

Hermeneutical Movement: Play, Leeway, and a Coda on Free Jazz

Cynthia Nielsen

I begin with Gadamer's understanding of play. According to Gadamer, play is a fundamental aspect of human life and experience and is observed in a wide array of practices including ritual, cultic, and artistic practices as well as in children's games and the interactions among non-human animals.

In his reflections on art, Gadamer identifies play as integral to art's dynamic ontology—that is, the artwork comes forth and “speaks” through its enactment via a dialogical play-movement brought about through engaged participation. Whether in his earlier discussions of art in *Truth and Method* or in his later writings such as “The Relevance of the Beautiful” and “The Artwork in Word and Truth,” Gadamer emphasizes that, hermeneutically and phenomenologically speaking, the artwork exists or is “there” only in its performance or enactment.

That is, an artwork is not experienced as a static object, which a detached subject examines. Rather, an artwork is a dynamic, communicative, and communal event. Whether we have a musical work, a play, a poem, or even a painting in mind, the musicians, actors, readers, and viewers together enact the work, allowing it to come forth, present itself, and say something.

Performers, in this broadened sense, include not only the artists who compose or create the work and the musicians or actors who perform and enact it, but also engaged spectators and auditors.

Artworks, thus, exhibit a being-toward-others and their dynamic being requires engaged participants; more provocatively put, the artwork's being is *becoming* and without engaged participants is (more like) non-being. In what follows, I hope to clarify Gadamer's notion of play in its multiple senses and examine his analysis of play as central to art's being as a communicative, multi-player event. Along the way, I will discuss various musical examples to illustrate Gadamer's claims. Then at the end I discuss how Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics might be brought into fruitful dialogue with free jazz (or something in the neighborhood of free jazz.)