

The Reasons

of
Art



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Ontologizing Art

(*Comment on Damnjanović*)

TORE NORDENSTAM / BERGEN

The question Professor Damnjanović initially raises in his learned contribution—How are works of art possible?—takes us straight to the heartlands of art and philosophy; and the notions he singles out for particular attention—the origin, structure, and effects of artworks—do indeed refer to aspects of art that are hard to avoid if you want to reach some degree of philosophical understanding of what works of art are. Let me confess at once that I find his paper very difficult. And I think the source of the difficulty has to do with the level of abstraction at which he places himself.

We are told that the principle of “the other thing” (*l'autre chose, das Andere, aliud*) gives a clue, perhaps *the* clue, to the answer to the question about the possibility of art. But we are not told what the answer would consist in, more precisely. In fact, Damnjanović presupposes that we all know what the principle of the other thing amounts to and that it is obvious to everyone how that principle can be used to clarify the central questions of the philosophy of art to which he directs our attention. *Nolens volens*, I find myself in the role of the ignorant philosopher who, like Socrates, raises more questions than he himself can answer in the hope of getting at least the beginnings of some answers to some aspects of some of the questions from more knowledgeable partners in dialogue.

Consider, for instance, something that Damnjanović stated right at the end of his contribution: “Dans la réception d’une œuvre d’art l’homme se rencontre dans le médium d’une autre expérience du monde, dans une autre chose; il se perd comme individu et il se retrouve rendu autre par l’expérience.” This is, I think, an excellent way of summing up the central idea in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s ideology of art (in *Truth and Method*). Gadamer describes in some detail a way of dealing with works of art that comes close to participating in sacred ritual. Truly experiencing a work of art is, indeed, to meet reality in its truth, according to Gadamer, in very much the same way in which believing Christians are said to meet true reality when consuming the flesh and blood of Christ in Holy Communion. As a description of his own way of dealing with art, I find Gadamer’s account both admirable and acceptable. He himself seems indeed to have partaken of art in a ritualistic manner that endows the work of art with the aura of an other-worldly object, an object that does leave the participator transformed in a transformed world.

There is a moving passage in Gadamer's little autobiography, *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, where he describes the situation in Leipzig in the winter of 1943–44, after the destruction of the city: he and his students sitting in a house that had happened to be spared, without heat and electricity, no window-panes left, continuing the Rilke seminar, having arrived at the third of the *Duino Elegies*. I have no doubt that under those circumstances the reading of that kind of poetry could transform the world of the participants (thus perhaps falsifying Auden's dictum that "poetry makes nothing happen").¹ The ritualization of the experience of art was systematized in Rudolf Bultmann's Thursday-evening meetings, in which Gadamer took part for fifteen years in the twenties and thirties, which were devoted to the reading aloud of selected classics in Greek.

But wouldn't you agree that this is only one way of experiencing art and that there is more to the world of art than the literally ecstatic transformations that for Gadamer are the essence of art? Doesn't the spectrum of your own everyday experience with art include more than this? If you would tend to agree that that is so (mentally reviewing a number of rather different works of art from different genres and periods), then it remains an open question how the otherhood of art affects us at the various points on that spectrum and what that otherhood amounts to, more precisely, in the different cases.

In a condensed passage, Damnjanović speaks of "la visée philosophique de l'essence," which is said to be necessary in order to avoid "historicism" and "relativism." To me, this suggests another bundle of questions rather than an answer, questions like the following: What, if anything, is wrong with historicism? What, if anything, is wrong with relativism? What, if anything, is it that is referred to by phrases like "the essence of art"? I for one certainly wouldn't stand for even the beginnings of an answer in the present context, an ecumenical international conference on aesthetics. But let me voice a general feeling of unease caused by the tradition to which Damnjanović belongs, and let me do so in the form of another question. It may be possible to play all the classic violin concertos from Mozart and Beethoven to Max Bruch on the double bass, but it would require a virtuoso of the rank of a Gary Karr to make the attempt musically rewarding. Might it not be the case, analogously, that some of the themes of philosophy and aesthetics could be handled more adequately on some other instruments than those provided by the ontologizing tradition?

Let me try to indicate what I have in mind in the following way. When discussing the conditions for the possibility of the existence of works of art, the ontologizing tradition does indeed draw attention to some central elements

1. [See the paper in this collection by Arthur Danto.]

in all works of art (they must have a certain kind of structure, a certain kind of origin, and certain kinds of effect). But on the level of ontological and phenomenological analysis, there is a conspicuous gap in the treatment of the conditions for the possibility of works of art: the analyses are carried out in abstraction from the *concepts* one uses when approaching art. In order for works of art to be possible at all, there must exist a concept of work of art, which again would seem to require the existence of a concept of art. In order to get a clear overview of all that is involved in the existence of these concepts, it might be a good idea to switch from attempts to characterize the essence of art and works of art, to reflection on what is required by way of concepts from a person in order for him to be able to experience art in adequate ways. What skills, knowledge, and experiences are required before we can say that a child can experience a work of art *as a work of art*?

If you put the question this way, on the pragmatic level concerned with the agents of art and their doings and competencies rather than with the essential properties of works of art and art in general, then it would seem to be an open question whether it makes good sense to speak of *the* essence of art. The socialization procedures that are necessary to acquire the required competencies seem, initially at least, to be a rather mixed crowd. But in every field of art, a competent approach to one work of art would necessarily involve some familiarity with a number of other works in the same field. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to appreciate the presence of the new and the absence of some of the old as well as the presence of a good many well-established features. The ability to make the relevant comparisons and exclusions, thus establishing a satisfactory ancestry for the present work of art (which need not, and usually does not, take the form of an art-historical dissertation), would seem to be the core of all aesthetic competence.

Perhaps this would catch at least something, on the pragmatic level, of what the principle of otherhood is intended to accomplish on the ontological level? "The essence of art" would then name a problem rather than a fact—namely, what kinds of similarities and differences are there between the relevant comparisons and exclusions in the different fields of art? Is there a general kind of competence that is needed to deal adequately with such different works of art as the illuminations of the Codex Egberti, Walt Disney's cartoons, the diaries of Anaïs Nin, Alban Berg's music, Kurosawa's films, and the performances of, say, the Netherlands Dance Theatre and Nina Hagen? Perhaps there is, and perhaps we can clarify what that general kind of competence includes by gesticulating in the right ways in the right directions. Then we could also get the beginning of an answer to the ontological question, about the essence of art, if we are still interested in that, by transposing our pragmatic findings into an ontological key.