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BOOK REVIEW

Art as Human Practice: An Aesthetics by Georg W. Bertram

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A book review of Georg W. Bertram, *Art as Human Practice: An Aesthetics.* Translated by Nathan Ross. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, x + 240 pp. ISBN 978-1-3500-6314-3.

Georg Bertram's *Art as Human Practice: An Aesthetics* is a comprehensive, ambitious, paradigm-shifting articulation of an original aesthetic theory.[1] In its focus on aesthetic experience as embedded in and enhancing human practices, it addresses historically thorny questions, suggests new avenues of interpretation, and offers a theory with enough structure and flexibility to make a substantial new contribution to the field of aesthetics. Bertram seeks to reorient our description of aesthetics, arguing that we understand art best as itself a practice that challenges and enlarges other practices. In so doing, art enables us to understand nothing less than what it means to be human and to do nothing less than continue to carry forward the project of being human.

What is happening to us when we have an aesthetic experience? Are we being taken out of our normal practices, with our usual attitude to and knowledge of the world disrupted? Are we disinterested in a way that contrasts to our interactions with the world otherwise? Several historical and contemporary theorists of art, including Arthur Danto and Christoph Menke, have described it this way. In the book's first chapter, Bertram gives a sustained critique of this viewpoint, which he calls 'the autonomy paradigm' of art. His conclusion, ultimately, is that autonomy theories are too object-oriented and so are unable to explain the way these objects are embedded in our practices (p. 43). They 'take human practice as a practice that is subject to determinacy in a one-sided way' by thinking of 'human practice as essentially determinate'. Bertram instead understands human practice as 'simultaneously determinate and indeterminate', claiming that this synthesis 'has to be the basis for any explanation of art' (p. 52).

Bertram then moves, in Chapter 2, to give wonderfully clear summaries of two of the leading art theorists of the German nineteenth century, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in an attempt to 'find a concept of art that is not oversimplified' (p. 56). His book will be of great help to those wanting a general understanding of both these philosophers, whose work is both notoriously difficult and enormously influential. But Bertram's

[1] It appeared originally as *Kunst als menschliche Praxis: Eine Ästhetik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014).

work is not primarily a historical exegesis: he uses his understanding of Kant and Hegel to launch a better understanding of human practice.[2]

Bertram's account focuses on understanding the way aesthetic experience resembles other practices that surround activities such as eating, playing, or socializing. Essential to his understanding of practice is its dialectical embrace of tradition and challenge to tradition. So, while '[a] human practice is one that is essentially bound to tradition', it is also true that 'human life is indeterminate from the ground up'. This indeterminacy, importantly, characterizes humans just as much as it does our practices: 'The human being does not have a life form that is arranged "by nature" to be a certain way,' Bertram writes. 'What characterizes this form of life is that we always have to determine our practices anew' (p. 50). When the challenge of our own being becomes clear to us, we are prompted to look for tools with which to meet it.

This discussion of practices allows Bertram to make sense of their inherent openness: that they are 'not determinable in a final way' but always 'relate to an open future' (p. 51). This means that practices are 'constituted by tradition to be open to revision and criticism. This is what makes up the human form of life' (p. 52). This openness to revision means that 'there is a precarious practical element to human existence […]. Humans are beings that, in establishing what they are, always put themselves in play.' In understanding this, we 'gain an insight into the fundamentally precarious nature of human existence' (p. 87). This, as Bertram points out, means that our reflection on ourselves is practical: it 'entails change' (p. 87).

Change, in Bertram's view, requires negotiation, and one of the tools humans have to perform this negotiation is art. Here are a few ways Bertram characterizes this process: 'in art, various human practices come to be negotiated in a practical way' (p. 100); 'artworks are objects that are constituted in such a way that they initiate specific practices. By means of these practices, other different practices get renegotiated' (p. 101). Put most directly: 'Art has to be understood as a *process of negotiation*' (p. 114).

Through these considerations, Bertram arrives at two theses: 'first, that artworks and aesthetic events evoke interpretive activities that pursue and articulate the constellations involved in them […]. Second, these activities have the potential to provoke a renegotiation of other practices on the basis of their specific imaginative potential' (p. 149). There is a lot to unpack here, and Bertram does this through the help of dense but succinct paragraphs in which he defines his terms. Some of these are worth quoting at length, including some of the original German, to see how the interlocking parts of Bertram's theory emerge. Here, for instance, are his specificity and value theses:

> *Specificity Thesis*: Artworks evoke various activities in recipients on the basis of their self-related constitution, activities by means of which these recipients articulate the challenges inherent in the artwork's constellation of elements [*mittels deren sie die herausfordernden Konfigurationen von Elementen dieser Kunstwerke artikulieren*]
>
> *Value Thesis*: The constellation of elements in an artwork issues challenges by the way they provoke other activities in the world [*Herausfordernd sind Konfigurationen von Elementen in Kunstwerken dadurch, dass sie eine Neubestimmung anderer Aktivitäten in*

[2] I would, however, register a disagreement with one of Bertram's interpretive claims about Hegel, namely his description of Hegel's account of art's decline: Hegel does not, on my interpretation, believe that art is permanently declining, but rather describes the special challenges modern art faces given the fact that it can no longer create religion, say, but only depict it. Hegel, on my reading, thinks art has enormous potential in the modern world. Thus, I do not believe that Hegel's exploration of the energetic development of new arts is '[c]ontrary to his own estimation' (p. 199).

> *der Welt anstoßen*]. In dealing with art, we manage to redefine other activities in the framework of human practices, although this redefinition can also result in confirming already established activities. (p. 150)

Put another way: 'the properties of aesthetic value that we find embodied in artworks belong to the structure of the world in that they provoke the renegotiation of human practices. They belong to the structure of the world in that they challenge the way we deal with the world' (*Die ästhetischen Werteigenschaften von Kunstwerken gehören dadurch zum Gefüge der Welt, dass sie Neuaushandlungen menschlicher Praktiken anstoßen. Sie gehören dadurch zum Gefüge der Welt, dass sie die Auseinandersetzung mit der Welt herausfordern*) (p. 150; German at p. 144).

As demonstrated in these quotations, Bertram's theory makes frequent use of words such as provoke (*anstoßen*) or challenge (*Auseinandersetzung* or *herausfordern*). At one point he says that '[a]rtworks struggle to develop challenges' (*Kunstwerke ringen darum, Herausforderungen zu entwickeln*) (p. 197; German at p. 185). He also speaks of artworks competing with each other (*Kunstwerke wetteifern miteinander*) and of the 'agonal' struggle for meaning they represent (p. 197; German at p. 185). This vocabulary constellation, whose force is powerfully evoked by Bertram's translator, Nathan Ross, keeps the existential nature of Bertram's underlying claims always in the reader's mind. Art, this language makes clear, is nothing less than part of humans' struggle to understand and create themselves: an example of the constant attempts to forge meaning and escape atrophy that characterize our lives together.

This understanding of aesthetic experience as challenging our practices can, Bertram claims, be extended beyond the art world. Surveying a desert landscape, for instance, he suggests, 'issues a different kind of provocation' by offering 'a series of connections in which different elements interact in a complex manner' (p. 153). When we view a landscape in this way, 'we discover the natural landscape as an object that has the potential to guide interpretive activities'. The landscape can become an object 'of an unlimited process of exploration', provoking us out of our habitual interactions with our environment while still staying deeply embedded in our other practices (p. 154).

Bertram gives a rich argument for understanding artworks as working in and creating constellations, both internally – by referring to their own constituent parts in relational ways – and externally – by referring to other artworks or aesthetic genres. The claim that artworks exist in these kinds of constellations, always issuing new challenges, accounts for how new genres can arise and older genres can grow stale or atrophy. Bertram uses the example of film's evolution from silent to sound and then to including other media like animation, for instance, to argue that '[a]rtistic genres are always caught in a state of dissolution. They are always about to transform into new genres.' This, too, can be understood through imagining constellations that evolve within a genre but also stretch it beyond itself: 'Established genres,' he writes, 'are constantly reconfigured by generic constellations that have not yet been established in them (like the way film changes through the additional element of sound space)' (p. 213). Film's evolution is dependent on the 'development that the generic constellations undergo in artworks' (p. 214).

This emphasis on interpretive and normative practices delivers, by Bertram's account, an objective as opposed to a subjective account of aesthetics. Aesthetic judgements 'are oriented toward the question of whether artworks provoke an adequate definition of human practices. This is their objective basis' (p. 215). This means that 'constellations of an artwork release great irritations, open up surprising perspectives, that they present a grand structure, rich in tension, that recipients are provoked, that they are able to articulate their feelings in dealing with the constellations, and many other things.' The value of artworks, then, comes when 'they challenge recipients – which can also result in the confirmation of how they understand

themselves' (pp. 196–97). In other words, as well as being themselves a practice, artworks help us think through our practices: they 'bring greater definition to our practices in various ways through their challenging aspect' (p. 201). And, to repeat, in engaging in all of this provoking, challenging, and competing, art helps us deal with the existential questions raised by the openness of our own natures, or, as Bertram puts it, 'What we evaluate are provocations to human practice – provocations that I have summarized by saying that art deals with defining what it is to be human' (p. 216).

This definition of art also sheds light on what we are doing when we interpret an artwork: Bertram claims that '[a]rt's process of negotiation emerges from a dynamic connection between artworks and those interpretive activities that challenge forth definitions of human practice'. He adds that 'these challenges do not take place in a straightforward way, but are instead bound up with a complex process of judgment in which we consider artworks as valuable or criticize them as failing based on their own claims'. In this way, our judgements become normative as well as interpretive: 'It is only through these normative and evaluative practices that we can explain the intersubjective character of the aesthetic process of negotiation in an adequate way' (pp. 215–16). Here Bertram emphasizes the connection of these evaluations to humans' freedom: 'In their capacity to critically discern and evaluate, these activities of judgment contribute in an essential way to how we negotiate the definition of human practice as a process of self-determination' (p. 217). This, broadly speaking, is why art will always be modern: it is always being reassessed through new practices and pushing the practices themselves to re-evaluate, expand, or contract (p. 203).

A great virtue in Bertram's attention to practice, in my opinion, is the resulting attention to ways in which our aesthetic experience is embodied. Bertram reminds us that moving to music is not the only way in which we respond physically to art. We walk through architectural spaces and around sculptures; we have to 'practice forms of hearing' to deal with both architecture and music; we combine both tactile and visual perspectives when experiencing sculpture. We are often emotionally challenged, especially by narrative art, experiencing empathy, outrage, concern, or fear. 'We have to grasp such emotional reactions as activities inherent to the reception of the work,' Bertram writes, 'and they thus demonstrate a specific form of interpretation of artworks' (p. 133). This attention warns us not to privilege textual interpretation: 'to articulate in language the constellations within the artwork is something that we should understand as only one interpretive activity *among others*' (p. 134).

What, then, are we doing when we judge artworks? We are, Bertram thinks, evaluating 'the potential for artworks to provoke a renegotiation of the definitions of practices' (p. 221). It comes as no surprise that philosophy, as a human practice that explicitly reflects on human practice, plays a role in our aesthetic judgements, too. 'A philosophical or theoretical attitude toward art is part of art's practice,' Bertram writes – or, put another way, 'it belongs to the competition of artworks for aesthetic success to articulate this competition'. Such competition is itself philosophical, a kind of 'reflection on reflection' that can make art's role in our practices, and thus its value, evident (p. 226).

Art's contribution to freedom, Bertram concludes, is unique. 'Artworks accomplish a contribution to freedom because of how they challenge human practices,' he writes. 'The freedom that is realized in art demonstrates this peculiarity: It is not the kind of freedom that is involved in a critical reflection by means of concepts. Rather, this realization of freedom is bound to objects that guide the self-determination of practices' (p. 231). In a challenge to much traditional theorizing about art, Bertram claims that art objects need not be sensible or material. This opens up more productive analyses of literature and conceptual art, which, all too often, are incorporated into sense-based theories of art in only the most awkward of ways (p. 125).

In the end, Bertram concludes, we need art to 'issue necessary challenges' (p. 234). We need still lifes to show us tensions in social relations (p. 210), poetry to challenge our understanding of our own language, dance to show us what norms we unknowingly inhabit regarding how the body can and should work. Art challenges us to interpret the world; in interpreting it, we engage in a valuable practice of evaluating our practices, showing in turn how artworks are of value. This also clarifies how we evaluate artworks against each other: artworks that successfully challenge us to engage in these evaluations are themselves most valuable.

Given the richness of Bertram's account, the reader is left wondering how it could be applied to answer other questions. How does this understanding of aesthetic experience map onto other historical or cultural understandings of art? Insofar as art is often material or sensual, what can this theory teach us about our evolving understanding of the way we see or hear, and how our practices around these senses are also up for negotiation? As to the book's format, I found myself regretting the lack of an index, which would have allowed readers to trace how Bertram's complex interlocking parts cohere across his writing.

Bertram's theory consists of dialectically interlocking pieces that give an organically interwoven sense of art's importance and, most centrally, its existential role in human life. It gives us a context through which to compare other seminal thinkers in the aesthetic tradition such as Nelson Goodman, John McDowell, and Noël Carroll. Although its scholarly credentials are impeccable, this book is not a dry work of academic scholarship: it presents a genuinely exciting and energizing theory that makes one immediately want to apply it to artworks. It thus makes possible the very competitive, provocative energy of reflection and self-determination that its theory describes. Bertram's aesthetic theory should take its place among others as a comprehensive theory of aesthetics. Just as importantly, it is primed to make our everyday experience of aesthetics richer. In showing how art participates in and helps our human practices evolve, Bertram's theory reveals art to be an essential part of existing and thriving in our very challenging world.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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