

REVIEW

**Thomas Hilgers. *Aesthetic Disinterestedness: Art, Experience, and the Self*.
New York and London: Routledge, 2017, 190 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-90500-9**

Attempts to revamp aesthetic theories of art – including a restored relationship with beauty – are certainly not lacking in contemporary philosophy.¹ These attempts were made even after such theories have been challenged by contemporary artistic practices and strongly criticized, for instance, by George Dickie, Arthur Danto, Noël Carroll, and others in analytic philosophy and previously by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer in continental philosophy. Yet it seems a bold attempt to use the notion of ‘aesthetic disinterestedness’, which is now often called ‘antiquated’, as a key to unlock the nature of the experience of art and of art itself, not only modern art but also contemporary practices such as performance art, and thus to provide a universal conception of art.

These are precisely Thomas Hilgers’s aims when in his most recent book he introduces and defends a ‘specific version’ of an aesthetic conception of art based on ‘a new and sophisticated account of disinterestedness’ in order ‘to understand the nature and value of our engagements with artworks, including works of modern and postmodern art’ (p. 3). Is this a radical version of the aesthetic theory of art, as it seems *prima facie*? Is the explanatory value of such an account truly effective for all art, modern and contemporary? How fresh is this account? As the author himself acknowledges (p. 6), this book is on the whole an effort to rethink Kant’s transcendental approach towards fine art and the aesthetic experience as well as Schopenhauer’s account of disinterestedness and the self, in light of some more recent developments in philosophy and in the arts themselves, especially film, theatre, and performance art.²

¹ See Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), as well as the collections edited by Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, and Tony O’Connor, *Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy, and Art Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) and by Owen Hulatt, *Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). See also the review of the latter collection by Václav Magid in *Estetika* 51 (2014): 290–96.

² Among recent developments in philosophy endorsed by Thomas Hilgers are the arguments advocated by Frank Sibley, Peter Strawson, Monroe Beardsley, and Martin Seel in favour of an aesthetic account of art; Stanley Cavell’s *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), for the goal of achieving selfhood in the context of engagement with an artwork; Theodor Adorno and Christoph Menke for distinguishing amongst art and

Before discussing Hilgers's claims and arguments in detail, will assess the overall structure of the book. The account is sound, serious, and thoroughly grounded: well-made arguments support the author's claims and the ideas or theories of other authors are accurately presented when defending or grounding his own approach or when assessing them critically; possible objections are constantly considered and addressed. The result is a clear-cut treatment of topics, which usually leaves no doubt about the author's main claims, ideas, and conclusions: all these are clearly stated in the informative, useful Introduction, and are carefully summarized at the beginning and end of each chapter. One does, however, notice a slight reverse of the tactic of plain discourse aiming at maximum clarity sometimes when the author reiterates the main ideas or when he frequently relegates some interesting discussions and conceptual distinctions to the endnotes, when they would have served better in the main body of the text. Nevertheless, Hilgers's account of the nature and value of our aesthetic engagement with artworks is challenging and noteworthy, especially for addressing the engagement in relation to the question of selfhood and thus reviving a concern that used to be of great importance in philosophical aesthetics, not only in the philosophy of mind as it seems to be today.

The main question in the book under review is 'what it means [for us] to relate aesthetically to an artwork'. The answer is indispensable for understanding the nature of art as well. 'Disinterestedness' is the core concept to use when answering this question, although it is not the only one. The structure of the book conspicuously asserts this centrality: its chapters in turn 'introduce', 'defend', and 'explicate' disinterestedness, and lastly account for 'generating' disinterestedness.

Chapter One aims to present an accurate description of disinterestedness. First, Hilgers critically discusses Kant's influential account of interested and disinterested pleasure as well as Schopenhauer's claim that the aesthetic experience of beauty makes a person lose his or her sense of self. Contra Schopenhauer, the author rejects the notion that the experience of beauty must be non-conceptual because of its disinterestedness and accepts instead that aesthetic engagements with artworks may include conceptual relationships to form and content. On this basis, Hilgers introduces his cognitivist account of aesthetic disinterestedness, whose central and enduring feature is its non-practical nature, that is, the exclusion of all practical and personal-specific

entertainment, decoration, and 'the culture industry'; Georg Bertram for the aesthetic engagement as a self-reflective and critical process; Elisabeth Camp for an account of perspective; Ernst Tugendhat's *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*, trans. Paul Stern (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), for the topic in the title.

relationships to, or perspectives on, an object or the world. Accordingly, he claims that the adoption of a disinterested attitude entails aesthetic distance, psychological or temporal, and detachment from one's own perspective, practical engagement, or actions, and that this attitude makes one temporarily lose the sense of oneself, including intentional and non-intentional states. Thus, in his view, disinterestedness – as a non-practical relationship and disengagement from one's own particular perspective – is a constitutive or necessary condition for aesthetic engagement with an artwork (pp. 39, 48), although not sufficient, as we see in the later development of the question in this chapter and those that follow. Consequently, Hilgers proceeds to sketch out his own aesthetic-cognitivist conception of art and the artwork. He mainly draws on Kant's theory of fine art, free play, and beauty – understood along the lines of Paul Guyer's 'meta-cognitive interpretation' – as well as Theodor Adorno's objectivist account of the artwork's 'unity of meaning' and autonomy, for contrasting a 'work of entertainment or communication' and a 'work of art' within the larger class of 'presentational works' (pp. 28–29). While both categories show what they present *as* something and thus unfold a certain perspective, it is constitutive of the latter that it *must* make us see its diegetic world, and ultimately our own world, in a unique and revealing manner' (p. 27).³ An essential aspect of this 'active-passive' aesthetic activity of the spectator is that it includes creative and amplifying 'moments' since it supposes the attempt to construct a unique, yet open and broken, metaperspective that forces us to re-evaluate our fundamental perspectives on the world (pp. 35, 120). Hence, adopting the specific perspective, or rather the rich and antagonistic 'multiperspectivity' that an artwork unfolds (by definition), and constructing its unity of meaning or meaningful metaperspective constitute another necessary condition for engaging aesthetically with an artwork.

It is worth noting here that the artwork is characterized primarily in terms not of aesthetic properties but of semantic content and expressive features and

³ Such a 'unique and revealing manner' is then detailed by Hilgers: 'This second Adornian excursion finally allows me to formulate my full conception of art: in contrast to other presentational works, an artwork not only presents an incredible wealth of sensuous material and conceptual relations, but is rich in antagonistic moments that motivate us to keep looking for further aspects, relations, characterizations and interpretations, which may allow us to unify the work after all. So, an artwork asks us to achieve various syntheses, but these cannot be achieved as automatically and smoothly as it is in the case when we deal with a work of entertainment or communication. Rather, a particular (active-passive) effort and free activity is required on the side of the recipient [...] Artworks ask us to try out radically new categorizations, characterizations, and interpretations with respect to what they show, but also with respect to our own reality, to which the artwork presentation always relates in one way or another' (pp. 35–36). For the active-passive nature of this activity, see also Martin Seel, 'Active Passivity: On the Aesthetic Variant of Freedom', *Estetika* 51 (2014): 269–81.

especially the ‘power’ to prompt the free play of our conceptual capacities. The author is of course entitled to adopt such a position. It is odd, however, that the Kantian notion of the ‘aesthetic Idea’ is completely lacking, except in one note (p. 92n84), from the aesthetic conception of art and artworks which is assumed to be a ‘very Kantian one’. Surprisingly, Hilgers’s aesthetic account of art here relies on Arthur Danto who, contrary to Hilgers’s main strategy, warned in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* against defining art in terms of an aesthetic response because of the danger of circularity this definition implies. He notably diverts from Danto by understanding the idea that an artwork asks for ‘acts of interpretation’ by their recipients as involving an ‘aesthetic response of a particular kind’ – namely, a free and harmonious interplay of one’s conceptual and sensuous capacities (pp. 25–26, 54n34). Consequently, he defines the overall aesthetic engagement with an artwork as the *free and disinterested play* of our mental powers, seen as the dynamic and open-ended, yet pleasurable, process of re-articulating and creatively synthesizing (pp. 36–37). This process includes as a first ‘moment’ or phase the ‘negative side’ of disinterestedness (emphasized by Schopenhauer), that is, temporarily *losing the (specific) sense of oneself*, yet followed by the second phase of *gaining a sense of the other* and third phase of *achieving selfhood*. This ‘threefold nesting’ is essential to defining the aesthetic experience of art or, in Hilgers’s terms, it is constitutive of aesthetic engagement with an artwork (p. 50).

Chapter Two is mainly a defence of the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness against George Dickie’s influential criticism in ‘The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude’ (1964) and his subsequent essays. Hilgers singles out two key objections: the supposed incoherence of this notion, considered as confused and vacuous, and its irrelevance, since while engaging with a work of art a spectator is merely following a rule of the relevant art game. Hence Dickie’s preference, in exploring our relations to works of art, for focusing instead on ‘institutional conventions’ and normative settings. The defence allows Hilgers to refine the meaning, limits, and implications of aesthetic disinterestedness. Concerning the former criticism, he argues that the notion of disinterested attitude is not identical with the trivial ‘freedom from distraction’, since the former stands for something more than the latter does: it includes *attending* to the world ‘while *not* relating to it practically and while *not* relating to it according to [one’s] own specific perspective’ and thus it is hardly a vacuous concept (pp. 62–64). Yet he also honestly establishes its limits by stating that adopting a disinterested attitude is a necessary aspect of an aesthetic experience of artworks, but not a sufficient one, since ‘other kinds of experiences may also include the adoption of such an attitude’ – for example, the aesthetic experiences of other ‘presentational works’. This broad, descriptive

category designates works that are always produced in order to show or present something – concrete objects, abstract forms, figures, relations, and so on – and includes, along with ‘works of art’ (which is a normative, honorific predicate), works of communication, entertainment, decoration, or propaganda (p. 64; see also pp. 25–26, 120). Intriguingly, the reverse of that statement, that *not all kinds of aesthetic experiences are disinterested*, is barely discussed in the Introduction and only briefly mentioned in a note at the close of the discussion on Nietzsche’s account of the Dionysian.⁴ The author should have paid more attention to this intriguing aspect and should have tried to define aesthetic experience more thoroughly, notably the difference between its various kinds (interested or disinterested, of artworks or presentational works or daily life), and the special role of disinterestedness in its definition. In any case, the key to Hilgers’s account is that he has a broad sense of ‘aesthetic experience’: it is not reduced to a mere articulation of one’s conceptual capacity; rather, it involves the participation of one’s sensory and affective capacities, and can be very different in kind – interested or disinterested or ubiquitous in the context of our lives. Contra Dickie, Hilgers here presents his account of aesthetic disinterestedness as a complementary investigation of the *intentional structure* of a particular kind of experience or relation to works of art (pp. 69–70). Yet it remains unclear whether Dickie’s second, stronger objection – that we do not need a disinterested attitude to explain non-practical relationships to an artwork, since these are actually governed by the observance of rules and institutional conventions – is given a full and decisive answer (I will return later to this key problem).

According to Hilgers, aesthetic disinterestedness does not imply ‘formalism’, in particular the formalist account of art, such as Clive Bell’s, which is outright rejected by Hilgers. He explicitly contrasts his notion of the artwork’s ‘unity of meaning’ or ‘meaningful metaperspective’, inherently connected to particular contents, to Bell’s notion of ‘significant form’ and formalist account of art (pp. 74–75). In contrast to Bell’s and Schopenhauer’s views, disinterestedness ‘excludes neither the application of concepts nor the interested attention towards form and content’ – on the condition that desires, interests, and goals do not relate to one’s specific perspective (that is, should not be idiosyncratic) but,

⁴ As Hilgers points out: ‘Of course, there are other cases of dancing, singing, or playing music that are not disinterested, and do not make us lose our sense of self, yet still qualify as aesthetic experiences. In contrast to dancers at a rave, dancers at Milonga, for instance, hardly lose their sense of self. Nevertheless, many will argue that dancing Tango definitely qualifies as a kind of aesthetic experience. I agree, because dancing Tango includes feelings of sensuous pleasure. As I stated in the introduction, there are many different kinds of aesthetic experiences, and not all of them are disinterested’ (p. 88n11).

instead, to some other individual perspective or a shared, common world (pp. 70–72, 76). This formulation is in part problematic: while I understand the condition that such ‘disinterested’ interests should be those I share with all other members of my social and cultural groups, it remains unclear why they should alternatively be related to the interests of some other individual person, which could be as idiosyncratic as mine. In Hilgers’s view, however, it follows that, despite its conceptual nature (since it includes conceptual relationships to form and content), a disinterested attitude to artworks is neither an abstract nor a merely passive or disembodied relationship: ‘it does not disengage us from life and the “world of man’s activity”; but only from our practical relations to the world and from our own individuality’ (p. 75). He thus discards not only the implications of formalism but also the notion of the disembodied spectator. Moreover, a disinterested attitude does not exclude all kinds of somatic, affective, and emotional states or responses, providing that an emotion is jointly understood in cognitivist and somatic-physiological ways as both an intentional and evaluative state (p. 76). The free play of our mental ‘powers’, mentioned in the first chapter, is thus redesigned here to include not only our conceptual capacities but also the *sensuous* and *affective* ones.

Chapter Three presents the author’s conception of the self, progressing from an intuitive understanding to thoroughly explaining the nature of a ‘sense of self’ and its social conditions, for a better understanding of the disinterested attitude and a defence of his main claim – namely, that ‘a person must lose the sense of herself when aesthetically relating to what an artwork shows’ (p. 94). The preliminary comment – that ‘having a sense of oneself’ is neither a perception nor a subject-object relation – clearly places Hilgers’s account against the perception-model of self-consciousness and the theatre-model of the self. The questions of what it means exactly ‘to have’ a sense of oneself and ‘to lose’ it are answered in an extensive analysis of the notion of self, from Schopenhauer and Fichte to George Herbert Mead and Ernst Tugendhat. Following Tugendhat’s notion of ‘practical self-consciousness’, as distinct from a ‘theoretical or epistemic self-consciousness’ (originating from an interpretation of Heidegger’s existential analytic of *Dasein*), Hilgers maintains that having a sense of oneself essentially means ‘relating to oneself in a practical way’. Primarily, it means that a person ‘stands in a voluntative or affective relation to her own existence [...] when deciding to act in a particular way [and] when evaluating, via her moods and emotions, how the world responds to her decisions and interests.’ Having a practical sense of self also goes hand in hand with relating practically to things (p. 113). Additionally, Hilgers draws on Mead’s account of self-consciousness in order to emphasize its social and communicative conditions,

by connecting the emergence and development of the capacity to stand in a practical relation to oneself and the interaction with others 'who can acknowledge one as the specific person one is, and who can ask one practical questions' (pp.107–9). By endorsing Mead's account and concepts, Hilgers maintains that 'the self is not a substance, but rather is a process' of organizing all adopted attitudes, expectations, and norms. The self is called 'the me', when seen as an organized set of attitudes of the so-called 'generalized other', and 'the I', when expressing the individual's uniqueness and creativity in response to the attitudes of the others. In the same line of thought, Hilgers distinguishes a 'basic' and a 'robust' sense of the self, the latter indicating the progression ranging from learning how to answer other's practical questions to how to ask oneself practical questions and how to adopt attitudes and roles and evaluate one's own behaviours (pp. 110–11). Finally, returning to Tugendhat's account, Hilgers secures the notion that a person's 'self-determination' depends on reflective and critical attention to one's own decisions and to the factors influencing them – expectations, shared norms, and social practices. In Hilgers's terms, 'achieving selfhood', that is, a truly rich and substantial form of self-determination, depends on critically reflecting on one's own 'fundamental perspective' on oneself and the world (pp. 8, 113). This way, the author prepares the grounds for his central argument in the last chapter – namely, when considering the self-relation side, a person typically cannot relate in a practical manner to what an artwork shows, because 'a person typically cannot stand in a voluntative or affective relation to her existence when relating to what an artwork shows, and therefore must temporarily lose the sense of herself' (p. 113). Yet, as we have seen, such a temporary loss of the *practical-sense* of oneself launches a reflective-critical process that culminates in achieving selfhood. Together with the attempt or capacity to re-construct the artwork's meaningful metaperspective, such a critical re-evaluation of our fundamental perspectives is thus another necessary aspect of aesthetically engaging with an artwork.⁵

Chapter Four extensively argues why a person typically cannot relate in a practical manner to what an artwork shows by complementarily paying attention to the artwork-relation side – namely, the relevant historical-cultural settings and conditions of reception which the various arts determine. For that purpose, Hilgers employs concepts such as 'aesthetic sphere' and 'fictional world';

⁵ Hilgers concludes: 'Having adopted a disinterested attitude, then, is an essential aspect of our aesthetic engagements with works of art, but it is not a sufficient condition of it, because when we are disinterested but not attempting to construct a unique, yet open and broken, metaperspective that forces us to re-evaluate our fundamental perspectives on the world, we are not engaging with an artwork' (p. 120).

meaning the establishment of a 'metaphysical barrier' that makes interaction impossible yet allows the absorbing and immersive power of the various arts, and the 'invisible spectator' and the 'visible spectator', meaning the recipient who cannot feel personally addressed by what an artwork shows and is, as a practical agent, excluded from it, as well as the opposite situation. Thus, he actually spells out the normative and institutional presuppositions that guarantee a non-practical, aesthetic relation to artworks. The account is rich and entails some controversial questions (some of which I will discuss later in this review). The first part of his overall argument is well summarized as follows:

due to special conditions of reception, differently established by the various arts, one typically *cannot* relate to what an artwork shows in a practical way, and therefore *cannot* feel an immediate urge or obligation to make practical decisions, or to evaluate how things respond to one's own interests and intentions. The conditions of reception holding in the case of engaging with an artwork, then, guarantee the non-practical nature of this engagement and, therefore, conflict with the conditions of having a sense of oneself. In other words, every art has its own ways of establishing aesthetic spheres and unfolding fictional worlds that a recipient must feel barred from. One is invisible to these worlds, and being an invisible spectator is a condition of being a disinterested one. (p. 8)

This line of argument is supported by a discussion of the conditions of reception holding chiefly when watching a film (as a cinematic experience in the classic setting of a cinema), followed by examples of our responses to other kinds of image – photography, painting – and even to other visual arts, such as sculpture, installation art, and architecture as well as to literature. Although the responses to the last three visual art forms are borderline cases of aesthetic engagement (since we are not restricted to only *look* at them), rather than typical ones,⁶ Hilgers claims that there 'the dominant rules and conventions of the art world still specify a situation of reception essentially defined by the recipient's invisibility and practical exclusion' (pp. 134; see also 136–37). One way Hilgers integrates these cases into an aesthetic theory is to stress the nature of the engagement with such artworks as a dynamic and dialectical process of – temporarily – losing one's sense of self and of relating to oneself, in other words the constant back and forth between its three distinct phases. An important addendum is that the status of 'invisible spectator' – a condition for the disinterested attitude – is not automatically established: it depends on the spectators' beliefs and mostly on

⁶ Hilgers admits: 'a recipient typically is not meant to do anything with the objects of an installation, aside from looking at them. This, however, is not always true. There are installations that invite or force us to relate to what they show in a practical way, and that consequently do not allow us to lose our sense of self, or rather to adopt a disinterested attitude' (p. 137).

cultural and institutional pre-conditions, such as cultural habits, social practices, and institutionalized spaces (like museums and cinemas) that make people relate to images as artefacts that show something absent, with which they cannot (or should not) interact in a practical manner (pp. 140–41).

Conditioning aesthetic experience on the spectator's beliefs is in tension with Hilgers's previous counterclaim against Noël Carroll. More precisely, Carroll's argument in *Beyond Aesthetics* (2001) is that those who explicate the aesthetic experience in terms of disinterestedness identify this experience in terms not of the internal features of the state, but of the causal conditions that abet the state – namely, the agent's right sort of beliefs.⁷ Hilgers contends, instead, that he does not conceive of a disinterested experience as a specific motivational state, but as a specific perceptual state, a particular kind of attitude or attention (pp. 61, 88n4). Yet he introduces the spectator's beliefs as a necessary condition for the status of 'invisible spectator'. In that case, the right belief is that one relates to something that essentially is absent, with which practical interaction is either impossible or forbidden by a rule.

The main challenge to Hilgers's aesthetic theory, as he readily admits, comes from those art games in which 'the aesthetic barrier rule' (in Dickie's terms) or the 'metaphysical barrier' does not really apply: some of the arts clearly establish spectator visibility, open the possibility of interaction, and eventually even call for the recipient's practical interaction or intervention. It is the more complicated case of performing arts such as dance, music, opera, and, chiefly, dramatic theatre, especially those forms of avant-garde theatre (for example, of Max Reinhardt, Erwin Piscator, Antonin Artaud, and their followers) that turned against the rules and conventions of classic bourgeois theatre. Last but not least, it is the case of the neo-avant-garde movements since the 1960s and 1970s, notably happenings and performance art that force recipients to participate in a practical way, thereby making it impossible to adopt a disinterested attitude of the kind previously defended by Hilgers. Counterexamples discussed in the section 'Participation and Autonomy' are performances by Marina Abramović, which demand of the spectator practical decisions and responsibility (for example, *Lips of Thomas*, 1975), Gregor Schneider's walkable, outdoor sculptures (*END* 2008–9), or other recent contemporary performance artists or groups, such as Christoph Schlingensiefel, SIGNA, and LIGNA, which are part of practical life (pp. 152–56). The author honestly takes up the challenge raised by them and also by Carroll's claim in *Beyond Aesthetics* that the existence of non-aesthetic art proves the failure of all aesthetic accounts of art. Such challenges suggest two possible conclusions,

⁷ Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chapter 'Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience', 58.

both rather unfortunate, as Hilgers puts it: 'either [Hilgers's] aesthetic conception of art is false or some celebrated works of recent and contemporary art do not really qualify as works of art' (pp. 154, 167n112). His tactic is to denounce this conundrum as a false dilemma and to claim that such counterexamples sit well within his aesthetic conception of art, concluding that:

despite all performative and other types of turns, modernist and contemporary artworks still typically establish aesthetic spheres and unfold fictional worlds, thereby showing something that a recipient cannot – or, at least, *shall not* – relate to in a practical manner. In other words, I take it that the paradigms of aesthetic disinterestedness and autonomy remain powerful and alive today. (p. 156; emphasis is mine)

I would say that the line of argument used to defend these claims is less powerful than the previous one, regarding film, photography, painting, and so on, which entails what Hilgers calls a 'metaphysical barrier'. This is because, first, the author has to diminish the strength of his claims and key concepts while multiplying them, that is, he has to introduce a second sense of aesthetic disinterestedness, and also take into account in his understanding of disinterestedness the *practical consequences* of our aesthetic engagement with artworks (although these practical consequences are not immediate, as in usual actions, but mediated). In fact, his argument is, on the one hand, that such artworks or performances do not remove the opposition between art and praxis and thus still rely on the paradigms of autonomy and disinterestedness, precisely because they turn against them: 'Such works have their status as artworks and their artistic power in part *because of* their particular rejections of the aesthetic paradigms and the notion of disinterestedness.' They therefore rely on what they denounce (pp. 120, 144, 155, 167n117).⁸ Thus, Hilgers concludes, such works may even allow for a disinterested experience 'of a different kind' from that of the disinterested attitude in a 'straightforward way' or sense: the former is 'a contemplative-reflective relation to our very own decisions and actions', unlike the latter, which is 'a contemplative relation to what other works of art show' (pp. 155, 167n113, n115). It is worth noting that this different, weak, or moderate sense of disinterestedness only functions under the condition of a radical 'perspectival

⁸ In Hilgers's view, not only performance art but also the cinema of film-makers like Goddard, Bertolucci, Fassbinder, and Farocki makes disinterestedness a topic by rejecting it (pp. 131–32). Hilgers notes that his argument structurally resembles Sibley's regarding the dependency of non-aesthetic art on the concept of the aesthetic as well as Adorno's point that a negation sustains whatever it excludes (p. 167n117). I would add that it also resembles the repudiation strategy in the historical-narrative account of art by Carroll in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), in the chapter 'Art, Practice, and Narrative', 63–75.

shift': if one describes and evaluates one's actions from a perspective that is not one's own (p. 155). On the other hand, he argues that the paradigms of autonomy and disinterestedness do not imply that artworks must lack all practical or political consequences, as Peter Bürger, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), and others have suggested. Such consequences, however, can never be immediate; rather, they must be the mediated results of self-reflective play among our capacities (p. 156). Ultimately, his formula, according to which, in the absence of a metaphysical barrier, a spectator 'at least, *shall not*' relate to such artworks or performances in a practical manner, supposes a volutative attitude of the practical self(-consciousness) or a practical, specific willing being (as Schopenhauer argued), which were previously excluded from the genuine definition of aesthetic engagement with works of art.

In the short yet riveting last part of this chapter, 'Art, History, and Culture', Hilgers also acknowledges the necessity of answering the question whether the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness truly has the universal significance and value that he claims it has. The explanatory value of such an aesthetic account of contemporary art faces some major challenges, including Danto's objection, in *After the End of Art* (1997), to the connection between art and aesthetics – that is to say, that it is a matter of historical contingency, not part of the essence of art –, and Carroll's claim in *Beyond Aesthetics* that an aesthetic account of art cannot accommodate the constant development of art (see pp. 38–39, 56n51, n61–64, 157). In reply, Hilgers further specifies his aesthetic conception of art and discusses its historical and sociocultural conditions. Against anti-essentialist and anti-aesthetic objections, the question 'what is art' is put back into the picture here, along with its aesthetic dimension and function. Firstly, he argues for a universal aesthetic dimension of art: 'artworks always have had, at least, an aesthetic dimension', together with the more modest hypothesis that art always has an aesthetic function or purpose, even if it also has some other (possibly primary) purposes as well (pp. 158–59). Hilgers justifies his claim by the implausibility of the assumption that in premodern times artworks were not meant to be aesthetically appreciated. This observation seems acceptable, if it admits of their other sacral or representational functions. Nonetheless, one can overturn the argument by claiming that it is implausible to assume that today artworks do not have useful roles to play or practical functions, even if the aesthetic dimension is primary (as Hilgers thinks). But Hilgers supplements that modest hypothesis of the aesthetic conception of art with the modern ideals of 'critique', 'self-criticism', and 'autonomy', allowing for a specific, *normative* account of art, able to distinguish between works of art and mere works of entertainment, communication, and decoration (pp. 158–59). This stronger claim

creates a possible tension between a transcendental and an empirical, sociohistorical account of autonomy, hence the further need to reconcile Kant and Adorno within such a normative account. Hilgers's final argument here is that, despite its dependency on particular historical and sociocultural conditions or ideals, such as the modern ideals of critique and autonomy, his account does not lack universal value and application, provided that such ideals also are universal forms related to human dignity and freedom in general (pp. 159–60).

Finally, the short concluding part of this book briefly explores the similarities between mystical experience and the aesthetic experience of art, when asserting, in contrast to Schopenhauer, not its escapist dimension, but its *transformative* dimension and its epistemic as well as ethical value. Such value resides particularly in its counteracting our inherent egocentrism, helping us reach certain ideals of self-criticism and autonomy, and making free and real thinking possible, in other words, in motivating us to transform ourselves. Importantly, Hilgers's specific account of the value of our engagements with artworks and of artworks themselves distances itself somewhat from the generic aesthetic theory of art, which identifies the aesthetic experience of art as an experience necessarily valued for its own sake and sees artworks as intrinsically valuable.⁹ It is true that here the value ascribed to artworks primarily consists in their allowing us to have an aesthetic experience whose immediate consequences are achieved at the level of one's self-relation or selfhood. Or, in Hilgers's own terms, the power of art consists in an artwork's potential to induce our capacities into states of free and disinterested play, that is, to make us enter a dynamic and dialectical state of losing our sense of self, gaining a sense of other, and achieving selfhood, again and again (pp. 169–70). Nevertheless, unlike the formalist accounts of art, he also ascribes a practical-ethical value to artworks. And unlike the instrumental accounts, he conceives of such a value indirectly, as the mediated result of our *aesthetic* engagement. It is worth adding that he does not exclude the possibility of other practical – social and political – *mediated* consequences of the aesthetic engagement with works of art, providing that the 'political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension' (as Herbert Marcuse puts it), as ascertained in Chapter Four when discussing the political significance of aesthetic disinterestedness and autonomy (p. 156).

In short, Hilgers grounds his aesthetic conception of art and its aesthetic experiencing on a tight network of concepts and assumptions which rely on each other and form a chain of interdependencies and also function as a series of

⁹ See Noël Carroll, 'Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience', in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 46–47.

necessary conditions for an aesthetic experience of art. On the spectator side, the adoption of a disinterested attitude is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for engaging aesthetically with an artwork. Disinterestedness allows for the state of the free play of one's capacities and prompts the temporary loss of one's sense of self. This first phase is, in its turn, a precondition for the second phase of gaining a sense of the other, while both phases are preconditions for the third phase of achieving selfhood. Their relations are not simply straightforward, since such a process consists in dynamic, dialectical interplay among these three phases, a constant back and forth between them. On the other side, the artwork triggers this process by asking the spectator to adopt a disinterested attitude as well as to perceive what it shows according to its perspectives or to construct its meaningful unity or metaperspective, which is another necessary (but not sufficient) condition for aesthetic engagement with an artwork. Thus, the entire process also relies on the artwork's essential features: wealth of sensuous material and conceptual relations, multiperspectivity, and dialecticity, which are, in addition, criteria for its inclusion in the category of art. Due to such essential features, an artwork has the power to bring forth the state of free and disinterested play and especially the process of self-critical thinking, which again is a necessary condition for the real self-determination or achieving selfhood. Finally, the special conditions of reception also play a determining role in generating a disinterested attitude towards various arts, due to a metaphysical barrier or, when this does not really apply, the institutional conventions and rules.

That being said, some controversial matters and open questions remain. For instance, one question is whether one can have an aesthetic experience of art, with its dialectical moments and transformative nature, without actually adopting a disinterested attitude. Hilgers's key point in denying such a possibility is disinterestedness's role in barring practical self-relations and thus prompting the experience's first moment of self-loss: 'Due to its non-practical nature, a disinterested attitude does not allow one to relate to oneself in a practical way, and consequently makes one temporarily lose the sense of the self' (p. 8). On the one hand, this claim is in tension with his other contentions. As we have seen, such a non-practical self-relation can occur in different kinds of aesthetic experiences, which are not related to artworks. Conversely, there are aesthetic experiences related to artistic practices such as dancing, singing, or playing music which are not disinterested, that is, do not lead one to adopt a non-practical attitude. Unlike other counterexamples, such as installations or recent performances whose status as artworks is secured – by qualifying their experiencing as still disinterested, though at the cost of accepting a different

sense of disinterestedness or mediated practical consequences –, those practices received another treatment. The most questionable tactic of argumentation in such difficult cases where disinterestedness does not apply is to exclude them from the category of works of *art*, though conceding their affiliation to *artistic* practices. As Hilgers puts it with regard to music, works of rock and pop music usually do not qualify as artworks, unlike classical music, whose works typically are artworks because of the conditions of their reception in the concert hall. Yet, he adds, many examples of classical music probably do not qualify as artworks, given the (essentialist) aesthetic conception of art defended in Chapter One, which requires an artwork to have the essential features of a wealth of sensuous material and conceptual relations, multiperspectivity, and dialecticity (pp. 150–51, 154, 166n105).

On the other hand, there are different, practical accounts of art and aesthetic experience and theories of the self, where forms of self-loss foster a free personal self-relation without assuming disinterestedness as a necessary condition. As Martin Seel has rightly brought to our attention, Hegel's well-known formula 'being with oneself in the other' points to the fact that subjects can only come to themselves if they remain capable of going beyond themselves, and this polarity of selfhood and otherhood also plays a significant role in Hegel's philosophy of art.¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer's endeavour in *Truth and Method* to redefine the aesthetic experience of art and integrate it within a universal hermeneutic process of understanding is a powerful example of how one can argue for the dialectical or transformative nature of aesthetic experience and integrate otherness without grounding such an experience on a disinterested attitude. The challenge that Gadamer's position poses for Hilgers's aesthetic account, with which he honestly deals in Chapter Two (pp. 82–86), consists not only in notions of 'prejudices', 'fore-meanings', and 'fusion of horizons' – the latter being read here by Hilgers as a 'perspectival fusion' and somehow equated with his notion of 'perspectival shift'. It also consists in Gadamer's practical account of the aesthetic experience of art as an experience of understanding, of oneself, and of the other. Such an experience calls for intersubjective engagement – since our common language precedes experience and is a positive condition for, and a guide to, experience itself –, and has a dialogical and a dialectical or transformative nature – since it is a new event of understanding in which both the subject and the object of experience are changed or transformed. Thus, as an experience of self-understanding, it is also a key means of ontological self-constitution, *Bildung*, for which

¹⁰ Martin Seel, 'Active Passivity: On the Aesthetic Variant of Freedom', *Estetika* 51 (2014): 269–70.

‘the trained receptivity toward “otherness” is constitutive.’¹¹ From this standpoint, Hilgers’s ‘perspectival shift’ appears instead as a particular case or segment of Gadamer’s larger ‘fusion of horizons’ as an event of understanding, which entails a dialectics of understanding, of oneself, and of the other.

A further point for discussion is the underlying rationale of Hilgers’s theory of aesthetic experience, the very concepts of ‘work of art’ and ‘art’. This concerns in particular the tension between his essentialist proclivity in defining a work of art and the weightiness of cultural and institutional preconditions not only for its aesthetic experiencing, but also for its existence as *art*, already noticed with regard to music. Similarly, according to Hilgers’s account not every painting or film qualifies as a genuine artwork, distinct from the broad category of a ‘presentational work’. Most paintings, films, novels, and so forth do not come under the category of art – mainly because they do not unfold ‘a unique, yet open and broken metaperspective’, and thus do not have ‘the power’ to bring forth the open-ended state of free play of our sensuous, affective, and conceptual capacities which prompts an aesthetic experience (pp. 4–5, 118–20). His claim is that such a power is constitutive not only of an aesthetic experience of art, but also of the artwork itself. In other words, it is an essential condition for arthood, which initially is opposed to conditions established by institutional or procedural accounts of art:

According to my account, nothing is a work of art because it falls under a specific concept or rule. Rather, it qualifies as such a work because it has the power to make us have the kind of experience I have described. Whether it has this power or not always is open for debate. In this sense, the status of art always remains fragile. (pp. 38–39)

Nonetheless, the strength of this claim (which paradoxically also exposes the fragility of the status of art) is later weakened by the emphasis put on the conditions of reception and institutional conventions or rules. These conditions and rules are constitutive of aesthetic engagement with particular kinds of works and also of securing their belonging to art, especially the borderline areas of the performing arts and performance art, happenings, and installations, where the recipient’s participation in a practical manner is possible, yet barred not by a metaphysical barrier but by a rule: a spectator *shall*

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed & Ward, 1988), 10–19, 310–25, 340–41, 416–19, 430–31. For Gadamer’s analysis of theoretical and practical *Bildung*, along the lines of Hegel, and his practical account of the aesthetic experience of art, see also Dan Eugen Ratiu, ‘Everyday Aesthetic Experience: Explorations by a Practical Aesthetics’, in *Experiencing the Everyday*, ed. Carsten Friberg and Raine Vasquez (Copenhagen: NSU Press, 2017), 22–52.

not interact in a practical way, in Hilgers's terms, or what Dickie calls 'the aesthetic barrier rule of art games'.¹² In his defence of disinterestedness, Hilgers concedes that Dickie was right to emphasize the significance of rules and institutional conventions, but maintains that he was wrong to suggest that the adoption of a disinterested attitude always is an illusion (p. 70). Hilgers therefore calibrates his aesthetic account so as to pay appropriate attention both to the intentional structure of the aesthetic experience of art and to the role of its normative and institutional presuppositions:

Any investigation that totally ignores the normative and institutional presuppositions of our relations to artworks and also ignores our ways of expressing these relations runs the risk of becoming too abstract and illusory. Any investigation, though, that ignores the intentional structure of these relations runs the risk of missing what art is really about, i.e. it runs the risk of not understanding the power of art. (pp. 69–70)

To be clear, I do not take such a calibration and complementarity as a fault of this book. It is rather a merit to be attuned to the challenges posed by contemporary art and alternative theories of art. I only wish to draw attention to the contrast between the appetite for an essentialist account of art tending towards universalism, on the one hand, and an institutional account submissive to historical and sociocultural conditions, including those of reception, on the other. In particular, the latter account does not attempt to answer the question 'what is art' but 'how we identify an artwork'. This tension between essential features of artworks and conditions of reception raises serious ontological questions about the nature of art and artworks as well as the validity of some categorical distinctions. Such questions have not received full, uncontroversial answers by initially qualifying the concept of *work of art* as an 'honorific predicate' and the concept of *art* as a 'normative' one, different from a broad descriptive category, or by later developments in the last chapter of the book.

Undoubtedly, this challenging volume bravely addresses some relevant yet still contentious questions of aesthetics. It really is a challenge to attempt to conciliate transcendental (Kant) and empirical (Adorno), aesthetic (Beardsley), and institutional (Dickie) accounts of art and its aesthetic experiencing. Hilgers's aesthetic conception of art and its experiencing offers some specific answers, by means of an account of disinterestedness that thoroughly considers the self-relations side, a cognitivist account that opportunely adds emotions, affects, and

¹² As Dickie puts it: 'It is not that we are detached or distanced from a work of art, we are barred from the work of art by the rules of the art game.' See George Dickie, 'Is Psychology Relevant to Aesthetics?', *Philosophical Review* 71 (1962): 298–99, and 'Psychical Distance: In a Fog at Sea', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 13 (1973): 23. See also pp. 69 and 89 of Hilgers's book.

bodies when addressing our aesthetic engagement with artworks, a non-formalist account that includes interested attention to form and content and indirectly ascribes to artworks an ethical value, and a normative account of art that relies on a particular sociohistorical context. Yet it is open to question whether Hilgers's new account of disinterestedness offers a radical, strong version of the aesthetic theory of art. After all, he concedes a different, dissimilar kind of disinterestedness with regard to experiencing some contemporary artworks or practices, while accepting other practical (social and political) consequences, even if mediated, of our aesthetic engagement with artworks. In the end, then, it may be that Hilgers's specific aesthetic conception is, instead, a moderate, institutionally improved version of the aesthetic theory of art.

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