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The Dialectic of Presence and Interpretation in Everyday Aesthetics: Applying Heidegger and Gumbrecht to a Walk in One's Neighborhood

Thomas Leddy

Gumbrecht's Heidegger-inspired book, *Production of Presence*, provides valuable tools for resolving issues in everyday aesthetics. Gumbrecht distinguishes between "presence cultures" and "interpretation cultures." (Gumbrecht 2004) We live in an interpretation culture, and yet even in our culture there are presence effects. Gumbrecht understands aesthetic experience in terms of the idea of presence. His paradigms are great works of art and great athletic events, all of which take us away from the everyday. I argue that his theory can be adapted, ironically, to everyday aesthetics, in particular to the experience of taking a walk. Much of what we experience aesthetically while taking a walk is experienced in the mode of silence. But, as Gumbrecht observes, there is an oscillation between presence effects and interpretation effects in aesthetic experience. I see that oscillation as something more like a dialectic. I also bring Plato's theory of beauty and Danto's theory of the artworld into this discussion. | Keywords: *Everyday Aesthetics, Presence, Gumbrecht, Heidegger, Walking*

1. Introduction

This issue of ESPES is devoted to the application of European philosophical traditions to everyday aesthetics. My contribution will be drawing on Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* by way mostly of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's reading in his *Production of Presence* (2004). Although Gumbrecht has little or nothing to say about everyday aesthetics in that book (it is mainly about literary appreciation and the future of the humanities) his understanding of presence provides some helpful direction for the new sub-discipline of everyday aesthetics.

The terms 'presence' and 'presencing' should not be confused with another Heideggerian use of "presence" and correlated use of "present." Heidegger speaks critically of the "metaphysics of presence," specifically of Aristotle's privileging of the present, ignoring the dimensions of the past and future, in his interpretation of time. In doing so, he is thinking of the present not only as 'the now' but also as eternal presence in the mind of God or in the unchanging laws of science, and really, the way the Forms are said to be eternally the same. Oxford Reference says the term "was used by Heidegger to characterize the central mistake of western metaphysics [...] [a postulation of a] self-knowing and self-propelling autonomous agent, for whom nature exists only in so far as it is present, which means useful" (Chandler and Munday, 2020). Presencing, however, as described by Gumbrecht and adopted here, is not directed towards anything eternal or excluding of the dynamic of past/present/future. Nor does it approach nature as present to an autonomous agent as merely useful. Like Heidegger, Derrida speaks of the metaphysics of presence as, to quote from another encyclopedia article, the "tendency to conceive fundamental philosophical concepts such as truth, reality, and being in terms of ideas such as presence, essence, identity, and origin - and in the process to ignore the crucial role of absence and difference" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). Yet the idea of "presencing" in Gumbrecht does not rely on any of this, and in fact Gumbrecht joins Derrida in condemning it. In short, presencing is quite the opposite of what happens in the metaphysics of presence.

Rather it focuses on the material aspect of the object, as something in space. As Heidegger would put it, it directs us to the thingly nature of the thing. But, Gumbrecht argues, we live in an "interpretation [or meaning] culture" which, unlike such previous "presencing cultures" as that of Ancient Greece (emphasized by Heidegger), and medieval culture (emphasized by Gumbrecht), sees material presence as a mere stepping stone to interpretation. Gumbrecht does not favor returning to a presencing culture, but he does believe that we should give credit as much to "presencing effects" as to "meaning effects," oscillating between these (Gumbrecht, 2004, pp. 2, 19).

Gumbrecht's position in his book, briefly, is that the humanities have in recent years overemphasized interpretation and have paid too little attention to presencing oneself to the aesthetic object. (This could be seen as a reactive defense of formalism, which always stressed direct confrontation with the art object.) He associates presence culture with medieval culture and meaning culture with modern culture (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 79), although, as he puts it, "all cultures [...] bring together components of meaning culture and presence culture." (Ibid.) The dominant idea in a meaning culture is mind and, in a presence culture, body (Ibid., p. 80). I will suggest in this paper that a dialectic between the two represents the best way to handle their natural conflict. And yet this dialectic seems to entail a contradictory way of life, or does it?

The conflict between presence culture and meaning culture, and between presence effects and meaning effects, also takes place in everyday aesthetics. I take daily walks in my neighborhood. These provide me with a multitude of

aesthetic experiences. For example, I am delighted by the colorful kitschy display of blown-up comic-strip characters that currently populate one front yard. I thrill to the view I get of a meandering path in another front yard highlighted in its greens, silvers, and dark shadows by the effects of the setting sun. I am amused by the look of a lady dressed in red, covered in transparent plastic, standing in line in the rain, self-composed. I take such sights and experiences as paradigmatic of everyday aesthetic experience, and I measure aesthetic theories of the everyday by whether or not they can handle them.

Increasingly in my walks I have come to realize that my appreciations are (despite such after-the-fact descriptions as given above) essentially wordless. This poses a problem. How can one discuss, describe, or theorize about something that is wordless? However, I do not want to imply that words play no role in everyday aesthetic experience. First, putting your experience into words helps shape that experience as it expands into memory and in communication with others. Second, insofar as words we read impact us, they also impact the ways we experience the things they describe. They affect even the ways we experience things we never describe through establishing a way of seeing. So, there is a dialectic, but there is also silence.

A poet may describe an experience in his or her medium, and then this description can influence how one sees the phenomenon. An English Department colleague at my university, Alan Soldofsky, recently published a poem, titled *Entitled* (Soldofsky, 2021). It is about pear trees in my neighborhood in Spring. After reading his poem I was able to see those trees differently during my daily walk. Poems consist of words. Evaluations and defenses of functional beauty also use words. For example, one might say that a coffee pot is beautiful and defend this with reference to both functionality and appearance. But even after reading Soldofsky's poem several times I do not have those words in my mind when I notice the way the flowers collect along the curb. Heidegger says language is the house of Being, and yet, perhaps contradictorily, it alternates with silence just as World alternates with Earth, or rather dialectically engages with it in creative agon.

Most philosophical disciplines and sub-disciplines are evaluatively neutral. For example, the theory of justice allows for multiple theories about what justice is, and each theory entails different evaluations. The theory of justice does not in itself imply a way of life. Everyday aesthetics may be different. The subdiscipline itself suggests a way of life, one based on a certain comportment towards things experienced. It suggests (holds? demands?) that one should focus on 'the now', on 'lived experience', on what the senses display. The very existence of the discipline promotes the thought that one ought to focus more on the aesthetic qualities of things of everyday life, on, as Heidegger would put it, listening to Being, rather than as approaching things as mere things, as mere equipment for our use and using up.

Let us now apply this to the daily walk of the community aesthete. Here we are talking about things experienced as they are passed by the walker in the course of walking. The way of life implied by this practice is not only in the habit of

the walk. It is entailed by a way of attending to things while engaging in everyday tasks of many sorts, including washing dishes. This way of life bears some similarity to that of the *flâneur* first described by Baudelaire (Baudelaire, 1995). The *flâneur*, says Baudelaire, is someone with “an insatiable desire for seeing and feeling” and “an excessive love for visible, tangible things” (Baudelaire, 1995, p. 9). To be sure, Baudelaire puts the point in intensely emotional terms. Terms like “insatiable desire” and “excessive love” may be more passionate than we would feel comfortable with today. But there is still desire and love for the contemporary lover of sights and sounds. Of course, the 19th century *flâneur* was limited. For example, he always seemed to be male and well-off, and he tended more to be attracted to crowded urban settings than to walking alone in a neighborhood. He (or, rather, they) might, however, be redefined for our own context as a passionate aesthetic observer of everyday life, someone who seeks “to see the world with the eyes of an artist” (Leddy, 2011, p. 260). This posits the ideal aesthetic walker as descendent of the attitude taken by *artists* towards life as perceived and represented; artists as diverse as Durer, Hopper, Hiroshige, and the Keinholzes. It is a way of life dominated by a non-practical attitude towards perception of the things of everyday life. This attitude might be described as ‘worshipful’ (a term appropriated from religion) or ‘non-alienated’ (a term appropriated from Marxism). But perhaps the best way to describe it is Heidegger’s “letting beings be.”

Also, as noted above, everyday aesthetics is broader than our experience of the contemplative walk. It includes also such things as cleaning the kitchen so that it looks ‘spick- and-span’. The moment you look at a kitchen you have cleaned and say (to yourself or aloud) ‘good’, or something similar, is an aesthetic moment, although simple and at a low level of intensity and complexity. Attending to and enhancing such moments can also be part of a way of life that is aesthetic.

What is the demand of the above-mentioned way of life? It is to pay attention aesthetically to all that is about you, letting beauty and other positive aesthetic qualities emerge where they can. The claim is not that *everything* is beautiful (or aesthetic) but that everything is potentially beautiful, taking ‘beauty’ broadly, to refer to all positive aesthetic qualities. Only when you take this attitude will you experience the beauty in things. Beauty here is seen as neither objective nor subjective but as emergent from the interaction of the walker and the things perceived in walking.

2. Plato, Surprisingly

There is a passage in Plato’s *Symposium* that inspires this thought, although the thought is contrary to Platonism, at least on the standard interpretation, in which Plato is seen as bent on attacking the arts in favor of a transcendent experience of eternal, unchanging Forms, none of this having a dynamic dimension. On the standard view Plato has nothing to say about Beauty, Art and Love other than that they are eternal and unchanging. The *Symposium*, however, goes against all of this. Plato there has Socrates describe

Diotima's view in this way: after advancing up the ladder of love, the neophyte no longer takes delight "like a slave [...] in the beauty of one single thing, whether beauty of a young child or man or of one practice." Rather, "having been turned toward the multitudinous ocean of the beautiful and contemplating it, he begets many beautiful and imposing discourses and thoughts in ungrudging love of wisdom, until, having at this point grown and waxed strong, he beholds a certain kind of knowledge which is one, and such that it is the following kind of beauty" (Plato, 1991, pp. 155, 210d). Note that what is apprehended is not a thing, but "a certain kind of knowledge," i.e., a certain way of knowing things. The phrase "the following kind of beauty" refers to Beauty itself. So, Beauty itself is a way of knowing things. To put it differently, grasping Beauty is grasping *being able* to see the world in a certain knowing way. Four stages are posited here: (1) turning to the multitudinous ocean of beauty, (2) contemplating it, (3) engaging in much impressive talk and thought (presumably philosophical), and (4) beholding and knowing Beauty itself, which is grasping a certain way of knowing.

The neophyte, taking a walk in their neighborhood turns to Beauty as it shows itself in a multitude of places, and contemplates it. The dialogical component comes in as well, not directly, but in the interaction between moments of silent appreciation and another part of life; that devoted to reading, interpretation and critical discussion – what Gumbrecht calls "interpretation effects." Diotima, and presumably Socrates and Plato, would also insist that this is interpersonal: that the quest for Beauty involves a social component, a relation between lover and beloved. This raises a question: how would everyday aesthetics as a practice be possible without an interpersonal dimension, i.e. of friendship or love? Even when walking alone, if there is friendship or love in the home from which one walks, this provides important (although perhaps not necessary) background for openness to beauty.

Note four things:

(1) Plato believes the beauty of "one single thing" distracts from appreciation of the beauty of particular things. This means not that one should avoid seeing beauty in particular things but that to follow this path one needs to open up and get beyond initial narrow passions. The ideal aesthetic walker contemplates each passing sight and moves on, from passion to passion, which is to say from one interesting sight to the next. There are two ways to interpret Plato's idea of "one single thing." The first is to reject individual beauties as worthless. The second, less extreme way, is to only reject exclusive obsession with single things, for example that single person one loves. The first cannot be taken seriously, especially given Plato's stress placed on the interpersonal dimension of love.

(2) Insofar as the student of beauty generates "many beautiful discourses" he/she is steeped in what Gumbrecht calls "interpretation culture." So it seems he/she is moving away from his so-called "presencing effects," i.e. the silent appreciative engagement with the aesthetic qualities of the objects observed.

And yet (3), through this, ironically, the neophyte presences himself or herself to Beauty itself. This seems to imply that presencing and interpretation are dialectically interrelated, that they need to work together as the kind of marriage, somewhat like the marriage of the Dionysian and the Apollonian Nietzsche spoke of as necessary for aesthetics in the opening lines of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

(4) It is only after presencing to Beauty itself (after ascending the ladder of love) that the neophyte sees something “marvelous, beautiful in nature” (Plato, 1991, p. 155, 210e) towards which all his or her previous labors were directed. Yet we have seen that the beauty in all bodies is “one in the same” (Plato, 1991, p. 155, 210b) and, so too, the beauty in all souls and in all institutions. So perhaps this “one in the same” just *is* Beauty itself, and, conversely, that Beauty itself just is the one and same beauty that is in all instances that participate in it. (So the temporal sequence I have suggested in the first sentence of this paragraph does not hold.) If so, Beauty *is* the beautiful in nature. It is the “one in the same.” On this interpretation, “presencing to Beauty itself” just means getting to the point that one can see the beauty in things. Each particular has its own beauty, to be sure, but in each instance we recognize it as the one and same beauty.

Beauty, Plato insists, is non-relativistic (Plato, 1991, p. 156, 211b). The beauty one apprehends in a presencing culture is non-relativistic as well, not because it is a matter of objective knowledge but because it is not being compared to anything, not interpreted, not cognized in a discursive way. It is known, but non-discursively. When Diotima says “It is here, if anywhere [...] that human life is to be lived: in contemplating the Beautiful itself” (Plato, 1991, p. 156, 211d) this can mean either one ought to contemplate the Beautiful itself independent of its manifestations, or that contemplating the Beautiful itself *just is* contemplating the beautiful in things. The latter is my interpretation.

Admittedly, Plato does have Diotima say: “Nor [...] will it appear beautiful to him as a face does, or hands, or anything else of which body partakes, nor as any discourse or any knowledge does, nor as what is somewhere in something else....but it exists in itself alone by itself, single in nature forever [...]” (Plato, 1991, p. 156, 210a). This would seem to only allow for the first of the two interpretations suggested. Such a statement looks to exclude everyday aesthetics since it would exclude focus on the beauty of individual things of everyday life, such as the face of a lover. However, as I have suggested, this is not expelled so much as backgrounded. Beauty itself is not affected by the fact that all other things are beautiful because they share in it (Plato, 1991, p. 156, 210b). But all this can only be true if beauty itself is *in* the hands, face, and so forth. It is not affected, but it is not really, contra Plato, “alone by itself,” since things and lives share in it.

It is, admittedly, unorthodox to say that Beauty is to be found only in the things that participate in it. It may also seem strange to think that the beauty found therein is not at all affected by relations. On this view, although each thing is beautiful in its own way, the beauty in each thing is, paradoxically, the same. It is the same because it cannot be described or interpreted.

I think there is some truth in this, but only if we interpret this passage without hypostatizing Beauty as something external. Better to see it as internal, i.e. in the things in the world perceived as beautiful. Similarly, we can interpret it, not as strictly eternal, but as ‘as if’ eternal, and yet still within the physical world we perceive. This would involve interpreting the “ladder of love” as not so much reflecting Plato’s theory of Forms as Diotima’s own much more down-to-earth theory of beauty as developed in the “lesser mysteries” described at the beginning of Socrates’ speech (Plato, 1991, 206b-210a).

But what does this have to do with Heidegger? Surely Heidegger’s “letting beings be” has nothing to do with the Forms as objects of a science-like investigation of definitions of key concepts (i.e. the orthodox Plato). I agree, and yet, as I have suggested, there are different versions or strands of Plato. Diotima’s ladder of love is not about scientific investigation or definition. The Form ‘Beauty’ is never defined in this dialogue, or anywhere in Plato. Instead, it is grasped at the end of a process. And we only know that it has been grasped if ‘*arête*’ is generated in the disciple. Part of that *arête* is being able to see beauty in the things that participate in Beauty. The Diotima strand of Plato’s *Symposium* allows for a non-metaphysical interpretation of Beauty and Being, i.e. one that abjures, or at least is agnostic about, transcendent reality. It allows for “letting beings be,” and hence for everyday aesthetics, but only of ‘the ordinary goes beyond itself’ sort.

Many have argued that everyday aesthetics is all about perceiving the ordinary in the ordinary (Haapala, 2005; Saito, 2007). For me, it is mainly about perceiving the extraordinary, or at least ‘the interesting’, in the ordinary. This does not mean that one has to perceive the ordinary as strange. The ordinary need only be perceived as having what I have called “aura” (Leddy, 2012, Chapter 4). Nor do I want to deny the importance of appreciating the ordinary in the ordinary, which is a special kind of appreciation of everyday things. Artists such as Edward Hopper and Ed Ruscha have focused on this kind of experience. Think of Ruscha’s book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) which just gives us black and white photographs of gas stations. Here we appreciate the ordinariness of these ordinary things. But in doing so, the art, and indirectly, the things themselves, take on aura. The irony or paradox of everyday aesthetics is that, as soon as the ordinariness of something ordinary is appreciated, the thing appreciated is no longer merely ordinary: it has ratcheted up to the level of ‘the interesting’, or even ‘the extraordinary’. Gas stations are experienced differently after experiencing Ruscha’s work. They have been framed by the perceiving mind as special. This is not to say that they become special every day or all of the time but that, under the unconscious influence of Ruscha’s way of seeing (or some other artist’s way of seeing), they can be seen as beautiful... they become beautiful.

3. Danto vs. Heidegger

Arthur Danto often spoke of the way in which ordinary objects are transfigured into the domain of art through entering into the artworld, his key example being Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, which, although indistinguishable from boxes

found in a warehouse, take on art status and aboutness when displayed in a gallery (Danto, 1964). There is something partly true about this. Warhol's boxes do tell us something about the nature of art, about how we see art differently once in an artworld context. But Danto's position comes directly, and legitimately, under Heidegger's attack against the concept of a work of art as an allegory where "it seems as though the thingly element in the art work is like the substructure into and upon which the other, authentic element is built" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 20).

Insofar as Danto refers to the identical Brillo box in the warehouse, as well as to the material element of *Brillo Box*, as a "mere thing" (Danto, 1964), he relies on a form of subject-object dualism that Heidegger sought to overcome. The Analytic/Continental divide is often explained away as a matter of style, but here we have simple disagreement between leaders of the competing schools. Danto's theory, for all of its elegance, leaves no room for everyday aesthetics, for any Deweyan continuities between art and life (Dewey, here, is on the side of the continental philosophers), or even for the physical creation of works of art in the studio. One might think that since, on Danto's theory, anything can be transfigured into art, then there is no such divide. However the division is strict: when something is not yet transfigured it is a 'mere real thing' and when it is transfigured it enters another realm, the realm of the artworld.

Danto later refers to what happens to the ordinary thing when it is taken into the world of art as "transfiguration" (Danto, 1983). This is a useful metaphor, but he failed to see that ordinary objects are also transfigured simply by being perceived aesthetically, although in a different way from what happens when they are transfigured into art. For Danto, when, and only when, ordinary things are transfigured into the realm of the artworld, do they enter into the domain of the aesthetic. But, on mine and perhaps Gumbrecht's view, the gas stations are transfigured into the aesthetic the moment Ruscha looks at them with an artist's eye. Then Ruscha enters the studio to make things. Entering the artworld is a later development.

This is not to say that the two transfigurations are unrelated: they are inescapably intertwined. Monet transfigures his pond when he creates a painting of waterlilies. But he also does it in his physical creation of the pond and in his way of seeing the pond before painting it, influenced, as both of these activities are, by his artistic project.

The idea of the aesthetic attitude has been criticized as one that gives too much power to the perceiver. It has been thought that the perceiver need only take a special attitude to perceive beauty, and that the perceiver must take a special attitude to perceive beauty. The first claim is more problematic. Beauty emerges in relational terms. The aesthetic attitude is not a willful thing. It is an attitude of openness, of willingness to be approached by beauty, which, for me, is as an enhanced sense of significance when something emerges as being worthy of our aesthetic attention.

But Danto got it wrong on another level. He thought that works of art can be distinguished by their aboutness, by their interpretability, and that it is

interpretation that brings them up into the world of art. In his *What Art Is* he says that artworks are embodied meanings designed to get viewers to grasp the meaning they embody (Danto, 2013). He also radically distinguishes between aesthetics and art. Contrary to Danto, my Deweyan approach stresses the continuity between art and life, aesthetics being what they both deeply share. Aboutness is not the property that distinguishes art from the everyday. Everyday objects can and usually do have meaning. At the very least they have names and histories. So they are interpretable. They do not, of course, have interpretations in the sense of ‘meanings assigned to them by their creators,’ although few works of art have meanings in this sense either. Nor is interpretation sufficient to make the object art: someone in the artworld also must believe it worthy of being considered art. Moreover, as I have argued above, interpretation is not necessary for aesthetic experience, and can actually interfere with the presencing of Being. Of course interpretation does enrich our experience when we write and think about it.

In his original article, Danto implied that something is art if it is seen as art by someone with appropriate art historical knowledge: “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry [sic: he meant “descry”] - an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (Danto, 1964, p. 580). Dickie interpreted Danto’s theory to mean that something is art if it is an artifact and someone in the artworld says it is art, or more precisely, confers upon it the status of candidate for appreciation (Dickie, 1969). But, as critics of Dickie soon saw, this act of conferral cannot be arbitrary. Appropriate art historical knowledge was required by Danto for a reason. And worthiness usually implies valuable aesthetic features.

It is common these days for aestheticians to see everyday aesthetic objects just in terms of interpretation, which is to say just in terms of how they can be understood cognitively. Allen Carlson and Glen Parsons, for example, think that everyday aesthetics must be framed in terms of the look of functionality in the object (Carlson and Parsons, 2012). They believe that such an object is aesthetically good if it looks fit for its function. In this, they exclude everything from everyday aesthetics that has no function or that doesn’t look quite fit for its function, as for example junked cars and abandoned homes. Yet, when I take a walk in my neighborhood there is a multitude of things that I find aesthetically interesting that have no clear function, or even if they do have a function, it plays no role in my experience. Carlson and Parsons say we need to have a lot of knowledge (sometimes scientific, sometimes practical) of the object not only to properly interpret it but to correctly appreciate it. This is only half the truth. The other half is best explained in terms of Gumbrecht’s concept of presence and Heidegger’s concept of Being. My argument, in short, is that to properly appreciate something in everyday life one needs to draw both on the experience of presence *and* cognitive understanding, although not necessarily at the same time.

Learning about the objects we see, i.e. learning about their names, functions and histories, is relatively easy. Experiencing an object as having presence is more difficult, at least for people living in our time. Why is it hard for us to

experience objects as having presence? As Gumbrecht says, the kind of society we (most of us) live in is not a presence society – it is a meaning society. We cannot go back to living in a presence society (at least not normally). But we can learn *from* such societies, and this is perhaps what atheists whose minds are closed to varieties of religious experience and other enlightenment thinkers fail to see.

And how do we experience presence? Take a walk and observe the world about you. If you simply contemplate what you see without thinking at all, without thinking about anything, without naming what you see or how you experience, things will emerge as visually interesting. This can happen with the other senses as well. Do not think of the phrase “visual interesting,” or of any other term that labels an aesthetic property. Do not ask yourself whether your appreciative experience is pleasurable. Let the visual interestingness of the thing, scene, or perceived event strike you. You will note its distinctiveness: that specific color, that shape, that look. This way of perceiving the world is much like what Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hanh refer to as mindfulness (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999). Paying full attention to the phenomena on one’s walk, allowing presence to happen, brings a kind of joy or, if you prefer, delight.

Does this mean that meaning, which is culturally specific, does not play a role? Not at all. How we see and what we focus on is culturally determined. Art, too, is culturally specific. Studying art, viewing many artworks, and learning how to paint are all activities that train the eye. The mind is stocked by these cultural practices unconsciously in such a way as to animate vision even, and especially when, the vision is not encumbered by language. Moreover, speaking, writing, painting, photographing, and other cultural practices happen after and before the moment of presencing, are comments on, and can extend and enrich that experience. There is a loop that goes from presencing to the cultural, then presence, then the cultural, and on and on.

Gumbrecht is right that we live in a meaning culture and that medieval and classical cultures were presence cultures (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 79). We need to work hard to perceive the world in a different way, to focus on presence rather than on meaning. As Heidegger says, we no longer listen to Being. Opening up to the pre-linguistic presence of things opens up to Being. Heidegger thought that, in Van Gogh’s art, truth comes into unconcealment. But whatever we learn about the art nature of art through his analysis is really about the thingly nature of a thing, and particularly about the equipmental nature of the piece of equipment, which itself is an element in our everyday lives. Heidegger’s essay is about the origin of the work of art but it is also about the shoes and about the everyday life, not only of the peasant woman, but of all of us. His point comes out even more when he talks about the temple and the earth/world relationship. However, as we will see, this needs some explanation.

4. Formalism and Contextualism

There was something good about formalism which has been lost in our current unquestioning acceptance of contextualism. By “contextualism” I mean the belief that something can only be appreciated in the light of understanding it

within its context. The thing that the formalists gave us was a direct method of looking at works of art. They called on us to focus on the thing itself. Their demand was: do not think about the intentions of the author/artist! Do not think about the historical context! Now, this may seem old-fashioned, and it is in fact overly limited: but if we are only contextualists we no longer look at the thing itself, like those museum visitors who only read the curators' texts on the walls, or the art appreciator who pays more attention to the taped lecture than the work. All attention to context takes us away from encountering the thing itself.

This is also true in everyday life. There must be a moment in the process of appreciating the things of life that is direct – that involves attending simply to what we see. This is not, however, to advocate formalism. Formalism has its limits in that it calls on us to see things in terms of colored shapes and lines, as though the thing itself were defined in terms of shapes and lines. If I really 'see' the disturbing shape of this burnt log in the park on my walk I see it not just as a shaped color but as a thing with expressive properties. Attending to the thing itself does not imply formalism.

Now there is no question that what we see is strongly influenced by culture. There is no escaping the unconscious influence of context, of education, of background, of language. Nor is there any denying that more contextual knowledge gives more understanding. When I say that one needs to attend to the thing itself I am not saying that there is a thing-in-itself independent of interpretation. What I am saying is that setting aside, or 'bracketing' (in the language of phenomenology) allows for presencing, which, in turn, allows for emergence of Being and, with it, beauty.

Gumbrecht is well aware of the potential charge of naiveté, of his being a 'substantialist' as having a naïve belief in stable or unchanging substances or essences. The charge would be that the stance fails to recognize that everything is 'under interpretation,' that we cannot escape interpretation. Gumbrecht does not deny the existence of cultural meaning: he simply reveals a layer of cultural objects that is not a layer of meaning (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 54). So how does he understand presence? As bringing back "physical closeness and tangibility" (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 57), and also as bringing back something onto which we can never permanently hold (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 58). Nonetheless, and importantly, for him, when we are talking about Being we are not talking about theology. Rather, Being is something physical in space.

Heidegger's "Origin" essay is as much about the everyday as about art. We are looking for the thingliness of the thing. The first key example is a pair of working shoes. These shoes are part of the everyday life of a peasant woman. Truth comes into unconcealment in her own life. But Van Gogh's painting intensifies and focuses that experience. What is true of art is also true of the artist in the world. What is true of the artist in the world is also true, I argue, of anyone who perceives aesthetically.

Heidegger sets the stage in *Being and Time* when he talks about *Dasein*.

Our “being in the world” is already in a substantial, and spatial, contact with things in the world. I would add that this correlates with G.E. Moore’s common sense realism (Moore, 1993). When I see or touch a chair I am not in contact with a mere collection of sense data. I am touching a chair. How do we then account for the fact that different people see the chair differently? First, they do not see different chairs. As Nelson Goodman would put it, there is one world, but there are many ways the world is (Goodman, 1978). There is one chair and many different ways of seeing it. Moreover, that there is one world does not mean we have to privilege physical descriptions over painted representations. Yet, although aesthetic appreciation may be silent this does not negate the unconscious influence of elaborate conceptual structures in our perception. Recognizing this helps us escape the charge of naïve realism while retaining our realism.

But what about this strange thing called “Being”? Being, Gumbrecht argues, takes the place of “ideas” including not only Plato’s Forms but also other, more recent, forms of conceptual configuration (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 67). Truth, as Heidegger argues, “happens,” and it happens through the double movement of revealing (un-concealing) and concealing. This is admittedly a hard part of Heidegger. My own view is consonant with Gumbrecht’s but moves in a somewhat different direction, interpreting the concealment with more positive language. For me, it is the turning of the object into what Susanne Langer called the “image” (Langer, 1953). The object is concealed in that its scientific nature is set aside: it is bracketed. The “concealed” object is concealed by its aura, by its aesthetic intensity. Unconcealment brings out the thingly nature of the thing which retreats from its context of interpretation.

As we enter Being, we enter the landscape (think of walking again, where the landscape is literally the one that one walks through) in a different way: “to be in this landscape is the fundamental prerequisite for restoring rootedness to historical Dasein” (Heidegger in Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 68). Heidegger says that when Being withdraws so that the things that appear “no longer have the character of objects” (Heidegger in Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 69). I say they no longer have this character since they have aura: aura masks interpretable character as objects. But that means they are not withdrawing behind appearance and experience. Instead, they are these very things intensified and bearing heightened significance. Gumbrecht and I agree that Being refers to a world of things “before” they are part of culture, and that, to experience them, they must begin to cross the presence/interpretation threshold, i.e. into the specific sphere of a specific culture, a culture where Being is no longer Being (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 70). Gumbrecht goes on to say that Dasein, human being-in-the-world, contributes to unconcealment through “letting things be” - through what Heidegger calls “composure,” an attitude which neither manipulates, transforms nor interprets the world (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 71).

Gumbrecht then turns to the example of the Greek temple, quoting the famous lines: “This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock’s clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building [...] first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the

stone [...] first brings to light the light of the day...” (Heidegger in Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 74). The Greek temple, then, brings out the expressive qualities of such things as storm and light. But how can this unconcealment of Being happen without the Temple or its equivalent, i.e. on one’s walk in an ordinary non-sacred neighborhood? One could say that the temple is present in the perceptive attitude of the walker. Thus, I do not completely agree with Gumbrecht that “[o]nly the presence of certain things (in this case, the presence of the temple) opens up the possibility of other things appearing in their primordial material qualities [...]” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 74). The “certain things” do not themselves have to be present. Perhaps ‘attitude’ is not enough of an answer. Perhaps there is one modern “temple” whose precinct extends as far as my neighborhood, that temple being Danto’s “Artworld.” Perhaps another is the practice of a Buddhist monk. Perhaps there are many things that can establish a “temple” even in our 21st century context.

Readers of *Origins* often find the relationship of “earth” and “world” to be particularly difficult. Gumbrecht offers his own solution specifically in terms of two interpretations of “world” and two theories of how “world,” “earth,” and “Being” should be related (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 75). The first sees references to “destiny” and “gods” as “integrative modalities within Being.” (Ibid.) Such terms do not refer to individual things or dependent on specific cultures. Being unconcealed to Greek peasants is not Being unconcealed to 21st century academics. This relativism makes them very unlike Plato’s Forms. “World” on this interpretation is “the changing configurations and structures of which Being as substance [earth] can be a part” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 76).

In the second interpretation, which Gumbrecht prefers because it fits his idea of tension between presence and meaning, “world” is excluded from Being. On this view, Being is “tangible things, seen independently of their culturally specific situations” (Ibid.), but with an understanding that this is in tension with the context of those very situations. Thus, on this view, earth and world “diverge within this togetherness.” (Ibid.) Or, as Heidegger puts it, “In essential striving [earth and world] raise each other into the self-assertion of their nature.” (Ibid.) Gumbrecht interprets this as the tension between presence and meaning. It is not clear to me, however, why these two interpretations are taken to be incongruent: instead they seem to be two sides of the same point.

5. One Difficulty

There is one difficulty with application of Gumbrecht’s ideas to everyday aesthetics. His only explicit discussion of aesthetics in *Production of Presence* makes a strong *contrast* between what he calls “moments of intensity” and everyday life (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 97). He writes that “what we call ‘aesthetic experience’ always provides us with certain experiences of intensity that we cannot find in the historically and culturally specific everyday worlds that we inhabit,” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 99) and, further, that it provides “something that our everyday worlds are not capable of offering us” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 100). Moreover, “aesthetic experience will necessarily be located at a certain

distance from these everyday worlds” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 101). His ideal aesthetic experience is one of being lost in focused intensity which is “the element of distance vis-à-vis the everyday world” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 104). His key example is of the focused intensity of the extreme levels of performance of an expert athlete. This is very different from the intensity of the contemporary *flâneur* wandering the urban and suburban streets that I advocate.

This opposition of the aesthetic and the everyday seems to make an aesthetics of everyday life impossible. And yet Gumbrecht can be interpreted as attacking a certain *kind* of everyday experience, an alienated one, one that we long to escape. Thus he asks: “are we not precisely longing for presence, is our desire for tangibility not so intense – because our own everyday environment is so almost insuperably consciousness-centered” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 106)? This consciousness-centeredness is associated with the Cartesian worldview, still dominant today ... with interpretation more than presence. Nonetheless, as Gumbrecht admits, we can only encounter presence effects today within our predominantly meaning culture.

For Gumbrecht, moments of intensity that we mainly get from great art, but sometimes also from great moments in sports, take us away from the Cartesian-conditioned everyday, the everyday of interpretation cultures. And yet another example of his (suddenly being hit by the intensity of sunlight on arriving in a California city from Europe) is itself taken from everyday life. Further, Gumbrecht defines aesthetic experience as “lived experience” in which there is an “oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 107), and this definition can be applied to everyday aesthetic experience. In short, it is our present cultural conditions, constituting ‘the everyday’, as they do from a Cartesian perspective, that makes aesthetic experience rare - yet the everyday is still redeemable.

Gumbrecht argues that we need a framework (“insularity” or “focused intensity”) in order to experience this tensional oscillation. I believe that such a framework need not be so rarified or extreme as the events he describes (great art, great sport events): it could be something small, like noticing the way a gardener has put out two plastic pink flamingos entwined amusingly to form a couple. Gumbrecht worries that we bracket the presence side of this oscillation in our Cartesian culture. He fails to consider the obvious solution: to bracket the meaning side, at least temporarily, to allow the presence side to come forth.

Gumbrecht speaks also of the event character of the aesthetic epiphany, the way in which, referring to Heidegger’s talk of the *phusis* as “emerging and rising in itself and in all things,” (Heidegger in Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 112) this emerging of presence is an event. He sees the beautiful play in sport as exemplifying such an event. But the idea can be used to refer to something on a much less grand scale: the emerging of “the interesting” during the walk of the contemporary *flâneur*. This too is a reaction against the Cartesian construction of the everyday. In the end I agree with Gumbrecht that “it makes

sense to hope that aesthetic experience may help us recuperate the spatial and the bodily dimension of our existence... that aesthetic experience may give us back at least a feeling of our being-in-the-world, in the sense of being part of the physical world of things” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 116), and that the pay-off of this is the sense of being “in sync with the things of the world” (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 117). This is the normative aspect of everyday aesthetics.

6. Conclusion

How then should we, or can we, apply these ideas to everyday aesthetics? For Gumbrecht there are meaning effects and presence effects in all cultural artifacts. In this essay I have considered taking a walking in one’s neighborhood, observing both the cultural and natural aspects and scenes, for instance the pear blossoms, as paradigmatic of the domain of everyday aesthetics. Everything seen on the walk has both meaning and presence effects. Everything can be interpreted, or at least categorized and explained, but can also be approached *without* this if approached while listening to Being.

This implies a new *flâneur*, not attracted necessarily to crowds (Baudelaire) or arcades (Benjamin) but to the entire panoply of the everyday. This *flâneur* looks at the world as an artist does or would, having a passion for seeing and feeling. As he or she walks through their neighborhood things emerge into beauty sequentially: first the children’s toy, then a piece of garbage, followed by a bramble of branches. Presencing and interpretation effects intertwine. But, at least at first, the experience is silent, the presencing is wordless. Beauty happens. This is the same as Being coming into unconcealment, to use Heidegger’s language, although with stress placed on pleasure. This beauty is not eternal, but is ‘as if’ eternal. The ‘as if’ eternal beauty is always the same, although each object of beauty manifests it in a different way. Seeing in this way is not isolated. It is the practice of opening to Being. The thing perceived is transfigured, taken up into the aesthetic. The artist does something similar, transfiguring the world both with her eyes and her hands, making things out of materials which, themselves, are transfigured into the world of the work. There is not only oscillation and tension between presence of interpretation: there is also dialectic. This dialectic extends to the relationship between the aesthetic and the world of art, the two transfigurations.

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