

The Heideggerian Roots of Everyday Aesthetics: A Hermeneutical Approach to Art^{*}

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ABSTRACT. The premise and interest of the following paper is today's unfeasibility of unitarily defining art and, respectively, how contemporary philosophical hermeneutics has understood to approach this fact. Drawing upon Martin Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology, which reconsiders the ontological status of works of art and focuses on their character of "things" in order to destruct the traditional meaning of art, the paper argues that today's aesthetics of everyday life is a direct response to the post-Heideggerian task of rethinking art and the fundamentals of aesthetics. Adopting a hermeneutical approach to art has a twofold consequence for aesthetics: (i) on the one hand, it broadens its reach, extending it beyond the realm of fine/high art, towards everyday objects and experiences, and (ii) on the other hand, it sheds new light on the relevance of artistic phenomena for lived life. The paper supports that (i) and (ii) are due to the fact that hermeneutics itself, as a process of interpretation, underlies all human activities, resulting that human beings exist inasmuch as they draw the meaning of their lives from the objects and experiences that they encounter.

1. Heidegger and the Definition of Art

Over the last decades, both artistic practices as well as art theory have undergone fundamental changes, such that the definition of art itself now appears to be a major and urgent problem within today's aesthetics and philosophy of art. This, however, is not at all a new problem; one would jus-

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tifiably call it a “perennial” preoccupation of philosophy, since art has historically received numerous definitions and, by all accounts, still receives them to this day. Still, what the *actual* crisis of defining art brings new to the table is a rather conspicuous disdain for the act of defining itself. It so happens that if, historically speaking, a new collective mentality required a new conception of art to satisfy its political “unfolding,” the current societal configuration is somewhat turned against ideal notions, paradigms, and archetypal principles that would account for art’s creation and reception. This is reflected in today’s philosophy of art broadly conceived, as pertaining to all philosophical traditions and approaches. One might, for example, easily relate Harold Rosenberg’s idea of the “de-definition” of art, as expressed in the quote below, to Adorno’s well-known “nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore” from the opening of his *Aesthetic Theory*.¹ To further offer the gist of contemporary theory on artistic phenomena:

The nature of art has become uncertain. At least, it is ambiguous. No one can say with assurance what a work of art is – or, more important, what is not a work of art. Where an art object is still present, as in painting, it is what I have called an anxious object: it does not know whether it is a masterpiece or junk. It may, as in the case of a collage by Schwitters, be literally both.²

The current state of theory on art is understandable if we yield to Arthur Danto’s idea that the whole history of art is in fact the history of art’s philosophical disenfranchisement.³ Since Plato’s mimetic conception of art renders art unable to produce anything *new*, itself being *produced* rather than productive, the first explicit philosophical interest in art therefore ends up in suppressing the latter by fitting it in a philosophical system. This, Danto argues, happens with all subsequent philosophical systems, as well. But if history has shown that art has always been connected to ruling principles that would determine its “end products,” among the many fundamental questions this finding raises is how can one define art and

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London & New York: Continuum, 2002), 1.

² Harold Rosenberg, *The De-Definition of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 12.

³ Arthur C. Danto, *L’Assujettissement philosophique de l’art* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 22.

elude the above “assault” upon it in the same time. Currently, there seem to be two possible answers to the matter.

The first line of thought continues to attempt to define art satisfactorily from an analytical viewpoint (genus + differentia) and is what Shusterman generically named “analytic philosophy of art.”⁴ A brilliant example of this is George Dickie’s defence of the institutional theory of art, which claims that that art as a notion is invented by a cultural group, such that a sturdy definition of art cannot omit the underlying extensional cultural structures that deem an object art or not.⁵ While I see Dickie’s position as perfectly reasonable, I cannot help noticing, alongside Richard Shusterman,⁶ that his definition of works of art (that is, “A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public”) graciously eliminates all evaluative and substantive content, limiting itself to a strictly formal, or procedural, account of art. Useful only to some extent (i.e., it defines art in terms of a necessary genus and specific difference), it does not offer an in-depth account of art and, if any, the role it plays in our lives. In this respect, one may indeed argue my point that even those philosophers that have claimed the impossibility of a logical definition of art, such as Morris Weitz, offer a more in-depth account of art, since they support a continual reconstruing of theories “in terms of their function and point, as serious and argued-for recommendations to concentrate on certain criteria of excellence in art.”⁸

The other line of thought does not attempt to analytically put forth a new and perfected theory of art, but instead argues for the rupture of the tradition that has allowed such theories to take root in the first place. By excellence, its most prominent representative is Martin Heidegger, who, albeit being much less formal, is, in the same time, much more direct. Similar to Dickie and Danto, Heidegger argues that art has been historically placed under the banners of different ruling principles, and even though

⁴ Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), part 1, ch. 1, “Placing Pragmatism.”

⁵ George Dickie, *Art and Value* (Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 27.

⁶ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 38-9.

⁷ Dickie, *Art and Value*, 59.

⁸ Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 1 (September, 1956): 35.

these have provided it with a certain unity, they have also permitted it to become philosophically disenfranchised into art as imitation, art as representation of the Sacred, art as geometrical perfection, art as expression of the inner self, and so forth. But instead of coming up with a new definition, he claims that the work of art pertains to an intimate relation with the lived life of a historically-determined community and carries on to prove this by applying to art the process of what he calls “destruction,” which I will briefly explain in what follows.

Phenomenology, in its Heideggerian meaning (as outlined in *Being and Time*, §7A-§7C and §33), makes use of “phenomenon” first of all as a countercoucept to “being covered up”: all phenomena, Heidegger argues, are prone to being concealed by interpretative layers heaped up throughout the history of thought.⁹ It is the task of *logos*, or a certain type of speech, to uncover these phenomena, or – as Heidegger puts it – to conduct a process of *destruction* in what regards their various traditional interpretations. Hence the *logos* of the *phainomenon*, or phenomenology. Now, there are many instances in Heidegger where the reader can witness firsthand the process of destruction being applied to various phenomena. *Die Destruktion* is applied predominantly to the concept of “man” in its somewhat coined apprehensions as rational being and as “the making in the image and likeness of God,” which eventually led to the idea of “transcendence”, that is, the idea that the essence of the human being is drawn from a superior divine nature.¹⁰ For the purposes of this paper, however, I will not refer to Heidegger’s phenomenological approach to the concept of man, but rather to his later phenomenology of art.

In this respect, an exercise that will shed more light on what Heidegger takes to be phenomenology is to be found in his 1935 essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” I will summarize the phenomenological exercise in what follows. To see what art is, we should first see “where art undoubtedly

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 31.

¹⁰ See, for example, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 45 et sq. A very lucid early endeavor of Heidegger in this respect would be the second chapter of the first part of his *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 17-27.

prevails in a real way.”¹¹ This “place,” where art is as real as it can get and stands before us, is, of course, the work of art. Although it is debatable what is it exactly that makes it a work of art, we can all agree that what strikes us first about a work is what Heidegger calls its “thingly” character (the work’s *Dinghafte*), that is, the fact that it can be referred to as “a thing,” no matter its complexity, positioning in space and time, or consistency. Nevertheless, if we are to look deeper into the matter, we will see that what would appear to stand as a baseline in studying art (i.e., the work of art’s thingly character) has also been covered up by various traditional interpretations. A first predominant Western understanding of the thing coincides with Latin grammatical structure, which requires a subject and a predicate in all meaningful statements. This resulted in conceiving all things as comprising a substance and a series of accidents. A second interpretation tells us that a thing is something that can be perceived by the senses, i.e., the unity of multiple sensorial data. Finally, a third interpretation of the thing argues that the latter is some kind of matter which receives a form. Behold, therefore, three interpretative layers which need to be pierced by thought when trying to define art. While details on how these interpretations are rejected and employed by Heidegger are generously offered throughout “The Origin of the Work of Art,”¹² I hope to have clarified the so-called “destructive” dimension of phenomenology, which I will be making use of in the rest of the paper.

Above I have stated that it was in no way Heidegger’s intention to put forth a new theory of art and therefore contribute to what we might call aesthetic theory. In fact, throughout his entire essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” not a single definition *per se* is provided for art. Furthermore, Heidegger is against the very discipline of “aesthetics,” which he believes “assaults” works of art and alienates their relevance for man’s everyday life. Each depiction of a work of art in Heidegger’s text ultimately falls into describing a human experience. In Heidegger’s later work, this is taken on by his phenomenological analyses of what are normally seen as non-artistic objects, such as a jug, a bridge, a river, and so forth. Therefore, albeit no transparent definition of art comes about, something much more

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 18.

¹² More precisely, in pages 22-30.

important is aimed at by Heidegger, that is, the reinsertion of (fine) art into the everyday, the reaffirming of art's role within a given community, and, though seemingly unintended, the restructuring of aesthetics itself so as to better grasp everyday phenomena.

2. Heidegger's Pragmatism and Everyday Aesthetics

Heidegger is widely acknowledged as the promoter of hermeneutical phenomenology,¹³ which is to be understood here in opposition to Husserl's idealistic phenomenology. While the hermeneutical dimension of phenomenology is persistent throughout Heidegger's entire corpus, it was Paul Ricoeur who best summarized the opposition between the two types of phenomenology.¹⁴ In a nutshell, idealistic phenomenology supports that the ground of all intuitive experience is subjective (or immanent), while hermeneutical phenomenology argues that there is an ontological belonging of the "subject" to the "object" and viceversa, each participating in the other's development. Consequently, understanding something is concerned with interpreting and transcending one's self towards it, rather than with its direct intuition. Heidegger's use of *Dasein* implies that human beings exist inasmuch as they relate to the objects and experiences within their world, hence the concept of "being-in-the-world." To exist thus comes to mean "to ek-sist," to be outside one's self, oriented towards life events and experiences. Heidegger pushes this idea to the point where, if human existence is continuously dispersed among "external" things, we cannot anymore speak of a "subject" in the essentialist sense of the term. And, indeed, it seems that if we are to speak of a subject, we can only do so with reference to the world upon which its existence is drawn. But "subject" would, then, be a poorly chosen word to depict this relation; a

¹³ It is impossible to exhaustively reference this. Two random references are Richard E. Palmer's *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 124-30, and Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* 1, (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1965), 318-26 and 339-49. Also, see Ricoeur's depiction of hermeneutical phenomenology in the texts referred to in the next footnote.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 25-52, or, alternatively, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in *Noûs* 9, no. 1 (March, 1975): 85-102.

much fitter term would be a “there-subject,” a “being-there,” or, finally, “Da-sein”:

Da-sein understands its here in terms of the over there in the surrounding world. (...) In accordance with its spatiality, Da-sein is initially never here, but over there. From this over there it comes back to its here, and it does this only by interpreting its heedful being toward something in terms of what is at hand over there.¹⁵

This is quite similar to John Dewey’s idea that life does not merely go on *in* an environment, but rather *because* of an environment and because we interact with it. This seems fairly clear if we acknowledge the fact that all our organs, including our skin and our entire subcutaneous system, are all means of connection to the environment, rendering possible intimate interchanges with it.¹⁶ What, as I have shown, Heidegger calls “Da-sein” in order to better lay down this idea, Dewey will come to call the “live creature.” Aesthetic experience itself, as Dewey construes it, comes to be defined as “active and alert commerce” with the world: “at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.”¹⁷

Due to the intimate relation that hermeneutical phenomenology establishes between humans and their world, it comes as no surprise that Heidegger is considered, alongside John Dewey, one of the founding fathers of the recent philosophical current of “everyday aesthetics,” or “aesthetics of everyday life.”¹⁸ Before harvesting the common elements of the two philosophers’ ideas on art for the purpose of this paper, I will briefly summarize the main ideas fueling the development of everyday aesthetics. What I have indicated in the first section of this paper are only a few attempts to account for defining art carried out by contemporary philosophers of art. While many other attempts could have been mentioned,

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 100.

¹⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1980), 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸ See, for example, Crispin Sartwell, “Aesthetics of the Everyday,” in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 761-70, and Arto Haapala, “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place,” in Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith, eds., *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 39-55.

these would have all fallen under the criticism conducted by recent studies such as those of Paul Mattick, Andrew Light and Jonathan Smith, and Yuriko Saito,¹⁹ to name only a few. The latter have indicated that although recent contributions in aesthetics and philosophy of art point out clearly that aesthetics cannot anymore be practiced as a branch of modern philosophy which deals with high/fine arts, they nevertheless continue to construe aesthetics as an activity centered on art, as opposed to experiences within the realm of everyday life. This understanding and practice of aesthetics separates art from society in a way that has led many to question the value of art for various domains of life. In this context, what both Dewey's pragmatism and Heidegger's hermeneutics have sought to do is to reunite the work of art and cultural production in general with everyday life. Both have showed that by assigning the label of "fine" or "classical" work to a cultural product, the latter will become isolated from the human conditions under which it has been brought to existence and which it influences in its turn. I have identified two main reasons for this alienation:

- (1) The so-called "museumification" or "classicization" of cultural products, which was dealt with by both art historians such as Sedlmayr and philosophers such as Heidegger or Danto.²⁰ What it basically does is to lift the work of art upon a pedestal whose ultimate purpose is to become atemporal and above any life experience;
- (2) The transformation of cultural products into international art market commodities, diminishing their role and place in the life of a given community and isolating the artists from the flow of social

¹⁹ Paul Mattick, *Art in Its Time* (New York: Routledge, 2003), Light and Smith, eds., *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), and Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁰ See Hans Sedlmayr, "Problema timpului," ("The Problem of Time"), in *Epoci și opere: studii de istoria și teoria artei* (Romanian translation of *Epochen und Werke: Gesammelte Schriften zur Kunstgeschichte*), trans. Mircea Popescu (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2001), 170. Some Heideggerian hints are available in "The Origin of the Work of Art," 39. Although a somewhat anti-hermeneutical position, the fourth chapter of Arthur C. Danto's *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), "Language, Art, Culture, Text," is equally important for the reorientation of art toward social life. Finally, a restatement of the problem may be found in Cristian Hainic, "A Few Uses of Phenomenology within Art History," in *Journal for Communication and Culture* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 73-4.

services, degenerating in aesthetic individualism, eccentricity, and even esotericism.²¹

Now, there are three reasons for which Heidegger's contribution to everyday aesthetics is slightly more complicated to tackle than Dewey's. First of all, while Dewey's main contribution lies in his 1934 *Art as Experience*, Heidegger's relevant ideas are dispersed throughout both numerous works *and* a large time span, which naturally results in a need of more detailed analysis of how fundamental concepts receive different meanings at different times in Heidegger's philosophy. Secondly, and more importantly, Heidegger's writing bears a somewhat speculative and metaphorical nature, especially his later works. Thirdly, and probably most importantly, Heidegger is a declared anti-aesthetician; so how could it be that he is considered to be one of the main forerunners of everyday aesthetics?

Although the last question seems to be the hardest to answer, I propose a simple solution to it, mainly by turning to the conditions of possibility for everyday aesthetics. Crispin Sartwell seems to have best summarized them. As such, "the possibility of everyday aesthetics originates in two undoubted facts: (1) that art emerges from a range of non-art activities and experiences, and (2) that the realm of the aesthetic extends well beyond the realm of what are commonly conceived to be the fine arts."²² My first observation is that Heidegger's philosophy of art completely satisfies both of these conditions. My second point is that, if we construe aesthetics according to these two conditions, we might very well obtain a much more different type of aesthetics than the one Heidegger pronounced himself against.

Heidegger's focus on the everyday more often than not invests usual artifacts with some sort of capability to influence the quality of our lives. In this respect, Heidegger's detailed interpretation of an everyday jug remains memorable,²³ showing how it acts upon a peasant's life in the same way that, say, the boots from the painting of Van Gogh do.²⁴ The whole idea behind these analyses is to bridge art and everyday life under one

²¹ The idea is concisely tackled in Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 9.

²² Sartwell, "Aesthetics of the Everyday," 761.

²³ Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 164-75 et sq.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 33.

common purpose, viz., enhancing human experience. The latter, however, has a pre-scientific nature, and albeit its lack of formality, it bears a holistic characteristic capable of invigorating both the bodily and intellectual dimensions of human beings. How Shusterman has understood to prove this was by first of all rejecting the strict means/end distinction and, consequently, the implication that practical labor differs from aesthetic experience. In this respect, Shusterman simply assumed that means can be savored either as an end, either as a contributory aspect to the end.²⁵ He provides the example of driving a sports car and taking it slightly above the speed limit – this may be both an instrumentality *and in the same time* a source of immediate satisfaction in the experience of driving, that is, in the aesthetic experience of smoothly handling a speeding car.

How Heidegger, on the other hand, has understood to prove this, is by destructing everyday life in its multiple instances. Such instances include building a dam or a hydroelectric generator on a river, increasingly using technology, and so forth. This is not to say that Heidegger ever took any stance against these types of phenomena. On the contrary, he even gave praise to technology inasmuch as it furnishes the unveiling (or the utterance) of truth, that is, of hidden, originary, or forgotten experiences.²⁶ Nonetheless, when technology begins to render human life as if people were machines, compelling them to meet production quota and deadlines, persons entrenched in this ordeal lose sight of their being-in-the-world and begin to live inauthentically, i.e., they begin to disregard how the everyday entities around them fuse within their life. The same is the case with aesthetics: we have lost contact with what is essential in art mainly because of our craving for aesthetic theory. Hence the need for aesthetics to return to everyday life and to point out the relational worth of what would traditionally not pass as aesthetics' object of study. If we find Heidegger to be too loose in his argumentation in this point, we can simply re-read the exact same argument in other words at subsequent philosophers of art, such as Arthur Danto: since, historically speaking, art comes to mean fine art that makes history, art's so-called "progress" up to the 20th century has meant its progressive alienation from the experience

²⁵ Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 50.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Die Frage nach der Technik," in *Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 7: Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 13.

of most people.²⁷ It is only natural to remark, therefore, that before the idea of an aesthetics of the everyday, aesthetics was on the downslope towards its own ivory tower. I firmly believe that Heidegger went at *this* type of specialized, or compartmentalized aesthetics, and that he would have nothing against being deemed a forerunner for an aesthetics that goes beyond the realm of traditionally-conceived art and towards the very basic human experience.

Now, there is a reason for which I have chosen to point out the similarities between Heidegger, Dewey and, later on, Shusterman. That reason is my endorsement of the idea that Heidegger puts forth a certain type of pragmatism. It was Richard Rorty who first pointed out that Heidegger's hermeneutics is pragmatic by means of its effort to overcome the idea of philosopher as a mere "spectator of time and eternity."²⁸ It was also Rorty who first associated Dewey's work to Heidegger's in this effort.²⁹ I take this point to be extremely accurate and relevant for the reorientation of philosophy towards everyday life. What is more, I support that the similarities between the two are probably more evident in their philosophy of art, rather than in their common effort to overcome metaphysics, tackled by Rorty. Both Heidegger and Dewey argue that any practical activity will have "aesthetic value" as long as it is credited with enough self-sufficiency so as to determine the quality of our lives. Heidegger even chooses to quit using the term "objects" and replaces it with the Greek *pragmata* so as to better account for things as tools that serve the primordial interest of everyday Dasein to work.³⁰ Dewey calls this characteristic the "individualizing quality" of objects and experiences,³¹ while, as aforementioned, Heidegger writes that once this "quality" is overlooked, an "assault" upon the respective objects and experiences is installed – hence, a continuous need for the destruction of everyday experience and the objects within it.

²⁷ Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, 108-9.

²⁸ Richard Rorty, "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language," in Guignon, Charles B., ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 338-9.

²⁹ Richard Rorty, "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey," in Murray, Michael, ed., *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1978), 244 et sq.

³⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §15, especially 63 and 65.

³¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 35.

Consequently, both Heidegger and Dewey argue that a definition of art is less important than the *experience* of art itself. Instead of telling us what a work of art *is*, aesthetics should rather show what a work of art *does*.³² Aesthetics should, therefore, rather tend to be dynamic than static, hermeneutic than scientific. In a strong Heideggerian vein, Dewey supports that we are often misled to say that an experience, be it of any kind, even an “experience of thinking,” means reaching a conclusion. However, “a ‘conclusion’ is no separate and independent thing; it is the consummation of a movement”³³ – since a conclusion becomes manifest in the same time as premises emerge, if we are to speak of conclusions in aesthetics, we should only do so in a non-essentialist manner. I should point out the striking similarity between this Deweyan idea and Heidegger’s entire hermeneutical framework for asking questions, as presented in the second section of *Being and Time*, where to the classic scientific positing of hypotheses that are to be confirmed or infirmed, Heidegger opposes the hermeneutical shift consisting in *not* positing anything about what is being sought, since what we seek may offer much more proper preliminary guidance by itself. This I would be inclined to call “hermeneutical aesthetics,” although it differs little from what I’ve already referred to as everyday aesthetics, the difference being that it specifically refers to Heidegger’s contribution. But is hermeneutical aesthetics possible?

3. The Idea of a “Hermeneutical Aesthetics”

Having shown under which conditions Heidegger may be reconciled with aesthetics, in this final section I will attempt to show that the problem of defining art may be surpassed if a hermeneutical framework for the aesthetics of everyday life is determined. This hermeneutical framework is to stem from Heidegger’s ontology of art and incorporate Dewey’s central notion of “aesthetic experience.”³⁴

³² Also see Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Art Works* (Dordrecht, Boston, and Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 81.

³³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 37-8.

³⁴ I should stress here that my aim is not to colligate the Heideggerian and Deweyan philosophy of art, but to simply see if hermeneutical aesthetics may adopt Dewey’s idea of “aesthetic experience.” I am grateful to Kalle Puolakka and Ștefan-Sebastian Maftci

A common practice I have noticed in most philosophers' approaches is that they reference their studies on Heidegger's philosophy of art solely on the basis of his groundbreaking essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art." Such is the case, for example, even with Crispin Sartwell, who accounts for the origins of everyday aesthetics, acknowledging Heidegger as an undisputed source.³⁵ This is not intrinsically wrong, as the essay contains one of Heidegger's most cunning analyses of the work of art as a thing, and afterwards of the work of art as revealing the essence of a thing, offering the gist of what hermeneutical aesthetics should be. "The Origin of the Work of Art" renders clear the fundamental twofold task of any hermeneutical approach to art: first of all, a continuous destruction needs to be applied to what tradition, in its multiple instances, has accepted as art and works of art; secondly, whatever the latter notions imply, they should be permanently correlated with lived life and with the possibility of understanding one's own being in a world (or, as it will be pointed out, with *facticity*). Hence the shift Heidegger undertakes from analysing works of art to analysing everyday objects and experiences.

I believe, however, that a deeper insight into Heidegger's ontology of art is offered by the whole of his works, beginning from his early, pre-*Being and Time* writings, to his late works on the ontology of language. Hermeneutics as engaging of facticity, Dasein as "being-in-the-world," humans as finite "mortals" – all these contribute generously to the idea of everyday aesthetics, especially since Heidegger uses many of these ideas as milestones towards reflection on art and the work of art. Rorty accused Heidegger of trying to re-insert a masked sacralisation of poetry and language into philosophy.³⁶ I, on the other hand, believe that Heidegger turned to art after he initially set out to analyze the human Dasein because art exemplifies in a specific manner how we are normally (and generally without noticing) affected by other, non-artistic things that we encounter daily. This seems to be the case, according both to Heidegger's own examples of various tools, but also to some later phenomenological developments of his ontology of art, such as that of Mikel Dufrenne, who in his

for discussing my paper and advising me to state this explicitly.

³⁵ Sartwell, "Aesthetics of the Everyday," 767.

³⁶ He also calls this "Heidegger's nostalgia." See Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 49.

Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience radicalized the Heideggerian idea of a work's own time and space being imposed upon humans.³⁷

Yet, one of the most important Heideggerian ideas that have contributed to the development of everyday aesthetics is that factual life means being-transitive, as Heidegger has first formulated it in his 1923 *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity*.³⁸ It follows that hermeneutics for Heidegger is any sort of interrogation of this transitiveness. But since the human Dasein, as I have shown above, is a non-essential “entity” that grasps its existence relatively to its world, then hermeneutics is a process of continuous interpretation of one's own Dasein. And if “being one's self” means continuously interpreting our relation to the world, understanding one's self means interpreting one's self; likewise, each understanding is based upon a state of Dasein's already having-been-interpreted, which is equivalent to saying that the essential nature of Dasein is interpreting (notice the “-ing” to evoke a continuous process, rather than a finished act of interpretation). Therefore, perception is interpretation.³⁹ This happens in relation to the “whole” of the world, but the process is generally covered up by formal generalities that claim to offer “a disburdening and relief” in the world, and which thus need to be destructed – this is one way of understanding the interpretative nature of human beings. The other way is by turning to works of art, because these create new ways of interpreting our world and thus hint at our essentially interpretative being. Art may be, thus, said to be the source of ordinary experience, in this sense. The young Heidegger preoccupied himself with the first manner of philosophizing. Later in his works, he seems to have turned to the second.

The hermeneutical understanding of the experiences upon which the meaning of one's life is drawn takes place in the process of shunning, or *destructing*, all inherited schemes pertaining to things and events, and al-

³⁷ Mark Sinclair (*Heidegger, Aristotle and the Work of Art: Poiesis in Being* [Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006], 151-3) has gone at great lengths to show that what Heidegger initially projected as an “analytic of Dasein” turned into an “analytic of beings” with the discovery of reliability as a basic character of being for everyday things. Needless to say, this only further stresses the relational “essence” of Dasein, which is always and already dispersed in its relation to everyday objects.

³⁸ Heidegger, *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, 5.

³⁹ The whole argumentation in this paragraph is based upon *ibid.*, §3. Also see Sartwell, “Aesthetics of the Everyday,” 767.

lowing their nature unravel itself factually, without any mediation on behalf of reason or representational “thinking.” This does not mean that the Heideggerian (or, for that matter, Deweyan) roots of everyday aesthetics reject reason as such. Rather, I think their critique is more similar to Baudrillard’s use of the metaphor of the map in *Simulacra and Simulation*, depicting people trusting a map or a tourist guide to tell them where to gain aesthetic pleasure from. Everyday aesthetic experience has a hermeneutical basis not only inasmuch as it therefore gains an event-like nature, as opposed to a rationally-mediated one, but also because of its inherent *factual* nature, meaning that it requires the existential involvement of the interpreter, who thus becomes “deeply rooted”⁴⁰ in all experiences he aesthetically encounters.

So, on the one hand, hermeneutical aesthetics surmounts the scientific use of the subject/object paradigm, and, on the other, it argues for a shift of perspective in what concerns any essentialist definition of experience. Instead of regarding the world as a construction of the subject’s will or as something “discoverable,” or “verifiable,” the hermeneutical perspective on facticity has it exactly the other way around. The merit of the work of art here is that it stands as a limit case in the analysis of the objects around us, revealing how they come to influence our life and well-being (their “truth”). It is through art, Heidegger argues, that the utmost truth of human finitude is expressed, in that works of art explore the boundaries of human interpretation, to the point where language itself refuses to be further transposed in words, which may render artists “mad” if no renunciation is assumed on their behalf.⁴¹ This leads us to my next and final remark, i.e., that some kind of “textuality” underlies all aesthetic experience.

It comes as somewhat inevitable that Heidegger’s hermeneutical aesthetics regards all art as being based upon poetry, in the sense of *ποίησις* (“creation,” or “letting happen” of things) and *ποιέω*. We must notice, though, that the discussion on what poetry does is not limited to the particular case of art. It seems that Heidegger’s reflections on art and works of art only pave the way towards a more “originary” manner of thinking

⁴⁰ Also see Arto Haapala, “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday,” 50-1.

⁴¹ Cf. Martin Heidegger, “Words,” in *On the Way to Language* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1982), 139-56.

our links to the world as a relational whole. In two of his essays,⁴² Heidegger explicitly talks about how poetry's "function" of uncovering the things we are projected towards is taken up by language, so that a relation of equivalence between words and things comes to be postulated. What this basically means is that the textuality of things and experiences may "function" as a foundation for everyday aesthetics. And I shall explain what I mean by "textuality" in the following.

By identifying experience with self-understanding, any type of understanding with interpretation, and interpretation with *ποίησις*, Heidegger also established the ontological framework of language as the medium of all thinking. It was, nonetheless, Gadamer and Ricoeur who have manifestly dedicated part of their careers to showing that human comprehension only takes place within textuality. However, textuality here does not refer to texts *per se*, but rather to an evident characteristic of texts: their lack of perceptual immediacy. If common sense would say that the lack of perceptual immediacy is a deficiency of things and experiences, philosophical hermeneutics tells us that "rather, this apparent lack, the abstract alienness of all 'texts,' uniquely expresses the fact that everything in language belongs to the process of understanding."⁴³ Gadamer himself places the word "text" within quotation marks, as it refers to all objects and experiences of which textuality is characteristic. Furthermore, human understanding – i.e., human interpretation – takes place not in the immediacy of representational "thinking," but rather in the lack of the objects and experiences' availability for direct confrontation. When today's aestheticians of the everyday say that it is not necessarily art that produces aesthetic experience, but everyday objects may also act as catalysts in this sense, what we call "aesthetic experience" here is in fact the hermeneutical understanding of the unexplainable deferral which results from our fundamental interpretative nature. Just as Dewey rejected the compartmentalization of the arts, arguing that each art (painting, sculpture, music, etc.) belongs to every other art in some degree, because they all qualify any complete experience, so did Heidegger argue that all art is in some degree poetic,

⁴² Martin Heidegger, "The Nature of Language," and "The Way to Language," in *ibid.*, 57-108 and 111-36.

⁴³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 391.

as it pertains to and reveals our worldly experience. This appears to be the most appropriate starting point for a comparative analysis of the two acknowledged sources of everyday aesthetics and for integrating aesthetic experience in hermeneutics.

4. Conclusions

Conclusively, philosophical hermeneutics does not seek to define art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, but instead focuses on its relevance for the lived life of its public broadly construed, including its original creators and its current art public, both of which are generically denominated “preservers” by Heidegger. Dewey’s “experiential” definition, that is, art’s identification with aesthetic experience, goes hand in hand with the essential primacy of interpretation in Heidegger. As outlined, Heidegger renders mere seeing and observing not that an appropriate philosophical tool for the study of art: just as being, life, and experience cannot be predicated of, but only understood practically, by doing and experiencing, neither can art be fixated under a ruling canon. Therefore, hermeneutical aesthetics bridges everyday life and works of art under the banner of nonobjective possible experience, in that this experience is not something to look at, but is rather possible insofar as we *do*, realize, and identify with it.

I have also shown, however, that aesthetic experience as hermeneutical understanding is mainly possible due to the interpreter’s finite nature. As man is not an “infinite spirit,” human beings have to appropriate to their own cognitions the things and events they encounter throughout life. Thus, a certain alienation of things becomes imminent. Even if the “result” of the interpretative process while having an aesthetic experience is an unnamed deferral, it is important to note, as Shusterman also did, that when aesthetic experience is directly impressed on our senses and imagination, it “supplies art with an irrefutable (albeit unformulable) normative vindication.”⁴⁴ The mere aesthetic experience of understanding one’s being-in-the-world as made up by everyday phenomena is in itself overwhelmingly

⁴⁴ Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 47.

sufficient to constitute a foundation for an aesthetics of everyday life.⁴⁵ After all, hermeneutics as a process that underlies all human life is entirely preliminary: “what it all comes to is not to become finished with it as quickly as possible, but rather to hold out in it as long as possible.”⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ I should like to thank Professor Constance DeVereaux for reviewing my paper and highlighting the need to exemplify this specific statement. Akin to Heidegger’s own examples, I consider to be aesthetic experiences that *may* lead to understanding one’s being-in-the-world as made up by everyday phenomena the times when we realize that something (e.g., a tool) is missing in order to complete a task that we have already begun carrying out. Likewise, seeing an urban structure which we use daily (e.g., a street, bridge, or building) being demolished and / or rebuilt may have the same potential as an aesthetic experience.

⁴⁶ Heidegger, *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, 19.

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