

# Art's Speculative Perturbations

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## Abstract

In this paper, I consider the speculative movement of understanding performed by art. I show how the repeated coming-into-being of a work's structure not only participates in life's living discourse but offers a model for how to transverse its complex, often contradictory, landscapes. Art reconfigures the edges of (un)intelligibility creating a speculative ethics that perturbs established modes of perceiving and interpreting. I conclude with a call for the necessity of art in a transient world.

## Keywords

Art, Gadamer, speculative thinking, perception, correspondence, living discourse, ethics

*We learn from the work of art how to tarry.*  
~ Gadamer, 2001b, p. 77

Art perturbs. It disorders, destabilizes, displaces, disturbs. This paper explores the speculative movement of understanding engendered by art's perturbations. It is inspired by Hans-Georg Gadamer's readings of Greek philosophy, in particular his engagement with Heraclitus, to open up a correspondence with the movement of living, experiencing, and perceiving. Gadamer's study of Heraclitus reveals the incommensurable experiences of living that create a paradox for being and for understanding. At issue here is that the movement of life as one filled with contradiction compels us to make sense of the world in terms of opposites instead of in its unity. Art, I show in the second section, troubles the movement of separation that dualities perform. Art challenges the temporal, linear, and taxonomic procedures at the heart of sense-making practices and questions unwarranted disconnections between experience, perception, and interpretation. Gadamer positioned art at the center of his speculative hermeneutics because he saw its potential

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to deepen our understanding of life's seemingly contradictory multiplicity and to re-envision the inter-play of experience and interpretation. Because art brings into being its own language, it is indispensable to sense and to sense-making practices like hermeneutics, the focus of the third section. My overall aim is to show that art re-construes the relationship between the intelligible and unintelligible in ways that open up a critical correspondence with the "speculative ethics" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) inherent to all sense-making practices.

### **In-One-Another**

*The Heraclitean message is not differentiation ...  
but perceiving the one in everything that is differentiated.*

~ Gadamer, 2001a, p. 50

What has been handed down by Heraclitus are numerous fragments of "oracle-like paradoxes," riddle-like statements about flow and change, oppositions and unity, ignitions and extinctions, whose influence, Gadamer (2001a) argues, "is felt wherever philosophical questions are set into motion" (p. 21). Gadamer's Heraclitus studies begin in true Gadamerian style, as a conversation with the text, exemplified by close, slow reading, fragment by fragment, "proceeding from the morphological" (Gadamer, 2001a, p. 47). In this way, we are introduced to Heraclitean statements such as:

- "The barley drink that is not stirred separates itself" (p. 38). [Fragment 125]
- "For those who are awake there is one and only one common world, while those who sleep each turn away into their own" (p. 53). [Fragment 89]
- "The human being kindles a light in the night, when the eyes are extinguished. Alive, he touches the dead; awake, he touches the sleeping" (p. 74). [Fragment 26]

Stillness and motion, unity and separation, wakefulness and sleep, a world in common and one apart, what are we to make of these oppositions? As Gadamer labors through these fragments, discerning their resemblances and the historical multimodality of each term used, he puts forward re-occurring themes to connect statements in expository ways. Gadamer illustrates that for Heraclitus, the state of all things is one of movement and it is from this movement that things take shape, sometimes appearing this way, sometimes that way, but all *becoming from within the being of the same existential flow*. Furthermore, things can transition from one configuration to another without any apparent prompt or reason. Life, then, is unpredictable and complex. It presents us countless co-existent experiences that challenge meaning—just think of the flow of emotions as we move through re-occurring events that bring joy, cause pain, restore, or truly break us apart. What sense can be made of these seemingly incommensurable events?

In his commentary of Heraclitus' Fragment 21: "Death [not life] is what we see awake; what we see as slumberers, sleep" (Gadamer, 2001a, p. 54), Gadamer (2001a) explains:

Dream and sleep stand for the delusion that consists in the fact that we are not in a position to recognize one and the same essence in all the various things that we encounter.... The statement shows all humanity falling into the same error of taking what is opposed as separate entities instead of recognizing their true unity.... He does not just

mean what everyone knows, the ‘one-after-another,’ the necessary dissolution of one thing by another, like day and night, summer and winter, youth and old age; but rather, above and beyond this, he means the ‘in-one-another.’ (p. 56)

In other words, this is not a temporal sequence, a movement of change over time, although that movement is not eliminated in this account. Rather, this is a movement that is more like a mixing, such as in Heraclitus’s example of the barley drink where different ingredients will separate when not stirred. When we think of a mixed drink, though, whether literally or as a metaphor for life, we rarely think of its necessary parts in their separate states. These we assume are subsumed as an-other-within, even while they have also become something different, in having now become a mixed drink. But mixing does not quite capture the movement of transition that is implied by *in-one-another*. Instead, these suggest more of a metamorphosis or transfiguration of one state into another so that a new formation “arises like a counter-world..., like an event of emergence” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 386).

In another presentation of his Heraclitus studies, a 1989 interview circulated by *Philosophy Overdose*<sup>1</sup>, Gadamer elaborates on the character of the movement of the “in-one-another.” In talking about the opposition between war and peace as an example, he states that Heraclitus is not teaching us to distinguish and identify what is war versus what is peace, rather “both are the one: the danger of war and the task of peace, that is human life.... That which can be divided and taken apart belongs at the same time together.... So it is a single movement which produces this: *that of separation*” (n.p., my emphasis added). This suggests a complex fabric connecting all matter, where the tugging of some threads will produce a very different event of being than if another set of threads had been emphasized, leaving each set of threads vulnerable to believing theirs is the only truth.

How can we make sense of a living in contradictions that seems to randomly disclose and conceal itself? How does one thing differentiate itself from the flux while another vanishes into its folds? And what effects do these seemingly separate motions have on the whole? This is the hermeneutic paradox of living and the movement of understanding that Gadamer returns to again and again. He questions the notion of origins, asking “what beginning is a beginning at all that is not the beginning of an end?” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 361). He wonders what effect a world primarily focused on change as a rupture from the past will have on attending to understanding’s complex movement of self-regeneration (Gadamer, 1989). He follows Heidegger’s assertion that “Dasein does not first exist and then move; it is constituted by its movements” (Inwood, 1999, p. 133).

Here we also see the speculative logic that lies within Gadamer’s own notions of becoming. In a section in *Truth and Method* on the universality of the hermeneutic experience, Gadamer (1989) asserts: “What something presents itself as belongs to its own being. Thus everything that is language has a speculative unity: it contains a distinction, that between its being and its

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<sup>1</sup> *Gadamer on Heraclitus* is an interview presented through RAI Multimedia Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences and recirculated on the YouTube channel *Philosophy Overdose*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vs05n0-prss>. The translation of the interview was conducted by Philosophy Overdose.

presentations of itself, but this is a distinction that is really not a distinction at all” (p. 470). Philosopher Joel Weinsheimer (2004) explains that the “unity between being and its presentations of itself ... is a ‘speculative unity,’ not an identity.... [So] the crux of Gadamer’s hermeneutics ... consists in reconciling the unity of meaning with the multiplicity of understandings” (pp. 163-164).

Gadamer’s statement that “everything that is language has a speculative unity” points to the plurality within the unity of living and thinking inherent in language. Language is itself a multiplicity—performing its speculative being in its configuration of words, sounds, images, bodies, and objects. Like life, then, language is performative, in motion; carrying out a dialogue with itself that enacts its being *and* becoming at the same time. It cannot be defined or contained. Gadamer (2001b) explains:

Language is not something assigned by individual human subjects. Language is a *we*, in that we are assigned our place in relation to each other, and in which the individual has no fixed borders. This means, however, that we all must overstep our own personal borders/limits of understanding in order to understand. (p. 56)

Language, like art, as I illustrate in the next section, manifests in its own event of being and becoming. It is always, then, carrying out the speculative movement of sense; a movement that does not stand outside the relations and practices that make up lived life but neither is it constrained by them. “That things could be different,” science and technology studies scholar María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) asserts, “is the impulse of speculative thinking” (p. 110). Speculative thinking flows from the contradictions of life; those incommensurable experiences that create and trouble the boundaries between what is, what we thought was, what is no longer, and what might be (Davey, 2013); that is, an in-one-another without becoming one or the other. Philosopher Nicholas Davey (2013) explains:

Thesis and antithesis are not regarded as formal opposites but as speculative modes of one another. Hermeneutical engagement allows each position to re-describe itself in the language of its other.... This is not a case of a subject assimilating its other but of a subject becoming-other-to-itself as a consequence of learning how ... to think of itself in the other’s terms. (p. 7)

It is this undefinable space *between*—the space of neither *and* both, this non-assimilative becoming-other-to-oneself, that I am interested in. And yet, the movement of becoming other with no apparent transition suggests that we should no longer speak of an in-between since this reinforces the notion of distinctions between opposites. Furthermore, Gadamer asserts that the speculative self-movement of being’s understanding is not one of self-consciousness but *is* the movement of being and thought-becoming in the midst of living (Gadamer, 2001a). How are we to learn from a movement that presents its being in its own terms, is in us, while also requiring that we do not assimilate the other? Art, I believe, is a manifestation of a speculative space where the plurality of life meets the limits and possibilities of its meaning-constituting capabilities. It is to art that I now turn.

### The Constellation of the Art-Structure

*I call this change, in which human play comes to its true consummation in being art, transformation into structure.*

~ Gadamer, 1989, p. 110

Although the focus of my paper is on art in all its forms, artists do not stand apart from the politics of the sensible (Rancière, 2004). They too are caught up in discourses that commercialize, instrumentalize, and colonize meaning. But art, by virtue of its presence *in* this flow, *as* this flow, *with* this flow, and *against* this flow, provides us with a productive multiplicity of thought that furthers thinking. Art works with and against this flow in ways that move us beyond the seemingly oppositional—in the interplay with sound and silence, light and shadow, movement and stillness—speculatively provoking, in the words of philosopher Jacques Rancière, numerous “configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception” (2004, p. 9). In this way, art is the being and becoming of sense, and a key partner in, and evidence of, its moving effects.

Gadamer (2006) suggests that we miss the point when we focus on the creativity of the artist or seek to understand the meaning or event it is reproducing. Art, rather, is in how “it” comes forth as “something that one has never seen in exactly this way before” (p. 75). Attuning to art’s being means orienting ourselves to the way it conveys a fullness of meaning in the uniqueness of each iteration of its transformation into structure (Gadamer, 2006). In art, the movement of sound and silence, light and shadow, presence and absence become together—this is not like an opponent exerting its influence on the other, but the coming-into-being of their inter-play. Silence provides a ground for sound. Sound surrounds silence. Light is accentuated by shadows. Shadows are given depth by light. What we have here is more like a composition, a gathering of rising and falling notes, appearing and receding sounds, shapes, chords, and figures. These all *work together* to make *it* what it is and can be.

Art effects a correspondence with the entities and materials from which it is constituted and that lie beyond it. “To correspond,” anthropologist Tim Ingold (2021) writes, “is to be ever-present at the cusp where thinking is on the point of settling into the shapes of thought. It is to catch ideas on the fly, in the ferment of their incipience, lest they be washed away with the current and forever lost” (p. 11). This describes well the way Swiss artist, Edmond Quinche, watches the world while remaining at *the threshold of the visible*. In Florian Rodari’s (2000) book on the artist bearing that title in French, Rodari describes how the forms and figures of Quinche’s work are born from his attentive and repeated study of the way light shines from within the things themselves, revealing, if perhaps only momentarily, the impulse in a figure or the upright strength in a tree (Rodari, 2000). Rodari describes:

Every drawing, in effect, announces this slow approach, the movement of the figure as it marches towards its final form and being: the pencil seeks to grasp its point of emergence, when the act of accomplishment still remains, everywhere and under all avatars, possible. (p. 91, my translation)

Rodari, explains that Quinche, having spent six years in Ireland, was stripped of any preconceptions about taking possession of the workings of light. In a region where wind, light, fog, water and land create new and unpredictable configurations of light and shadow, it seemed best to watch and listen. In this kind of extreme instability, Rodari (2000) remarks: “there are no landmarks, frames jump about, perspectives dissolve. We no longer face things but are caught up with them, transported in the comings and goings of shifting manifestations and vanishments. Nothing is definitive. Nothing is had, but shared. We are merely *passers-by*” (pp. 45-46, my translation).

In his reading of Plato, Gadamer (2006) hones in on Plato’s explorations of a third kind of being, distinguished from those of ideas and appearances. This is a being of movement, a being that is not yet or one that is no longer. In this way, Gadamer says, Plato overcomes the false illusion of their being “any actual separation between the two worlds” (p. 69). From this reading, Gadamer (2006) concludes:

What he now everywhere aims to show is that, in the structure of the world as well as in the practice of life, we encounter the mixed, and within it we must seek and find the ‘exact’.... Becoming is no longer simply some kind of non-being, that is, something seen as the becoming of something different, but now it signifies coming into being.... Being emerges from becoming! (pp. 69-70)

Aristotle, Gadamer observes, develops this notion further by creating a new concept, he named *energeia*. This new concept, Gadamer explains, allowed Aristotle “to think a motion that was without path or goal, something like life itself, like being aware, seeing or thinking. All of these he called ‘pure *energeia*’” (p. 72), a concept that Gadamer states associating with art. This is because, *energeia* points both to the inherent movement within an art’s structure and to the nature of the challenge that the speculative unity of the work issues to us and expects of us (Gadamer, 1986).

Every work of art brings into being its own language. It asks that we stay with it, observing, experiencing, listening, following its lead, as “there is much that is completely unnameable to which the work directs our thinking” (Gadamer, 2006, p. 58). Art theorizes through a singularity that performs a “composite multiplicity” (Gadamer, 2006, p. 78). It is “its own measure and measures itself by nothing outside it” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 111). In its multiple ways of saying, sounding, imaging, sculpting, materializing, it brings the world into being (Gadamer, 2001a). It is in its coming-into-structure that art makes intelligible a movement of meaning that is often too complex to be attainable in any one way, or at any one time. Yet, this constitutive movement is often obscured by the prevailing obsession with categories and conclusions that determine, identify, and configure meaning once and for all. Rather, art is always a being-becoming. It is presentation, representation, and expression of the unnameable flows, stutters, collisions, extractions, swirls, lines, forms and horizons that make up the moving landscape of living life. Art is able to transverse the oppositions inherent to the experience of living and those shaping formalized methods for perceiving and representing life’s meanings. Art performs meaning-making’s fluidity and discloses how the layers of meaning that surface with any expression “do not muddy its intelligibility ... but increase it” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 567).

Rodari (2000) reminds us that the eye cannot see without light first hitting an obstacle. To see requires illumination and shadows. It requires that we pierce through the blinding light or boundless void and bring to being perception itself. What we are able to see is not only subject to light's movement, it is also shaped by modes of perceiving that shine on what is presented to us in particular ways. Art, then, is not a simple representation performed out of whimsy, but is more often than not, the result of serious, ongoing inquiry into the states of things, their appearances, their effects, and so forth. In the case of Quinche, for example, the study of shifting and refracting light was a re-occurring theme. Rodari (2000) writes:

Movement is born like a breath rolling up the underside of things, fueling their combustion. A bird, a cloud, a tree, are, for Edmond Quinche, emblematic figures of the breathing of light—carried by the wing, chased, inflated by the wind, seized in the quivering of all of their branches, they assure the passage, more or less lively, more or less fleeting, of this life-giving force. (p. 55, my translation)

We forget that perceiving is learned. That when we entered the world, the world was already there. As its temporary inhabitants, we each draw on and become with the words, sounds, sights, and rhythms available to us, groping our way through the lights and shadows of understanding. Life is always a process of discrimination and discernment, as we take into account, learn from and learn how to make sense of what we encounter. We forget that the intermingling of what we see and how we see is always in motion; an endless flow of collisions, emergences, ruptures, foldings, and fusions (Ingold, 2021). Yet, becoming does not dictate being. Its relationship to being is fluid. Becoming is unstable, open to rifts, perturbations, and interferences. Art directs our gaze to this movement. It encourages an attentive and engaged correspondence with “the ways along which lives, in their perpetual unfolding or becoming, simultaneously join together and differentiate themselves, one from another” (Ingold, 2021, p. 9).

Working with a multiplicity of registers and modes that present themselves to sense, art penetrates and perturbs assumed borders between discursive systems. In doing so, art undermarks particular practices that do or might spread through ways of being and relating that have complex ethical and political effects. The movement of art, Gadamer asserts, disrupts conventional associations between sense-making and reason. It reminds us that what is often construed as reason or reasonable undermines the way discourse is actually carried out in living dialogue, and is, therefore, continuously re-organizing the unity of sense it performs (Gadamer, 1998). Art perturbs discourse by unsettling the very dispositions and practices by which certain ways of saying, doing, and perceiving gain dominance.

Art tackles the difficulties presented by perception. It does not stand outside the vast and diverse contradictions of lived-life, but is instead an involved partner in exposing and seeking out new connections between being and becoming. Gadamer (1986) notes: “The play of art is a mirror that through the centuries constantly arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar: what we are, what we might be, and what we are about” (p. 130). Art surfaces and confronts spoken and unspoken questions, embodied meanings, felt-senses circulating through time and space in the very language of itself—that is in its multilingual, multimodal, material presentation. Davey (2013) explains, it is because art “does not represent anything actual [that it can] ... alter rather than repeat actuality” (p. 135).

Art's gift is to perturb our sensibilities; to keep us from thinking we are more than we are. As we face the magnitude of ways art puts into being relationships of sound, images, words, forms, and so on, we are absorbing, whether consciously or not, the many ways in-one-another moves and swells, appearing and disappearing in the relational movement of being and becoming. Art confronts us with boundless formulations for re-imagining our world. It performs the movement of sense-making in its multiplicities; working with movements that separate, fold, converge, permute, collide. It also confronts us with our limits, the prejudices that orient our beings and shape our discourses, prejudices that block our capacities to listen to ways of being and performing that disturb or disgust us. Art does not stand outside of thought-thinking, life-living, being-becoming. It does not provide answers or offer solutions. Rather, art reminds us of our effect. It asks us to consider the consequences of our existence, our reasons-for-being. It asks us to stay with the flow, and face the challenge of living in the midst of the multiplicity of ways of being and becoming that we are, and can be.

### **On The Threshold of (Un)Intelligibility**

*The creative artist has eliminated the frame, and the articulation of surface constitutive of the picture points beyond itself into other contexts.*

~ Gadamer, 1986, p. 89

Art opens up a correspondence with a world shifting and swirling; still very much *in* formation. This is not a disengaged process. What is presented to us in the world and in the work of art is both meaning-full but not self-evident. Gadamer (2001b) reminds us that for understanding to happen, “we do not need just to hear one another but to *listen to* one another” (p. 39). This listening, however, entails that we enter the other's particular way of unfolding the world. A poem, for example, Gadamer (1997) remarks, “wants us to know, learn, and experience everything that *it* knows” (p. 142, my emphasis added). This form of correspondence turns away from a process of sense-making that seeks to reconstruct the meaning of the whole as a something that aligns with learned modes of perceiving and interpreting. Instead, it asks that we turn toward a form of correspondence that, Ingold (2021) argues, “joins *with* ... the forward movement of ... [life's] ongoing generation” (p. 13).

Works of art challenge interpretation because of their semantic complexity. Listening, looking, reading, sensing, and interpreting require careful attending to what is collected in the piece and how the parts are arranged. A work of art presents us with a discursively meaningful gathering, in that it expresses something through the what and the how of its collective performance; a constellation of items that are themselves a collection, and so on, an endless assemblage of form, matter, and meaning. Because of this complexity, art stirs up the ambiguities and incommensurabilities that lie within meaning (Gadamer, 1997); that is, its meaningfulness cannot be lifted from its performance and defined once and for all. Rather, Gadamer states, the meaning of any work of art resides in the utter presence of the work *and* in the continuous, collective “hermeneutic struggle ... of making visible the unity of meaning which befits [it]” (1997, pp. 127-128). It is not the difference between composing and listening that is important, composer John Cage (1961) writes, but rather “their uniqueness and their infinite play of interpenetration with themselves and with us” (p. 171). As we engage with, learn from, and

reject the numerous art performances that surround us, we are actively participating in the intermingling of transmission and transformation, adding as we take, creating as we reproduce.

Art, then, is a model for what holding a conversation about difficult material entails *and* for how we might reconfigure our modes of perception and communication. Art does this in that it addresses us with its complexity, is willing to have its meaning-effect altered in the course of our interaction, but also speaks back to us, inviting new connections, pointing out unexplored directions, beseeching us to reconsider, rethink, re-envision. “A work of art,” Gadamer (2001b) expresses, “*has something to say to us ... either through the question it awakens, or the question it answers*” (pp. 69-70). And, in our questions of the work and of each other, lie the speculative movements of sense that reveal and conceal our understandings of self, other, and the world we share.

Art tackles the transversal movement of the concrete and abstract, the perceptible and imperceptible, the experienced and the interpreted. The world configured in a work of art, philosopher Theodore George (2017b) explains, brings “the ambiguities and contradictions of factual life into special focus precisely as ambiguous and contradictory” (p. 109). As such, art takes speculative thinking beyond its limits because it exposes and breaches the rules and norms of interpretive and relational practices that most of us feel we must follow. Artist Heather Mekkelson, for example, works with these ambiguous junctures. Known for installations made of reconstructed facsimile objects one might find strewn about in the aftermath of a disaster like a flood, she discusses her more recent exhibits. In these, Mekkelson creates intricate installations of abstract forms to consider more expansive metaphysical questions such as the nature of perception or the existence of time. When asked how she approaches time through sculpture, she explains:

Using a medium that results in a blatantly physical, obdurate thing seems antithetical to expressing a formless concept such as time. It’s a wonderfully daunting task. I have noticed, using assemblage in particular, that each component does a lot of the temporal work on its own. Whether the object is recognizable or not, it carries its own potential, its own history. Then my associations come into play.<sup>2</sup>

Gadamer uses the concept *Gebilde* to mean both that which is there in the *it* of the work’s interrelated components and the interpretive moves one might take to make sense of it. For him, *Gebilde* is not an act of construction as outlined in a blueprint but is “something that has developed into its own pattern from within and thus is perhaps to be grasped in a further formation” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 189). This process of “construing,” he explains, is similar to the strategies one might employ to make sense of a Latin text. As each Latin word is identified as a verb or subject, relations among words begin to form, until “the disordered fragments of the sentence, the words, suddenly crystallize into the unity of meaning of the whole sentence” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 187). This is an iterative and always incomplete process since the building of relations between components is a linguistic event and stirs up the speculative excesses of meaning at play within language itself, whatever its mode. *Gebilde*, then, can be understood as

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<sup>2</sup> Mekkelson was interviewed in 2016 by Caroline Picard in sector 2337 of The Green Lantern, p. 7. <https://sector2337.com/sector-daily/page/7/#how-does-when-an-interview-with-heather-mekkelson>

“structure,” or “contour” and “figure,” as George (2017b) suggests, to mean both the process of configuration by which a work might be interpreted to bring a particular “order” to its arrangement (George, 2017b) and the semantic overflow emanating from the substantive material of which it is made. As Cage (1961) remarks: “There is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound” (p. 191).

Art, I suggest, is a necessary dialogue partner in the ongoing conversation of life. It transforms the very configuration experience and interpretation can take by perturbing the ontological landscape from which perception and sense are construed. The speculative play at work in the art work calls for us to enter its complex structure; a structure that moves with and against the current in its recurrent iterations of being and becoming. It provokes us to consider the world’s arbitrariness, cruelty, beauty, ruins, realizations. Art awakens us to the power and effect of the very real, very impactful formations and gatherings of sense that circulate and mingle with understanding’s being. It challenges us to better understand the impact and power of our own forms of engagement. It asks that we consider critically the way our sense-making practices are themselves complicitly reproducing the very systems that constrain our abilities to see and relate differently. This turn to the being of perception should not be misunderstood as a perceiving that stands outside of lived life. It is, rather, a perceiving that critically considers how the circumstances of our situatedness participate in what can be perceived and how (Haraway, 1988). In addition, feminist science and technology studies scholar Donna Haraway (1988) reminds us that “vision is *always* a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices” (p. 585).

Art transforms our speculative and hermeneutic ways of perceiving and interpreting and simultaneously asks us to consider the ethical issues at play in these very practices. Art perturbs because it places us in a dialogical event, where the possibilities and implications of our interpretive capacities and procedures are brought into being again and again in different ways, perturbing the way things are thought to be, stirring up different configurations for being. It confronts us with a “speculative in ethics [that] invokes an indecisive critical approach, one that doesn’t seek refuge in the stances it takes, aware and appreciative of the vulnerability of any position” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 7).

Since these conversations are occurring across time, place, disciplines, languages, and artistic forms, we can’t assume to understand their complexity of meaning or the unfamiliarity of their form without effort. George (2017a) asserts that “to *be* a conversation from out of the larger context of life ... may be said at once to require that we have much *less* in common than a common tradition and, precisely for this reason, to demand much *more* of us” (p. 345). By listening to the beginnings and absences of comprehensive meaning, the stutters and breaks in our thinking together as we seek connective junctures, stumble on to new perceptions, we bring into visibility as well as perturb the potentials, limits, and effects of our sense-making practices. In this way, art reveals forms of ordering that teeter on the edge of intelligibility, and, that when critically scrutinized, often “collapse into non-meaning” (Davey, 2013, p. 51).

Gadamer (2007) notes that the Greeks had a word “for that which brings our understanding to a standstill. They called it the *atopon* ... [meaning] ‘the placeless,’ that which cannot be fitted into the categories of expectation in our understanding and which therefore causes us to be suspicious

of it” (p. 93). Rather than be suspicious of what at first we do not understand, or at first appears offensive, or something unworthy of our attention, art asks us to look again, to listen more intently. As Cage (1961) provocatively suggests, a sound should not fear “the silence that extinguishes it” (p. 173), or environmental noises that appear to interrupt or exist outside its composition. It is in these experiences of perturbation that art engages us in speculative thinking at the edge of certainty.

We need art. Art performs a speculative ethics by provoking us to partake in conversations and confront ethical questions pertaining to our beings and becomings as individuals and societies. It forces us to consider the movements of thinking and being already infiltrating the fabric of life and those bubbling up from within its complex array of discursive systems. Art asks us to consider the ramifications of likely and seemingly unlikely scenarios arising from the in-one-another of a shared existence on our ways of being and understanding. It asks that we do not thoughtlessly accept the settling of meaning and matter. Rather, it calls on us to remember that a barley drink will separate when not stirred.

### **Art by Necessity**

*I tried to demonstrate that art can convey truth and therefore form public opinion, that art stood for more than giving aesthetic pleasure.*

~ Gadamer, 1992, p. 63

What I have illustrated in this paper is that art’s location in society has a direct and indirect effect on a public’s capacity for sense-making. Art confronts the forms and practices of inquiring, conversing, and relating that circulate through institutional and social contexts. Art blurs the arbitrary boundaries established by societies around disciplines of knowledge, including what counts as art. For example, Cage’s “experimental” compositions troubled the definition of music by focusing on noise and the “organization of sound” (Cage, 1961, p. 3), which in turn pushed us to consider the way music, and all forms of sound intermingle with our living, how we attend to them, what they do to us, what the consequences of their definitions mean to society. Entering the movement of speculative thinking in conversation with art deepens our attentiveness to the consequences our ways of perceiving have on our understandings of lived life and the ecological contexts in which these lives take place.

Gadamer saw in art the inexhaustible and rich multiplicity of understanding. He recognized the dangers to our hermeneutic practices that situating art as mere embellishment would have on the interpretive capacity of individuals and societies. Instead, he called on the rehabilitation of their critical correspondence. Dialoguing with art, engaging interpretively with its multiple forms is not a frivolous activity. It, more than anything else we have at our disposal, performs an uninterrupted, public speculative ethics, always keeping open the threshold where intelligibility and unintelligibility redescribe themselves in the language of its other.

The living discourse of the distribution of sense often works behind our backs, invisibly like the motion of the undertow as it pulls water back into the ocean, keeping rhythm with each breaking wave. Art makes visible the consequences of this often imperceptible effect of our interpretive and discursive systems and calls on us to stay critically attentive to their repercussions. This is

not to suggest that art has any moral edge or never harms, silences, oppresses, or exploits. Quite the contrary, all speculative conversations are complex inter-plays of the harmonious movement of the undertow and the transversal disruption of the riptide. These seemingly irreconcilable movements open up spaces of correspondence that, with effort, reveal the speculative unity of the in-one-another. The sheer magnitude and diversity of art is evidence of this performative and unfinished unity within diversity; a creative capacity that is not to be taken for granted in a transient world. By staying on the threshold of (un)intelligibility, conversing and confronting the difficulties of a seemingly senseless world, art can hold us together.

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