

## HERMENEUTICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF ART: A NOTE ON INTERDISCIPLINARITY<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** On the grounds that art cannot be subsumed anymore to the principles that have provided it with a certain sense of unity throughout history and that an ideal notion of art can no longer be defended, this paper investigates the hermeneutic and pragmatic roots of the recent philosophical current of “everyday aesthetics” in order to determine a baseline for the study of art. After pointing out the so-called “destructive” dimension of hermeneutical phenomenology, the paper counters the idealistic approach to art and concludes that art may and should be reintegrated within the lived life of a historically-determined community and cultural context. A key finding of the paper consists in declaring the interdisciplinary potential of the latter idea, which parallels Steve Fuller’s critique of interdisciplinarity as mere departmental flexibility and adaptability.

**Key words & phrases:** *art history; aesthetics; philosophy of art; phenomenology of art; Martin Heidegger; John Dewey; aesthetics of everyday life; Steve Fuller*

### 1. Introduction

A considerable part of present understandings of interdisciplinarity refers to the latter as a reorientation of traditional academic disciplines toward the social needs of certain given communities. While they may erroneously be seen as an attempt to renounce rationality in the favor of practical knowledge, such interdisciplinary approaches actually presuppose some sort of institutional collective effort to solve some problems that could not otherwise be efficiently addressed. The goal of this paper is to take the philosophical subdiscipline of aesthetics as study case and point out how the interdisciplinary notion of adaptability is reflected within one of its later developments, i.e., everyday aesthetics.

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It is for this reason that I firstly provide an extensive definition of the terms employed and then focus on the contributions that the hermeneutical phenomenology of art, as instantiated in Heidegger's work, has brought to the academic field of aesthetics. The point I make in sections 3 and 4 is that the hermeneutical phenomenology of art may be said to adopt a pragmatic position with regard to its study object (that is, art), especially if we consider the notion of "pragmatic" under the auspices of community involvement, as opposed to a bare refusal of rationality. The main point discussed throughout these two sections is the manner in which a pragmatic understanding of art may focus on aesthetic experience as the vehicle of community involvement. The conclusions drawn indicate that it may, so long as aesthetic experience is, again, detached from its reserved use in the fine or high arts.

## 2. Definitions of terms and concepts

Several key-terms with which I will be operating throughout this paper need to be clearly defined beforehand. At a first glance, it would seem that the terms "art" and "interdisciplinarity" pose less problems than the specificity of the phrase "hermeneutical phenomenology." It is my intention, however, to point out that the situation is in fact the other way around: while the philosophical current of hermeneutical phenomenology is clearly traceable to an authorship and a series of fundamental texts, art deals with a full-blown crisis in what regards art's definition itself. I will attempt to show that this crisis parallels a recent debate in the theory of interdisciplinarity, namely communication between disciplines as specialized approaches to fields of knowledge *versus* the intellectual reorientation of disciplines towards the current state of society, a discussion accounted for with various occasions by Steve Fuller (2000 & 2012).

First of all, however, I should explain what I mean by "hermeneutical phenomenology." I take phenomenology in its Heideggerian meaning, as outlined in *Being and Time*, §7A-§7C and §33. "Phenomenon" here is first of all a counter-concept to "being covered up": all phenomena, Heidegger argues, are prone to being concealed by interpretative layers heaped up throughout the history of thought (Heidegger 1996, 31). 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, that the essence of the human being is something that overwhelms it (e.g., Heidegger 1996, 45 and Heidegger 1999, 17-27). For the purposes of this lecture, 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 I take to be phenomenology is to be found in Heidegger’s 1935 essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” I will briefly summarize the phenomenological exercise in what follows. To see what art is, we should first see “where art undoubtedly prevails in a real way.” (Heidegger 2001, 18) 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 (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 that 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,” (Heidegger 2001, 22-30) I hope to have clarified the so-called “destructive” dimension of phenomenology, which I will be making use of in the rest of the lecture.

Hermeneutical phenomenology 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 concisely summarized the opposition between the two types of phenomenology (Ricoeur 1991, 25-52 and Ricoeur 1975, 85-102). 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 vice versa, each participating

in the other's development. Consequently, understanding something is concerned with interpreting and transcending one's self towards it, rather than with direct intuition. Heidegger's use of *Dasein* (or "être-là", or "being-there") 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.

Having outlined what I mean by hermeneutical phenomenology, there are two other terms that need further clarification: "art" and "interdisciplinarity." In the following, I will deal with art in connection to hermeneutical phenomenology, attempting to show that, by means of its orientation towards everyday life, aesthetics comes to illustrate a disciplinary reorientation similar to the one that Steve Fuller's enlightening comments on interdisciplinarity support. As far as the definition of the latter is concerned, it will suffice for now to define interdisciplinarity as a reorientation of disciplines in their whole towards the social needs of a historically-determined community. This idea will be tackled in the third and final section of the paper.

### **3. Art and everyday life: the pragmatic dimension of Heidegger's hermeneutics**

Because of the intimate relation that hermeneutical phenomenology therefore 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." (e.g., Sartwell 2005, 761-70 and Haapala 2005, 39-55) Before harvesting the common elements of the two philosophers' ideas on art for the purpose of this lecture, I will briefly summarize the context in which every day aesthetics developed.

Over the last decades, artistic practices and 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 paradox has many formulations, the best of which I find to be (i) Adorno's idea that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore (2002, 1), (ii) Dewey's statement that "by one of the ironic perversities that often attend the course of affairs, the existence of the works of art upon which formation of an aesthetic theory depends has become an obstruction to theory about them," (1980, 3) and, in a more speculative manner, (iii) Heidegger's idea that the essence of art is an "abyssal" one (1982, 139-56), i.e., it cannot be named. It is also interesting to see how a part of the analytic approaches to art (especially the institutional theory of art, as defended by Danto 1964: 571-84 and Dickie 2001, 3-11) showed that past definitions which have conceived art as imitation,

expression of perfection, expression of inner feelings, and so forth, cannot anymore account for today's artistic phenomena. Many new philosophical currents have sprung to life in an attempt to explain and justify what passes as art in our times: Moulin ascribes the difficulty of defining art to internationalization and globalisation (1997), Michaud attributes this to the "de-aestheticized" experience of art (2003), Belting to the idea that artists tend to shun all art criticism except the one pursued by means of their own work (2007, 120 et sq.), and so forth.

Recent studies (e.g., Mattick 2003, Light & Smith 2005, Saito 2007), however, have indicated that, although contributions such as the ones mentioned above 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 describe aesthetics as an art-centered activity which deals with experiences beyond the realm of everyday life. This understanding of aesthetics separates art from society in a way that has led many to question the value of art for general well-being, education, citizenship, and a host of other human concerns. What both Dewey's pragmatism and Heidegger's hermeneutics have sought to do in order to resolve the aforementioned paradox 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. There are 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 (Sedlmayr 2001, 170; Heidegger 2001, 39; Danto 1986, ch. 4<sup>3</sup>; Hainic 2011: 73-4). 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 services, degenerating in aesthetic individualism, eccentricity, and even esotericism (e.g., Dewey 1980, 9).

It was Richard Rorty who 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." (2006, 338-9) It was also Rorty who first associated Dewey's work to Heidegger's in this effort (1978, 244 et sq.). Although this point is quite accurate and relevant for the reorientation of philosophy towards everyday life, I support that the similarities between the two philosophers are probably more

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<sup>3</sup> Although a somewhat anti-hermeneutical position, this chapter is equally important for the reorientation of art toward social life.

evident in their philosophy of art, rather than in their common effort to overcome metaphysics, which is tackled by Rorty. Both Heidegger and Dewey extend the scope of aesthetics beyond the realm of art and towards everyday objects and experiences, arguing 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. Dewey calls this characteristic the “individualizing quality” of objects and experiences (1980, 35), while Heidegger writes that once this “quality” is overlooked, an “assault” upon the respective objects and experiences is installed (2001, 25) – hence a continuous need for the destruction of everyday experience and the objects within it.

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 allowing their nature unravel itself factually, without any mediation on behalf of reason or representational “thinking.” This does not mean that the Heideggerian and 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*. For an even more adequate illustration, we may recall those tourists that visit a city, and instead of enjoying its multiple sources of aesthetic experience, they unceasingly measure distances and calculate itineraries on their maps, following their travel guides to the letter. 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 *factic* nature, meaning that it requires the existential involvement of the interpreter, who thus becomes “deeply rooted” (Haapala 2005, 50-1) in all experiences he aesthetically encounters.

#### **4. Hermeneutical phenomenology as a basis for the interdisciplinary study of art**

The final point I would like to make concerns the symmetry between the inclusion of everyday life in the study of art and the reorientation of interdisciplinarity towards disciplinary relevance for society. I will first of all explain the second idea. Steve Fuller (2012) argues that disciplinary success is largely a function of institutionalization: “Basically any discipline can succeed if its members are provided with adequate resources to solve their own problems, which are in turn more generally recognized as problems worth solving.” He explains that Thomas Kuhn’s account of discipline-formation is justified only up to a certain point: “scientists” appear first of all as the people that strive to seize knowledge production from politicians, religious fanatics, and all other people that make it impossible to study

“what is true” without taking into account “what is good” and “what is just” at the same time. Therefore, this “autonomization of inquiry” naturally ended up perceiving disciplines as something desirable, mainly because of their: (i) secure borders of inquiry, which were independent of societal demands, (ii) precise standards for inclusion of new members and topics, and (iii) highly efficient “sieve” that would filter everyday concerns and “translate” them into new problems.

In the long run, however, Fuller’s purpose is to show that the creation of “disciplines” is from the beginning misrepresented by Kuhn, as disciplines came about as social movements that aspired to explain all registers of life in its whole, rather than as the domains of reality we now come to associate them with (Fuller 2000, ch. 8). The autonomization of enquiry briefly sketched above naturally led to considering pure cognitive autonomy, independent of the cultural and social context, a highly-reputed value. In their theorizing, disciplines are supposed to have progressively lost contact with lived life, to the point that nowadays “undermining the credibility of your colleagues is always a greater sin than simply doing nothing. In such an academic environment, interdisciplinarity is a highly risky venture for which there is little clear reward.” (Fuller 2012)

In a satirical comment on the imperatives and normativity of modern philosophy, Fuller distinguishes between humans as unique beings with rational capacities and “perhaps even touched with the divine” and human beings as mere *Homo sapiens*, whose capacity of change is inscribed in the variation tolerated by history and society. The latter so-called “naturalized” or “ontologically diminished” position is also, according to Fuller, the one interdisciplinarity should adopt towards disciplines. In this respect, and in the light of the first two parts of this paper, I believe it is fair to conclude that this position also parallels the hermeneutical phenomenology of art and, to some extent, pragmatist aesthetics. The two philosophical currents not only eliminate the “sieve” mentioned above and reunite art with everyday life, but, ultimately, they also “destruct” the ontology of knowledge production as we know it and as criticized by Steve Fuller.

As it is the case with everyday aesthetics, the “destructive” dimension of interdisciplinarity is also obfuscated by the increasingly competitive market and the pressure it places upon universities to offer training and research services simultaneously. As such, tenure itself now becomes a luxury that few institutions can afford. Under these circumstances, interdisciplinarity comes to signify the encouragement of values such as flexibility and adaptiveness to new departments, research projects and so on. Fuller argues that interdisciplinarians “of an earlier era” (e.g., John Mez and Ernst Cassirer) did not have these “values” in mind when accounting for disciplines, but rather a fundamental transformation of intellectual

orientation towards relevancy for society. I hope, in turn, to have sufficiently argued in favor of this alternative approach to interdisciplinarity, stemming from the multifaceted study of art.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Focus on Fuller's approach to interdisciplinary has shown that how the hermeneutical phenomenology of art acts within the field of philosophical aesthetics is the approximate equivalent of how interdisciplinary approaches should act within traditional academic disciplines. With regard to the study of art, hermeneutical phenomenology incorporates (but not necessarily renders as its purpose) practical knowledge by means of an aesthetic experience that may be gained from both daily and exceptional objects and events, as opposed to traditional aesthetics, where the exclusive source of aesthetic experience consisted in the exceptional status of art. Since conducting an interdisciplinary analysis of a phenomenon is, by definition, relative to a historically-determined community's cultural and social specificities, this paper has shown that hermeneutical phenomenology may serve as a basis for the interdisciplinary study of the phenomenon of art.

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