
Winter 1986

Gadamer, Habermas and the Death of Art

Gary Shapiro

University of Richmond, gshapiro@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/philosophy-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), [Contemporary Art Commons](#), and the [Theory and Criticism Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. "Gadamer, Habermas and the Death of Art." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 39-47.
doi:10.1093/bjaesthetics/26.1.39.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

GADAMER, HABERMAS AND THE DEATH OF ART

Gary Shapiro

SINCE THE appearance of Jürgen Habermas's critical review of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* [*Wahrheit und Methode*], there has been talk of the 'Gadamer-Habermas debate' among those who are interested in the nature of historical understanding and social rationality. More recently a number of philosophers have come to see that the issues involved are of wider scope, and that the opposition of the two can be seen as emblematic of two very general styles or approaches to philosophy, which are at the centre of contemporary discussion.¹ As one might expect, differences at fundamental levels concerning truth and understanding are likely to be reflected also in views of the arts and aesthetic questions. In this essay I want to approach the *Auseinandersetzung* between Gadamer and Habermas with an eye to constructing an exchange between the two concerning their analysis of recent and contemporary art. In the process I hope to suggest some of the ways in which what might be taken to be the primary issues of 'first philosophy' between the two, that is, issues pertaining to knowledge and value, turn, in some crucial ways, on aesthetic questions and concepts.

Let me begin by suggesting what it is that makes Gadamer and Habermas emblematic contemporary philosophers, both in general and as aesthetic theorists. Richard Rorty has given currency to a schema according to which there are two general philosophical styles or meta-philosophical approaches, foundationalism and contextualism. Each may take a variety of forms, but it is typical of the foundationalist to seek a fixed basis for what we know, what we think we should do, and for the claims of aesthetic and artistic experience, while the contextualist denies the availability of any such fixed grounds and suggests instead that our knowledge, our ethical and political actions, and our aesthetic experience can get along well enough with reference to the norms and practices of actual societies, taking into account the historical experience of these societies as it is found in their cultures. Employing this distinction Kant and Hegel can be taken, but only in a preliminary way, as exemplifying foundationalist and contextualist approaches to art and the aesthetic. Kant insists that the claims of taste and the achievements of art presuppose the validity of universal and ahistorical standards that are grounded in the transcendental conditions of human experience. For Kant these standards led to a formalistic concern to limit the intellectual and moral content of art; they also led him to prefer real jungles

and sunsets to those of the painters, so that he would have been forced to reject Henri Rousseau jungles and Turner sunsets (had he known them), in favour of their natural analogues. As a contextualist, Hegel finds art vastly more interesting than nature because it embodies the ways in which a succession of cultures imaginatively represent their own highest values; although if Hegel had been aware of the fact that tastes in nature change too (as in the late eighteenth century mountains came to be prized rather than seen as remnants of the fall of man) he might have given a more thorough account of natural beauty in his aesthetics.

Applying the distinction between foundationalist and contextualist modes in a more nuanced way than Rorty himself sometimes does, we can perceive both tendencies within a single thinker; and this is easily discovered in the case of Hegel. For Hegel makes the two equally notorious but apparently incompatible claims that philosophy is simply its own time comprehended in thought *and* that both philosophy and history have come to an end with the achievement of absolute knowledge by the first and the European system of law and national states by the second. Leaving to one side the question of just how these themes work themselves out (or fail to work themselves out) in Hegel's thought as a whole, let me suggest that his conception of the end of art is a brilliant answer to the question of how it is possible to be both a foundationalist and a contextualist in aesthetics. As a foundationalist Hegel holds that wisdom, if not 'always already' there in the transcendental conditions of human experience is there, finally, at the end, and this entails that art (conceived as a kind of knowledge) is limited and superseded by philosophy which is in turn *aufgehoben* by an encyclopaedic science. As a contextualist, correlating the styles of art with various cultures, Hegel sees the human spirit as a radically historical activity that can be understood only narratively in terms of what it does. To announce the end of art is to say, as a contextualist, that this narrative has simply come to an end; while as a foundationalist it is to offer a *reason why* the narrative has come to an end and, indeed, to just this end.

Both Hegel's description and his analysis turn on an account of the relations between art and science (*Wissenschaft*). This age, that is Hegel's own, and the future that he projected, constitute the epoch of science and reflection. We do not live in an era of artistic immediacy and it is inevitable that the more universal perspective of reflection and science should replace the energies of art as our main cultural concern. Even within the artistic world itself, in relation to galleries, performances, artistic instruction and connoisseurship of all kinds, such a displacement of emphasis is apparent. Near the beginning of his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel says that art cannot produce the degree or intensity of satisfaction for the inhabitants of the modern world that it gave to the Greeks or to 'the golden age of the later Middle ages'. The possibility of such satisfaction has been destroyed, he maintains, by the reflective and scientific character of the modern world; such reflection and scientific concerns lead us always to look to

'general considerations' and 'universal forms' as opposed to concentrating on the unique imaginative embodiment characteristic of art. These 'universal forms, laws, duties, rights, maxims' and the like lead both to the artist himself being 'infected by the loud voice of reflection' and, more fundamentally, to our entire culture becoming a reflective one such that no artist could distance himself from it simply by his own act of will or by spontaneous creation. After marshalling such analyses, Hegel concludes that 'art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past'.²

Hegel's solution to the dichotomy of foundationalism and contextualism, then, has a narrative form. In a way that a structuralist like Lévi-Strauss would approve he appears to resolve a contradiction by telling a story that allows the inclusion of both elements. But however brilliant this solution may be it is not one that very many could be expected to find satisfying. So Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, would like to reject the foundationalist Hegel in order to preserve and expand the contextual theme. Although acknowledging those internal exigencies of Hegel's thought that lead to the 'end of art' thesis, he attempts to avoid the latter by establishing a fully finitistic view of human experience.³ For if reflection and science are never absolute but always perspectival and contextual, then the aspect of art that Hegel identified with the individual and the imaginative can never be eliminated. Gadamer's ambitious book on interpretation begins with a contextualizing critique of Kantian aesthetics. He argues, in effect, that Kant's belief in universal standards of taste and his associated attempt to purify the aesthetic experience by separating it from knowledge and moral action is not (as aesthetic foundationalists might have it) the posing of the proper question for the very first time; it is instead a kind of unconscious rescue effort in which Kant manages to preserve a few remnants of an earlier humanistic tradition, where poetics and rhetoric were sister arts in the formation of the man of good taste. In the story that Gadamer tells, this earlier humanism was shattered when it collided with the universalizing claims of Galilean and Newtonian science and Hobbesian or Rousseauian politics and ethics. Gadamer concludes *Truth and Method* by attempting to refurbish the Platonic conception of intellectual beauty, after a long detour through the issues of explanation versus understanding that are associated with the *Geisteswissenschaften*. It is this notion that Kant explicitly rejects in the *Critique of Judgement* in order to establish the independence of the aesthetic judgement from extraneous factors.⁴ Yet the return to Plato is not as transcendental as it might appear because it is made only by way of a Heideggerian manoeuvre that substitutes language as essentially historical and finite for the Platonic *eidōs*: at the same time Gadamer retains the presumption of clarity in that which shines beautifully and of our corresponding veneration of the beautiful. Gadamer thinks that the alternative to this fusion of a Heideggerian view of language with Platonic beauty would be the adoption of Hegel's non-finitistic conception of human experience; for, just before introducing his amalgam of Heidegger and Plato, Gadamer acknowledges the

inevitability of the end of art theme should Hegel's idea of experience be adopted:

The 'appearance' of the beautiful seems to be something reserved to finite human experience. There was a similar problem in medieval thought, namely how beauty can be in God if he is one and not many. Only Nicholas of Cusa's theory of the *complicatio* of the many in God offers a satisfactory solution. From this it seems a logical conclusion that for Hegel's philosophy of infinite knowledge, art is a form of representation that is cancelled out in the concept and in philosophy.⁵

Gadamer's borrowings from and revisions of the history of philosophy are typical contextualist strategies; they are dialectically successful in suggesting that, because of the finitude of language and our always being situated in a specific historical context, we can expect to be lured by the indeterminate aspects of the beautiful to fresh views and interpretations of the art of the past as well as to new artistic production. But here a certain tension arises between the dialectical justification of the hermeneutic programme and the actual carrying out of the programme in our own aesthetic and historical context. While Gadamer accurately detects the important relationship between Hegel's 'end of art' thesis and his less notorious but equally challenging claim that *interpretation* of the art of the past has (in essentials) come to an end, in *Truth and Method* he does not come to terms with Hegel the critic and hermeneut who makes a number of discriminating observations about the art of his own time. Speaking as a cultural critic, one might say, Hegel claimed that art had come to an end in this sense: that for *us* (post-romantics) it could no longer hold the central cultural place that it occupied in Greece or in the late middle ages. He went on to produce an ingenious classification of the remaining forms of art that could exist during this process of ending (or to be more precise *Auflösung*, dissolution or, to use Derrida's term, closure), specifying them as explorations in realism and naturalism on the one hand and as increasingly reflective varieties of irony and 'subjective humour' on the other.⁶ In other words, Hegel may be said to have foreseen something like the current division of artistic labour into the world of narratives of the contemporary scene on the one hand—from *Madame Bovary* to Hemingway to *Dallas*—and, on the other, of the reflective ironies and humour of Cage, Rauschenberg, Oldenberg and Christo.

It is this side of Hegel that Habermas takes up in a number of statements that he has made concerning modernism and post-modernism. By now it is a rather standard observation that Habermas lacks an aesthetic theory; yet it is he, the advocate of an allegedly abstract programme of general human emancipation (i.e., critical theory) who shows a high degree of concern with both recent art and the critical discourse that accompanies it while Gadamer, the recognized hermeneut who programmatically stresses the necessity of simultaneously interpreting one's own culture and that of the past, tends to assimilate the present to the past a bit too easily. Habermas's approach depends upon his

accepting, from contemporary critical discourse, a distinction between modernism and post-modernism while refusing to translate that distinction into an irreversible sequence to be understood in an historicist sense as rendering post-modernism the inevitable form of our culture for the foreseeable future. The issues at stake between Gadamer and Habermas can perhaps be brought into focus by comparing their views of artistic autonomy. Both thinkers note that the eighteenth century is a watershed in this respect, marking art's separation from religious, political, scientific and other concerns. Gadamer seems to think that this separation or differentiation (his term) of the art object and the aesthetic experience is the result of the philosophical movement, under the influence of modern science, that leads to the Kantian set of distinctions between theory, practice, and taste; he claims that insisting on this autonomy is a *reductio ad absurdum* of art, leading to the familiar paradox that what is held to be absolutely 'significant in its own right' is such that its significance cannot be described or asserted.⁷ What is said to be absolutely differentiated is, as Hegel saw so clearly in his analysis of 'sense-certainty', indiscernible from the absolutely undifferentiated. It was Heidegger who said, with reference to Hegel 'perhaps experience is the element in which art dies';⁸ one of the virtues of Gadamer's argument that pure aesthetic experience would be inarticulable and unidentifiable is to show us some surprising parallels in the way in which such concepts have been dissolved in recent analytical aesthetics and deconstructed in recent continental thought. Gadamer's analysis and continental thought generally have much more to say than does Anglo-American analytic philosophy about those tendencies in our cultural life that lead to the paradoxical demand for a pure aesthetic experience. Yet Gadamer's solution to what he calls the problem of artistic differentiation or abstraction is not so clear as his articulation of it, although it is in a sense the entire burden of *Truth and Method* to re-establish the Platonic conception of intelligible beauty as an alternative. His way of doing that is to engage in a lengthy and detailed analysis of the human sciences, since they have the hermeneutic task of understanding all experiences, and do so by 'anticipating truth in them'.⁹

Habermas takes the datum of artistic differentiation at least as seriously as does Gadamer, but he gives a more socially and politically nuanced account of its motives and offers a very different diagnosis for correcting its excesses. In the essay translated as 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', Habermas emphasizes that modernism, as a development of art's capacity to be autonomous, leads both to a highly differentiated art and to an art with a critical mission, living on 'the experience of rebelling against all that is normative'.¹⁰ Habermas largely accepts Max Weber's account of rationalization and cultural modernity as a post-religious and post-metaphysical separation, institutionalization, and professionalization of the three autonomous spheres of science, morality, and art (corresponding to the subjects of three Kantian critiques). For Habermas such differentiation is irreversible, short of political and social catastrophe. This

marks his most important conflict with the earlier members of the Frankfurt school, notably Adorno; for Adorno art is the 'promise of happiness' reminding us of the possibility of overcoming the divisions of the 'administered society'. Surrealism, e.g., was an effort to break down the alienating effects of such cultural differentiation by challenging the distinctions between 'art and life, fiction and praxis, appearance and reality'.¹¹ But surrealism failed, says Habermas, because it thought that culture could be transformed by breaking open only a single cultural sphere. He suggests that post-modernism, represented by spokesmen such as Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida is structurally similar to the surrealist project, in so far as both claim to be liberated from the demands of 'work and usefulness' and both attempt to contrast instrumental reason with the imaginative, the emotional and the dionysiac.¹²

The alternative Habermas offers to these allegedly regressive cultural prescriptions is the project of 'creating unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements'.¹³ The aim then is not to return to the artistic or the mythical—this is what the rationalist Habermas sees as common to the projects of Gadamer, Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, Foucault and Derrida. The goal is rather to render possible communication and interaction among cultural spheres that we now recognize to be distinct. Post-modernity is a dead end because its efforts are doomed to a failure like that of surrealism. But modernism lives on as an unfulfilled project. At this point we would like to know just how the project of communication and interaction is to be furthered and how it is to be distinguished from the various forms of popularization and packaging with which we are familiar from the mass media and which do not contribute to the emancipatory goals of modernism that Habermas endorses. Here Habermas would reply, with some plausibility, that the change in communication and interaction he has in mind is one that would simultaneously involve all of the cultural spheres and that it is simply not possible to draw up an artistic manifesto or policy for the arts that could be effective in achieving this goal independently of a larger transformation. The transformation that Habermas favours is a return or ascent to the foundations, conceived in terms of the regulative ideal of a speech community constituted by fully unconstrained discourse. Perhaps we should follow Habermas's recent guidance in discounting the utopian tone that some have heard in these concepts, agreeing to interpret the ideal speech situation as a regulative rather than a constitutive idea.¹⁴ Still, as some critics have suggested, it is simply not clear that the project (in its current formulation) can sustain the claims of universality and necessity that it inherits from more traditional foundationalist models. But then the possibility of such a transformation is clearly problematic and it may turn out that Weber's somewhat melancholy narrative of inevitable differentiation and specialization is the last word on the subject. In that case the Weberian analysis would simply be a sociological confirmation of Hegel's perception that when art is only art and nothing else, it

cannot live for us in the way that it did for earlier ages; 'the knee no longer bends' for the Madonna encountered in the museum rather than in the church. In such a situation it is understandable that the paradoxical quest for an ultimately differentiated aesthetic experience could suffer a dialectical reversal in which not pure experience but an institutionally defined artworld would be the criterion of the aesthetic and artistic. This is the general development to be observed in Anglo-American analytic aesthetics of the last thirty or forty years in which the rejection of earlier theories of a pure aesthetic experience, such as Bell's 'significant form' or various versions of organic unity, is followed by attempts like those of George Dickie and Arthur Danto to give an 'experience-free' account of art as constituted by certain forms of life (the 'artworld' or artistic institutions) rather than of any intrinsic perceptual qualities of the work of art.

Gadamer takes up the question of modernism and its heirs in *Die Aktualität des Schönen* [*The Contemporaneity of the Beautiful*]. There he begins not with the rather general problem of the pure, or ultimately differentiated, experience of art but with the question whether its contemporary forms embody such a radical break with the past that we must agree with Hegel that art (as traditionally understood) is dead. Gadamer takes Hegel's doctrine that 'art is a thing of the past' to mean that art now appears in need of justification or legitimation, that is, its role in cultural life is now far from self-evident. Questions of justification seem especially appropriate to the twentieth-century works that Gadamer cites: such things as Duchamp's ready-mades, happenings and destructive art or anti-art.¹⁵ As might be expected, the broad lines of the analysis are reconciliatory. In pursuit of what could be called a hermeneutic conservatism, Gadamer explicitly says that the three major concepts he introduces—play, symbol, and festival—are designed to span the apparent gap between the traditional and the contemporary by disclosing the anthropological foundations of art. The first two, play and symbol, were deployed in some detail in *Truth and Method* and form part of the general repertoire of German idealist aesthetics. The category of *Fest*—festival or celebration—however, was the subject of only a brief allusion in the first book. In *Die Aktualität des Schönen* it takes on a cumulative and all-embracing role. Gadamer suggests that every genuine artistic performance is a *Fest* in which artist, performers, and audience form an actual or virtual community released from utilitarian constraints. The *Fest* could be understood as embodying in a concrete, historical form that unconstrained communication that Habermas takes as an implicit demand of language but a distant prospect for us, given the actual differentiation of our lives. Gadamer would then be claiming both that the great artistic tradition lives as a *Fest* or holiday that is continuously celebrated and reaffirmed, and that in so far as the *Fest*-structure is present, no significant distinction can be made between exhibiting urinals and exhibiting Rembrandts, between staging Greek tragedies and staging happenings in which the participants are covered with shaving cream and cellophane.

Despite Gadamer's venture into the worlds of modernism and post-modernism (which contrasts interestingly with his mentor Heidegger's veneration for just a few Greek and German poets), his category of *Fest* seems to be ripe for a Habermasian socio-philosophical deconstruction. Such an analysis would begin with the only apparently accidental fact that Gadamer's text was originally a series of lectures given during the summer in Salzburg and therefore associated with the annual Salzburg Festival of the arts. Despite the excellent performances that are usual on such occasions, the festival itself is part tourist attraction and part museum, in which the whole city functions as a showcase for the musical performances. The institutionalization of these artistic and other pleasures is not a broadly grounded *Fest* that would answer to the far-reaching claims that Gadamer makes for the category, but an episode conducted in a museum city and available generally to an audience drawn from the most mobile and affluent stratum of the population. Should such a critique be dismissed on account of its *ad hominem* character, still it is clear that some analysis along similar lines would be relevant to Gadamer's claims and that the Habermasian approach is well suited to differentiate universalistic claims from more limited actualities. It may be significant that Habermas's first book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* [*The Structural Transformation of the Public Realm*], is essentially concerned with three stages in the development of the idea of the public: (1) the court, as a realm of display designed to crystallize loyalties; (2) the expansion of the public in the early bourgeois period as a sphere of open discussion and debate; and (3) the transformation of that practice, whose ideals were never fully realized, into the contemporary world of media events, whose 'photo opportunities' provide a strange echo of the regal or imperial conception of the public realm.¹⁶ Applied in a thoroughgoing way, Habermasian analysis might yield an interesting typology of *Feste* in a variety of social and historical circumstances; if it were enriched by the forms of analysis used by Mikhail Bakhtin in his studies of the carnivalesque it might also offer some indications of the possibility of achieving a *Fest* that would satisfy various kinds of universalistic claims in the same variety of circumstances. Habermas would probably say that there is a deep connection between art's now requiring a legitimation that it did not need previously and the rationalized form of contemporary life that gives our *Feste* a willed and artificial character. In this respect the legitimation crisis of art would be similar to what he sees as the general legitimation crisis of modern society. This conclusion would no doubt strengthen Habermas's position that modernism is the project, still to be fulfilled, of achieving 'a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism'.¹⁷ To this Gadamer replies, in effect, that the achievement of a genuine *Fest* is itself a project and not something given. But he seems to imply that there is a permanent possibility of actualizing tradition and introducing genuine participation in such celebrations. Yet the example of

Salzburg and the increasingly orchestrated spectacles of the mass media suggest that Habermas has asked the correct question: what are the *conditions* under which art can claim not only universal communicability but a universalizing social role? If art is, as Gadamer indicates, to be understood in terms of universal and communal goals then, following Habermas, it seems appropriate to ask whether the circumstances of the modern world are such that these goals are likely to be achieved. If present conditions are unfavourable then it can be asked what types of changes might render the achievement of such goals more plausible. The question of whether Hegel was right or not in pronouncing the death of art or characterizing it as a thing of the past would then become, if not exactly an empirical question, at least a research project for a critical theory.

REFERENCES

- 1 Habermas's critical review appeared first as part of *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften, Philosophische Rundschau* 14, Beiheft 5 (1966-67), pp. 251-90; a translation appears as 'A Review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*' in Fred Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy, editors, *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 335-63. For an essay orientated to issues in the social sciences see Dieter Misgeld, 'Critical Theory and Hermeneutics' in John O'Neill, editor, *On Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 164-83. More explicitly philosophical discussions can be found in David Hoy, *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978); Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).
- 2 *Hegel's Aesthetics*, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 10-11.
- 3 *Truth and Method*, translation edited by Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 442.
- 4 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, par. 62.
- 5 *Truth and Method*, p. 442.
- 6 *Hegel's Aesthetics*, 'Dissolution of the Romantic Form of Art', pp. 593-611.
- 7 *Truth and Method*, pp. 80 ff; cf. *Die Aktualität des Schönen: Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1979), pp. 28-9.
- 8 Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 79.
- 9 *Truth and Method*, p. 88.
- 10 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', *New German Critique* (Winter, 1981), p. 5.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 14 See, for example, Habermas's reply to his critics on this topic in *Habermas, Critical Debates*, edited by David Held and John Thompson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 229-38.
- 15 *Aktualität*, pp. 28-9.
- 16 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965).
- 17 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', p. 13.

This paper was read at a session of the American Society for Aesthetics on Frankfurt School Aesthetics, November 1984. I am grateful to Douglas Kellner, Suresh Raval, Charles Guignon and the editors of this journal for helpful comments.