what is explicitly said to us—something beyond the letter, beyond the literally declared. In Gadamer’s words, revealing the unfamiliar (*Fremden*) “also means apprehending what is said to us, which is always more than the declared and comprehended meaning” (2007a, 128)<sup>14</sup>. Here, more pointedly, is Gadamer’s task for understanding.

There are two aspects of this phenomenon (“apprehending what is said to us”) that need to be clarified. First, what notion of the “unfamiliar” is at play? Secondly, what precisely is the corresponding task of understanding? In more general terms, Gadamer can be said to distinguish between two kinds of foreignness: first, in relation to the other, and secondly—more importantly—in relation to ourselves. To introduce such a distinction into Gadamer’s hermeneutics is a delicate matter, in that it carries with it something of a psychoanalytic element. It implies that there is something of ourselves that is concealed to us. In *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, we find this element in the following passage: “The work of art that says something confronts us with ourselves. That is, it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed” (Gadamer, 2007a, 129; 1993b, 6). This “psychoanalytic” aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutics is more explicitly articulated in *Hermeneutics and the ontological difference*. There Gadamer states: “the problem is not that we do not understand the other person, but that we don’t understand ourselves!” (2007c, 371; 1995, 70).

Problematic or not, Gadamer gives validity to this distinction by differentiating between two corresponding hermeneutical tasks. He notes that there is certainly a difficulty in understanding “a foreign or ancient language,” but harder still is letting “something be said to us” (2007a, 129; 1993b, 6). In short, hearing is easy compared to listening. Gadamer ties this notion of *letting something be said* to a desire for understanding. He says, “We cannot understand without wanting to understand, that is, without wanting to let something be said” (2007a, 129)<sup>15</sup>.

In sum, Gadamer is pointing to the phenomenon of “apprehending what is said to us,” which he ties to a desire for understanding. The difficulty this desire presents is to be found in ourselves. Thus, the hermeneutical task is formulated in terms of

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<sup>14</sup> „meint auch das Vernehmen dessen, was uns gesagt wird. Auch dies ist immer noch mehr als sein angebbarer und erfaßter Sinn“ (Gadamer, 1993b, 5).

<sup>15</sup> „Man kann nicht verstehen, ohne verstehen zu wollen, d.h. ohne sich etwas sagen lassen zu wollen.“ (Gadamer, 1993b, 6).

*letting something be said*. What is so difficult about letting something be said? I would say that the difficulty addressed lies in *lending validity* to what the other has to say. This is not primarily a difficulty of (linguistic) comprehension: that is, understanding, word for word, what the other says. It is a difficulty we have with the other and the implications of what is said.

In “Hermeneutics and the ontological difference,” Gadamer ties this argument to the argument of *Truth and Method* and the central notion of understanding as a play of prejudices. He remarks that our desire to understand the other is accompanied by a *resistance* (*Widerstand*), a resistance tied to “our own biases” (2007c, 371; 1995, 70). How do we suddenly find ourselves face to face with our prejudices? As I see it, lending validity to what the other person says, simultaneously entails that we question ourselves, our own rationale and way of thinking.

### 6.3. The model of speech: art “speaking”?

How can we concretely conceive this phenomenon of *apprehending what is said to us*, of *letting something be said to us*? To clarify this experience Gadamer reaches for the model of speech (*Rede*) and points to the following structure: “someone says something to someone else” (2007a, 128; 1993b, 5). To note, Gadamer is not talking of “speaking” in the narrow sense but broadly of *significance*: what says something to us<sup>16</sup>. Accordingly, Gadamer claims, “Whatever says something to us is like a person who says something” (2007a, 128; 1993b, 5). In other words, his claim is that whenever something addresses us, whenever we feel a sense of significance, we can understand this experience on the model of speech.

Consequently, Gadamer appeals to this model in order to elucidate the experience of art. In his words, “what holds in this fashion for all speaking is valid in a special way for the experience of art” (2007a, 129)<sup>17</sup>. What is Gadamer saying? What does this “valid in a special way” mean here? He seems to say that “speaking” clarifies particularly well the experience of art. However, if we assume that the experience of art is synonymous with the experience of *Betroffenheit*, then his line of argument ultimately indicates the converse: i.e. art—“being struck”—clarifies particularly well what *saying something* means.

Let me be more detailed. I am not arguing against Gadamer but merely trying to point out how the structure of speech is an odd one to apply to art—particularly as

<sup>16</sup> For a more elaborate account see Davey (2013, 140–164).

<sup>17</sup> „Was so von aller Rede gilt, gilt aber in eminenter Weise von der Erfahrung der Kunst“ (Gadamer, 1993b, 6).

presented by Gadamer. First of all, Gadamer does not explicitly say how this model is valid, or how it describes the experience of art. We cannot really take it literally. A painting does not really speak. Yet, Gadamer maintains that his assertion is not metaphorical: “when we say that the work of art says something to us [...] our assertion is not a metaphor, but has a valid and demonstrable meaning” (2007a, 126)<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, Gadamer literally says that when we experience this sense of significance it “is like” being addressed by another person. Does not this “is like” signal that a metaphor is in play? I think that this issue can be resolved if we are able to specify what the phenomenon is. Therefore, I claim that at issue cannot be *speaking* (in any real or narrow sense) but rather a sense of *significance*.

Considering more closely the structure of speech, I ask, who is this “someone” that speaks to us in the encounter with art? On Gadamer’s account it is not the author. He says, “Naturally it is not the artist who is speaking here.” He strongly argues against a reduction of the meaning of the work of art to the intentions of the author. In his words, “we cannot be satisfied with the cherished hermeneutical rule that the *mens auctoris* limits the task of understanding.” Gadamer’s reasoning is that the experience of art is characterized by “an excess of meaning,” which “leaves the *mens auctoris* behind it” (2007a, 130; 1993b, 7.) To clarify, as detached from its original context, the artwork becomes all the more underdetermined, while its meaning becomes overdetermined.

However, the applicability of the structure of speech is further complicated by Gadamer’s remarks in *The Artwork in Word and Image*. He points out that it is also unclear exactly what we perceive in the artwork. In his words, “when it comes to art, it is meaningless to ask the artist what he or she meant. Likewise it is meaningless to ask the perceiver what it is that the work really says to him or her” (2007b, 212; 1993c, 388). Thus, it seems as if the particulars of the experience of art remain quite indeterminate. Therefore, in an attempt to specify the experience of art according to Gadamer’s model (“*someone* says something to someone else”), it seems that we cannot say *who* is saying something or for that matter *what* this someone is saying. Yet, this does not mean that what we are left with is an experience of the incomprehensible. What we are left with is an experience of *being addressed*—in all its stripped-down simplicity. My argument is that this is what Gadamer’s account of the experience of art emphasizes: in art we are struck by the meaning of what is said, even though we are left at a loss for words. And this experience clarifies, in essence, what *saying something* means.

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<sup>18</sup> „Jedenfalls ist es für das Kunstwerk keine Metapher, sondern es hat einen guten und aufweisbaren Sinn, daß das Kunstwerk uns etwas sagt“ (Gadamer, 1993b, 3).

#### 6.4. Sense and meaning

As a final step, let me introduce the distinction between sense and meaning, in my attempt to clarify Gadamer's account of being struck. This distinction merits some attention in that Gadamer repeatedly "dismisses" meaning in terms of reference or *sense*. This gesture can be found, for example, when Gadamer distances himself from historical hermeneutics, in how everything familiar "is eclipsed" with art, and in how the emphasis is on apprehending a significance beyond the declared.

The distinction between sense and meaning is somewhat controversial in the reception of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Particularly Hirsch (1967) is critical of Gadamer on this point in *Validity in interpretation*. I will not go into the details of Hirsch's critique. Let me only point out that the distinction between sense and meaning can be seen as the distinction with which Gadamer opens up his philosophical project in *Truth and Method*. In the introduction, Gadamer (1989, xxii; 1990, 2) clearly establishes a contrast between scientific truth, modelled on correspondence, and an "extra-scientific" truth present in e.g. art.

It is tempting to superimpose upon this distinction (of sense and meaning) another similar one: namely, the subject-object distinction. However, this supplementary distinction falters in that, within Gadamer's framework, there is no place for purely subjective meaning. Gadamer does define meaning in contrast to objective reference (or *sense*). However, the contrary determination, *meaning* in terms of subjective significance, fails us. Thus, in an attempt to clarify this experience of being struck, the subject-object distinction is of little use.

Michelfelder, in her review of *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, introduces the distinction between the personal and the communal. She (Michelfelder, 1997, 448) contrasts Gadamer's account with that of Heidegger's and emphasizes that the experience Gadamer refers to has the character of a *personal address*—"it speaks out at a personal level"—whereas Heidegger's account of the Greek temple represents a *communal address*. I do not see how this distinction clarifies the experience Gadamer is talking about. On the contrary, Michelfelder's distinction is dangerously close to representing a distinction between the subjective and the intersubjective—with Gadamer unfavourably placed.

What is the "meaning" we are supposedly struck by? I suggest that what strikes us are the *implications* of what is said. Gadamer says that the experience of art is a self-encounter. I would specify and say that as a self-encounter the experience of art instantiates a form of self-reflective application. If we are truly struck by the truth of what is said, if we take what is said to be the truth, then we cannot help but ask our-

selves, what does this mean for me? If this is true, how must I rethink my life? In addition, I would say that as a self-encounter, what we encounter through art is not a “self” acknowledged in advance. Art shows us a surprising image of the self, in face of which we are compelled to ask, must I change my life? Imhof’s *Faust* shows us ourselves as non-responsive or indifferent visitors in a human zoo. Is this who we are? Is this me?

## 7. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to offer a close reading and interpretation of Gadamer’s *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*. The impetus for focusing on this essay was as a response to criticism aimed at Gadamer’s supposedly excessively hermeneutic account of art. The key question was, has Gadamer “hermeneuted” the aesthetic experience of art? I argue that the experience of *Betroffenheit* is both aesthetic and hermeneutic. In other words, I claim that Gadamer does not “reduce” away the aesthetic aspect of the experience of art but rather *grounds* this experience hermeneutically. Rhetorically one could ask, if art were not experienced as significant, would we even be touched by it?

The more problematic question is, what exactly is the phenomenon that Gadamer is talking about? In *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, the experience under discussion is primarily referred to as “being struck by the meaning of what is said.” However, this experience could, given the descriptions Gadamer offers us, likewise be said to be one of aesthetic shock, or being overwhelmed and at a loss for words. Nevertheless, Gadamer clarifies this experience conceptually with the notion of contemporaneity. It implies that art *speaks* to us. Such a conception is not without its complications. In my interpretation, the experience of art addresses us and shakes us with a sense of self-implication. My argument is that Gadamer is working his way down to this singular aspect of the experience of art. At issue is the notion of contemporaneity. The hermeneutical significance of this notion is revealed in the experience of art.

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