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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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***Hermeneutics and the Performative Turn;
The Unfruitfulness of a Complementary
Characterisation***

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ABSTRACT. After a long dominance of hermeneutics, in the last three decades aesthetics has been strongly influenced by the *performative turn*, which placed at the centre of theoretical analysis performative aspects of art, supposedly ignored by the hermeneutical approach. Accordingly, the *aesthetics of performativity* has been sometimes presented (Walburga Hülk) as *opposed* to hermeneutics. Not all the representatives of the performative turn adopted such extreme positions. However, even those authors (Erika Fischer-Lichte, Hans Ullrich Gumbrecht) who did not oppose hermeneutics to the performative turn, leaned towards characterising hermeneutics as an *artwork-centred, interpretation-focused and therefore performativity-incompetent* (unable to take performative aspects of art into account) aesthetic paradigm.

This paper intends to radically question such a characterisation by showing how Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his main work *Truth and Method*, displays a hermeneutical system which, in spite of putting the notions of *artwork* and *interpretation* at the core of the analysis, is able to take into account performative aspects of art. The main point of the analysis is not only the one of *rendering justice* to Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, but also of offering a first basis for better identifying the differences between hermeneutics and the

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performative turn, differences which cannot be adequately individuated by characterising their reciprocal positions into a *complementary modus* (where performativity fills the space left empty by hermeneutics). In fact, performativity lies at the centre of Gadamer's hermeneutics (and most probably also of all hermeneutical approaches influenced by his work), articulated in a series of concepts which pledge for a *performativity-competence* of hermeneutics. The question is to understand *what happens* when such concepts are employed in an aesthetic context (the one at the core of performative turn) where the notion of artwork plays, in most cases, a marginal role (while performance acquires an autonomous value against it), and what is semantically entailed in this different use. The objective of this paper is, among others, to provide a first contribution for future answers to these questions.

1. Introduction

With this paper I intend to question a conceptual constellation, which has imposed itself together with the notion of *performativity*, involving the mutual positioning of *hermeneutics* and *performative turn*. The starting point is the following excerpt from Erika Fischer-Lichte, where the *performative turn* is implicitly characterised as a *post-hermeneutical* aesthetic paradigm:

Until the late 1980s, the notion of "culture as text" dominated cultural studies. Specific cultural phenomena as well as entire cultures were conceived as structured webs of signs waiting to be deciphered. Numerous attempts to describe and interpret culture were launched and designated as "readings." This notion specified the decoding and interpretation of texts as

the central activity of cultural studies. [...] In the 1990s, a shift in focus occurred, favoring the – hitherto largely ignored – performative traits of culture. Cultural studies increasingly employed this independent (practical) frame of reference for the analysis of existing or potential realities and acknowledged the specific “realness” of cultural activities and events, which lay beyond the grasp of traditional text models. This gave rise to the notion of “culture as performance”.²

In this quote, a *diachronic* relationship between hermeneutics and the performative turn is established, which seems in the first instance to be plausible. One could even characterise the development of humanities in the last half-century as a *sequence of three main dominant paradigms*, which respectively put at the centre of their discourses one linguistic dimension:

- (a) *Structuralism*, which has shaped the scene of cultural studies, especially in the 1960s and the 1970s, attempts to understand cultural phenomena through the *syntactic* relationships between their various elements.
- (b) *Hermeneutics*, particularly predominant in the 1980s and 1990s, identifies the central element of cultural artifacts in the potentially infinitely *semantic* productivity of the text, activated by the various interpretations.

² Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 26.

- (c) The *performative turn*, which has had a relevant impact within the humanities, particularly in the last twenty years, focuses on the *pragmatic* aspect of cultural objects, whereby what comes to the fore is not *what they tell us*, but *how they affect us*.

Regardless of the tenability of this schematisation, it seems to me that the characterising of the *performative turn* as a *post-hermeneutic paradigm* is defensible, as it has undoubtedly brought a new emphasis within a cultural panorama strongly influenced by hermeneutics. What is much more dubious, on the contrary, is the labelling of the performative turn as an *anti-hermeneutic gesture*, such as Walburga Hülk does in the following passage:

Even if the word performative may have [...] “no [...] great meaning”, it has nevertheless prompted a considerable 40-year word-history behind it, which today invites one to take a closer look at this word and to investigate the “paradigm performativity”, which has established itself together with it, in terms of its methodological sharpness and sensitivity. The fact that, as Austin says, the word “does not sound deep”, and thus suggests no “deeper meaning”, does not argue against this questioning; on the contrary, the lack of (meaningful) depth itself points to that fundamental, though *anti-hermeneutic, gesture*, which is exactly what must be studied.³

Such an anti-hermeneutic characterisation of the performative has not been

³ Hülk, 2004, p. 9, my translation.

always endorsed and has been substantially corrected recently, among others, by Fischer-Lichte (especially in Chapter 5 of *The Transformative Power of Performance*) as well as by other representatives of performative turn. However, while the compatibility between the performative turn and hermeneutics has in many cases been stated, in no case, at least to my knowledge, was it taken into account the possibility that some performative aspects of art could have already found a *theoretical place* within the hermeneutic paradigm.⁴ It seems to me that the diachronic posteriority of the performative turn towards such a dominant paradigm as hermeneutics has generated the need to refrain from looking for *traces of performativity* within the hermeneutic paradigm. For this reason, a *complementary constellation* was generated, almost as a *side effect*, as the following excerpt from Hans-Ullrich Gumbrecht clearly shows:

I deliberately do not designate the new questions, with which I am concerned, as “anti-hermeneutical”, because I do not expect (or not even wish) that they will ever completely remove and replace hermeneutics as the doctrine of identification of meaning. Rather, I believe I am observing the emergence of a scientific and cultural fascination *complementary* to interpretation.⁵

⁴ An important exception is constituted by Adriano Fabris. See Fabris, 2012.

⁵ Gumbrecht, 2012, p. 191, my translation, my italics. Another meaningful excerpt, taken from *Production of Presence*, which stresses the *emancipation effort from the dominance of hermeneutics*, is the following: ‘Now what would it mean – and what would it take – to put an end to the age of the sign? What would it mean – and what would it take – to end metaphysics? It can certainly not mean that we would abandon meaning,

In this excerpt, taken from a chapter whose title, *Das Nicht-Hermeneutische*, is more than explicit, Gumbrecht does not directly mention the *performative turn*. However, in that same chapter, as well as in the rest of the book, he regularly refers to notions (above all the notion of *presence*) which play a primary role in it. Besides, in Fischer Lichte's already quoted excerpt, it is stated that the performative turn took into account traits of art, which had been *hitherto* (including by hermeneutics) *ignored*. And (as will be shown in the third section) in many other passages of the same study she identifies several performative traits of art, which, according to her analysis, cannot find an adequate place within (or are incompatible with) hermeneutical aesthetics. Finally, in spite of sporadic exceptions, and as we will see in detail in the next pages: even when hermeneutics and the performative turn have not been opposed to each other, hermeneutics has been more or less explicitly characterised by eminent representatives of the performative turn as an *artwork-centred, interpretation-focused, and therefore performativity-incompetent* (unable to take performative aspects of art into account) aesthetic paradigm.

The main goal of this paper is to *radically question* such a characterisation of hermeneutics. More specifically, it intends to show how

signification, and interpretation. [...] I think that [...] can only mean doing something in addition to interpretation – without, of course, abandoning interpretation as an elementary and probably inevitable intellectual practice. [...] The effort that it would take us to develop noninterpretative in addition to hermeneutic concepts would therefore be an effort directed against the consequences and taboos coming from the enthronement of interpretation as the *exclusive* core practice of humanities' (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 52).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his main work *Truth and Method*, displays a hermeneutical system which, in spite of putting the notions of *artwork* and *interpretation* at the core of the analysis, is able to take into account performative aspects of art. This *radical questioning* will be articulated in two main *theoretical tasks*:

- (a) At a general level, I will argue that *Truth and Method* turns out to be an account of art and interpretation which, by adopting the notion of *play* for ontologically characterising artworks (including paintings and works of literature), consequently puts the *performance* at the centre of the analysis, as the moment in which the work of art comes into existence (it is *played*), inducing an essential *transformation* of the people who experience it. This first task will be accomplished in the *second section*.

- (b) At a more detailed level, I will on the one hand individuate *four pairs of concepts* at work in Erika Fischer-Lichte's seminal work *The Transformative Power of Performance*, through which the author articulates the (supposed) complementarity between the performative turn and hermeneutics, while on the other hand recover four central notions of *Truth and Method*, which should be considered as sorts of *hermeneutical (ante litteram) answers to the performative challenges* formulated by Fischer-Lichte, and which, in my view, pledge for the *performativity-competence* of Gadamer's hermeneutical approach. This second task will be accomplished in the *third section*.

In the *conclusion* I will give a brief evaluation of the results of the analysis, whose aim does not consist in denying or diminishing the break provoked by the performative turn in the aesthetic domain, but rather in positioning it in a *more fruitful* way in relation to hermeneutics.⁶

2. *Culture as Text?* A Criticism to a Usual Characterisation of Hermeneutics

In order to start my argument, I will, artificially but (I hope) adequately, read the formula *culture as text*, through which the usual influence of hermeneutics in the aesthetic is often characterised (including in the excerpt quoted at the beginning) as the *result of an implicit inference*. This inference has its *first premise* in the classical, and more than legitimate, definition of hermeneutics as ‘the classical discipline concerned with the art of understanding texts.’⁷ The *conclusion* drawn from this premise can be summarised (and, as always in such cases, simplified) in the following statement: ‘Whenever and wherever hermeneutics is adopted as a paradigm for a field of research, it will consider the corresponding research objects as texts to be understood.’

⁶ In this paper I intend to correct a usual interpretation of hermeneutics against the hermeneutic approach formulated in *Truth and Method*. I will consequently quote several passages (not only from Gadamer) in order to support my arguments.

⁷ Gadamer, 2004, p. 157.

This inference seems in the first instance to be more than plausible. However, at a more attentive look, we have to recognise that the plausibility of the conclusion is grounded on the validity of a *second premise*, which is, so to say, *tacitly assumed*. This second premise can (again) be summarised in the following statement: ‘The exposure to fields which are *not* (Painting) or *not only* (Theatre, Music) constituted by texts does not provoke any significant transformation of hermeneutics.’ In other (metaphorical) words, the implicit assumption of the second premise is the *hermeneutical colonisation of humanities*, where hermeneutics is seen as a sort of *invader*, shaping all the fields which it occupies into the form of the element from which it started its *aggressive campaign*, namely the textual one. The main aim of this second section consists *in the rejection, at least in the case of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, of this inference by the falsification of the second premise*.

In fact, the following excerpt of Gadamer’s seems to bluntly confirm the characterisation of hermeneutic aesthetics that I intend to criticise:

In fact, hermeneutics would then have to be understood in so comprehensive a sense as to embrace the whole sphere of art and its complex of questions. Every work of art, not only literature, must be understood like any other text that requires understanding, and this kind of understanding has to be acquired. That gives hermeneutical consciousness a comprehensiveness that surpasses even that of

aesthetic consciousness. *Aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics.*⁸

So far so good: it seems that the formula *culture as text*, in spite of the simplification which can be ascribed to every formula, is also valid in the case of Gadamer's hermeneutics. However, it would be enough to read the lines immediately following the previous excerpt in order to realise that things are quite different:

Conversely, hermeneutics must be so determined as a whole that it does justice to the experience of art. Understanding must be conceived as a part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning of all statements—those of art and all other kinds of tradition—is formed and actualized.⁹

Here Gadamer's methodological turn is synthesised in two lines. In another passage, from the introduction, he is more detailed:

The following investigation starts with a critique of aesthetic consciousness in order to defend the experience of truth that comes to us through the work of art against the aesthetic theory that lets itself be restricted to a scientific conception of truth. But the book does not rest content with justifying the truth of art; instead, it tries to develop from this starting point a conception of knowledge and of truth that

⁸ Gadamer, 2004, p. 157.

⁹ Gadamer, 2004, p. 157.

corresponds to the whole of our hermeneutic experience. Just as in the experience of art we are concerned with truths that go essentially beyond the range of methodical knowledge, so the same thing is true of the whole of the human science.¹⁰

In fact, Gadamer in this last excerpt not only explicitly states how hermeneutics should be shaped on the ‘experience of truth that comes to us through the work of art’, but also implicitly explains why he devoted the whole first section (out of three) of his main work, which intends to formulate a new hermeneutical theory, to aesthetics. Were Gadamer’s intent simply to apply hermeneutics to aesthetics, then it would make no sense to start with a first section devoted to aesthetics, and only in the second section to focus on hermeneutics. This order of exposition is rather justified by Gadamer’s whole approach, who intends to shape hermeneutics on our experience of art. Our *first interpretive thesis* sounds therefore as following: In Gadamer's *Truth and Method* the *colonising hermeneutics*, in its exposition to domains related to non-strictly textual cultural artifacts, and in order *to do justice to the experience of art*, undergoes an *essential transformation*. *It is shaped by the domains it intended (supposedly) to subsume*. The rest of this section will try to establish whether or not Gadamer *walks the talk*: is his hermeneutics really shaped on the experience of truth we make in the domain of art?

I will articulate my (positive) answer to the above question through an analysis of the whole argument of the second part of the first section of

¹⁰ Gadamer, 2004, p. xxii.

Truth and Method, whose title, *The Ontology of the Work of Art and its Hermeneutic Significance*, programmatically expresses Gadamer's ambition. We can structure Gadamer's argument into four main steps, which subsequently will be individually analysed:

- (a) 'Play' as a key notion for the characterisation of the work of art.
- (b) Application to Visual Arts.
- (c) Application to Literature.
- (d) Application to the totality of Humanities.

Let's start with the first step, which is the most important one and which therefore will be analysed in more detail, as the adoption of the notion of 'play' has a series of consequences, which are particularly relevant in this context. The first one is that the work of art is no longer characterised as an object to be *understood* or *contemplated* by a more or less *disinterested* subject, but rather an *event* (nowadays we could say a *happening*) to which all the involved subjects *take part*. In this taking part they undergo an essential *transformation*, through which the artwork acquires a truly *performative* character (while the *transformative power of performance*, which is also the very title of the English version of Fischer-Lichte's main work, is exactly one of the performative traits which are supposed to be ignored by hermeneutic accounts of art):

The work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it. The “subject” of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself. This is the point at which the mode of being of play becomes significant. For play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play. [...] The players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation (Darstellung) through the players.¹¹

Accordingly, the notion of play entails a series of related consequences, all relevant in order to evaluate the *performativity-competence* of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. First of all, the audience is seen not as something which *contemplates* the (already accomplished) work of art (from a supposedly neutral position, allowing its disinterested-aesthetic attitude), but rather as its *accomplishment*, as the element which *completes* it. With this point Gadamer articulates the commonsensical idea that, to take an extreme case, a book written and put away in a drawer without being read by anyone, is in a certain sense an *unfinished* artwork:

Thus it is not really the absence of a fourth wall that turns the play into a show. Rather, openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play. The audience only completes what the play as such is.

¹¹ Gadamer, 2004, p. 103.

This point shows the importance of defining play as a process that takes place “in between.” We have seen that play does not have its being in the player's consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit. The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him.¹²

¹² Gadamer, 2004, p. 109. The adoption of the expression ‘in between’, heavily employed by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her analysis of the aesthetics of performativity, is also very indicative in this context. Besides, this same idea is also at work in the characterisation of *conversation*, one of the key notions of Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach (which is often labelled as *dialogical hermeneutics*), which is described as a process in which *we are involved*, and which is therefore not unilaterally controlled by any of the participants: ‘We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. [...] Everything we have said characterizing the situation of two people coming to an understanding in conversation has a genuine application to hermeneutics, which is concerned with *understanding texts*. [...] Like conversation, interpretation is a circle closed by the dialectic of question and answer. It is a genuine historical life compoment achieved through the medium of language, and we can call it a conversation with respect to the interpretation of texts as well’ (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 385, 387,391). In this excerpt another aspect is also stressed which is supposedly ascribed to the aesthetic of the performative turn, and formulated in the notion of *situation*, namely the *unpredictability of the performance*. This point will be separately treated in the third section.

Secondly, the *performance is seen as the central moment of the existence of the work of art*: in this respect, as we shall see, both interpretation and reception of works of art are regarded as *events*. And in fact, what Gadamer is looking for in the experience of art, which should later be applied to the whole world of humanities in order to elaborate a new hermeneutical approach, is exactly this centrality of performance, this *contingent situation*, in which both players and spectators are *exposed*. As stated in the previous excerpt, works of art (and more generally cultural artifacts) *happen in-between*. As a consequence, performance arts (music, theatre, et cetera) are taken as exemplary for the characterisation of *all* arts and humanities more generally:

In being played the play speaks to the spectator through its presentation; and it does so in such a way that, despite the distance between it and himself, the spectator still belongs to play. This is seen most clearly in one type of representation, a religious rite. Here the relation to the community is obvious. [...] The same is true for drama generally, even considered as literature. The performance of a play, like that of a ritual, cannot simply be detached from the play itself, as if it were something that is not part of its essential being, but is as subjective and fluid as the aesthetic experiences in which it is experienced. Rather, it is in the performance and only in it—as we see most clearly in the case of music—that we encounter the work itself, as the divine is encountered in the religious rite. Here it becomes clear why starting from the concept of play is methodologically advantageous. The work of art cannot simply be isolated from the

“contingency” of the chance conditions in which it appears, and where this kind of isolation occurs, the result is an abstraction that reduces the actual being of the work. It itself belongs to the world to which it represents itself. A drama really exists only when it is played, and ultimately music must resonate.¹³

We are now in the position of drawing some *first provisional conclusions* relating to the adoption of the notion of play for the ontological characterisation of works of art:

(a) The notion of *play* is directed against a Cartesian characterisation of the subject-world relation¹⁴, which is typically (and, in part, correctly) attributed to hermeneutics, where the subject is *observer* and *interpreter* of the world standing *in front* of him (like a text to be deciphered). Gumbrecht speaks of *a horizontal axis of the hermeneutic field*, where the subject casts himself in an eccentric position against the world, almost at its limits.¹⁵ In

¹³ Gadamer, 2004, p. 115.

¹⁴ Anti-Cartesianism evidently plays a relevant role in the whole project of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, including the criticism of Dilthey. It is not only the notion of *method* which is targeted, but also, and more fundamentally, the configuration subject-object which is presupposed by such notion, a configuration in which the subject is, so to say, the *protected territory from which the reality can be methodically accessed*, without being exposed to it. Gadamer’s subject is on the contrary a subject *exposed to the contingency*, and therefore a *historical* one. In this respect, the heritage of Heidegger is more than evident.

¹⁵ ‘Very schematically, we may then describe this new, early modern view in which Western culture begins, over several centuries, to redefine the relation between humankind

Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics however, the spectator is not the *limit* of the artwork, but rather *the element of it which achieves its realisation*.

(b) The notion of play allows Gadamer to underline the transformative power of art and the event-character of art experience, which are typically regarded as aspects of art not considered by hermeneutics. This performative aspect of art is maintained all along his hermeneutical analysis, informing also the characterisation of interpretation as *conversation*, which is seen as a process where at the end none of the parts remains unchanged.¹⁶

and the world as the intersection of two axes. There is a horizontal axis that opposes the subject as an eccentric, disembodied observer and the world as an assembly of purely material objects, including the human body. The vertical axis stands for the act of world-interpretation through which the subject penetrates the surface of the world in order to extract knowledge and truth as its underlying meanings. I propose to call this worldview “the hermeneutic field”. Of course, I know that it was only centuries later that “Hermeneutics” became the name of the philosophical subfield that concentrates on the techniques and the conditions of interpretation. But long before the emergence of this academic subdiscipline, “interpretation” (and with it “expression”) had become the predominant – and soon afterwards, the exclusive – paradigm that Western culture made available for those who wanted to think the relationship of humans to their world’ (Gumbrecht, 2004, pp. 27-28).

¹⁶ The last paragraph of the second section of *Truth and Method* is in this respect very significant, as it stresses both the *transformative power of conversation* and its happening *in between*: ‘Our first point is that the language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed in the centre, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. [...] To reach an

(c) The fact of putting at the centre of his analysis the notion of artwork (which in the case of the performative turn is not the case) does not refrain Gadamer from considering the performance as the very key for characterising the mode of existence of art. Performing arts are consequently seen as paradigmatic arts, which eminently exemplify an aspect of it pertaining to *all* arts, including the ones, like painting and literature, which typically are realised in physical artifacts.

This last point is what will be briefly investigated in the last part of this section. We want to see how Gadamer applies his ontological characterisation of art, modelled on the example of performing arts, to arts like painting and literature (which are supposed to be constituted by *objects, not by performances*), in order at the end to characterise thereby the whole domain of humanities.

In relation to visual arts, the intent of Gadamer is clearly expressed in the following words: ‘The methodological priority we have accorded the performing arts, will be legitimated if the insight that we have gained from them proves to be true of the plastic arts as well,’¹⁷ Initially, however, Gadamer seems to suggest that the very notion of performance *does not* apply to this domain, as ‘in the plastic arts it first seems as if the work has

understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were’ (Gadamer, 2004, p. 371). See also the footnote 12 for the further characterisation of conversation as unpredictable event.

¹⁷ Gadamer, 2004, p. 133.

such a clear identity that there is no variability of presentation. What varies does not seem to belong to the side of the work itself and so seems to be subjective.¹⁸ Accordingly, it seems that such objectivity is what allows pictures to be detached from their original context, which is what typically happens in the institution of museums. In a second moment, however, Gadamer develops the thesis that such a supposed context-independent-identity is not the *presupposition*, but rather the *result* of the very institution of museum, which is in fact the institutionalisation of a distorted way to experience works of art, by considering them as something to be *contemplated* by a subject which regards them, to use Nagel's well-known formula, *from nowhere*. Malraux's metaphor of the *imaginary museum*, in this respect, can be seen as the aesthetic counterpart of the disinterested and ahistorical look which should characterise scientific investigation, and which has been adopted by what Gadamer calls the *aesthetic consciousness*:

It is obviously no coincidence that aesthetic consciousness, which develops the concept of art and the artistic as a way of understanding traditional structures and so performs aesthetic differentiation, is simultaneous with the creation of museum collections that gather together everything we look at in this way. Thus *we make every work of art, as it were, into a picture*. By detaching all art from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it, we frame it like a picture and hang it.¹⁹

¹⁸ Gadamer, 2004, p. 130.

¹⁹ Gadamer, 2004, p. 131, my italics.

With this excerpt Gadamer suggests that his shaping of the whole domain of art on the model of performing arts is not to be understood as a *revolution*, but rather as a *restoration* of a way of experiencing art which nowadays has been almost forgotten, due to the (in Gadamer's view) distorted account of art which dominated aesthetics in the last two centuries. While works of art are nowadays considered objects for a subject, at one's disposal (in a museum, in a theatre, in a concert hall) in order to be contemplated, the notion of play, as already stressed, radically breaks with this idea. Works of art *are not* at our disposal. On the contrary, by taking part in them (by taking part in their performance) *we put ourselves at their disposal*, in a certain sense. In this taking part we expose ourselves to it, rather than enclosing ourselves in our interiority by their contemplation. It is in this exposition that we experience all works of art *as performances*, including the ones which are typically thought of as objects. In the specific case of painting, the performance-character of the picture is, among others, specified by differentiating the notion of *image* from the notion of *copy*, and by stressing how the image does not *reproduce*, but rather *presents* the original, producing what Gadamer defines as *increase in being* (*Zuwachs an Sein*):

The relation of the picture to the original is basically quite different than in the case of a copy. *It is no longer a one-sided relationship.* That the picture has its own reality means the reverse for what is pictured, namely that it comes to presentation in the representation. It presents itself there. It does not follow that it is dependent on this

particular presentation in order to appear. It can also present itself as what it is in other ways. But if it presents itself in this way, this is no longer any incidental event but belongs to its own being. Every such presentation is an ontological event and occupies the same ontological level as what is represented. By being presented it experiences, as it were, an *increase in being*.²⁰

Of course, one can object that Gadamer's approach is untenable, that finally an image cannot present itself, as, strictly speaking, it cannot perform anything. Paintings, and more generally, images, are *neither performers nor performances, they are simply objects*. It is a plausible argument, but it is one that would reinforce my point. Because the conclusion to be inferred by accepting such an objection should be the following: *Gadamer's hermeneutical approach is so much 'performance centred' to have the ambition of also considering as performances works of art which are physical artifacts, and which more plausibly should be considered as objects, as things*.

These considerations remain valid when we analyse what Gadamer

²⁰ Gadamer, 2004, p. 135. It has to be stressed that Gadamer's approach to image found an eminent representative in Gottfried Boehm, who fruitfully and originally developed Gadamer's insights in his works devoted to visual arts (see Boehm, 1978 and 2007). The fact that Boehm explicitly refers to Gadamer, with whom he studied and closely collaborated, demonstrates that Gadamer should not be seen as a mere *exception*, as he created a (sort of) hermeneutical school, where the notion of work of art gained performative elements. See also in the next footnote our considerations about Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in the domain of literature.

defines as *the borderline position of literature*, whose performance-character is stressed, also in this case, against the commonsensical idea that a work of literature consists in the written text. Gadamer's point is that text, in a certain sense, *becomes a text only when it is read*, and that such a reading constitutes a modality of reproduction, through which the work of art, again, presents itself (in the language of performative turn we can say: *stages itself*). The fact that in this case, the accent is cast on the reader much more than on the work of art itself, and so on its reception, is not so relevant for the whole argument. If the work of art *happens in-between*, the question of whether the *first move* is performed on the side of the production or the reception of it becomes irrelevant. In both cases, something happens between art and public, and in fact *this happening is the accomplished work of art*:

Reading with understanding is always a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation. Emphasis, rhythmic ordering, and the like are part of wholly silent reading too. Meaning and the understanding of it are so closely connected with the corporeality of language that understanding always involves an inner speaking as well. If so, then it is just as true that literature—say in its proper art form, the novel—has its original existence in being read, as that the epic has it in being declaimed by the rhapsodist or the picture in being looked at by the spectator. Thus the reading of a book would still remain an event in which the content conies to presentation. [...] Literary art can be understood only from the ontology of the work of art, and not from the aesthetic experiences that occur in the course of

the reading. Like a public reading or performance, being read belongs to literature by its nature. They are stages of what is generally called “reproduction” but which in fact is the original mode of being of all performing arts, and that mode of being has proved exemplary for defining the mode of being of all art.²¹

The last, quite straightforward step of Gadamer’s *four-stage-argument*, as sketched before, consists in the application of the above quoted considerations about literature to the totality of textual domain: in fact those considerations do not primarily concern the supposed artistic value of literature, but rather the fact that any textual artifact, in order to be understood, has to be read, and this reading, in Wolfgang Iser’s words, is to be characterised as an *act*, through which the meaning of the text is actualised every time, and in different modalities, according to the different

²¹ Gadamer, 2004, pp.153-154. Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, among others, have been developing this account of literature, where the active role of reception in the very constitution of a work of art is stressed, even if in different ways and sometimes in explicit deviation from Gadamer (see Jauss, 1970 and 1991 and Iser, 1984). Again: this is to confirm that the analysis carried out in this essay, even if centred on *Truth and Method*, should not be understood as the recognition of Gadamer as an exception in the world of hermeneutics, but rather as the identification of a performance-centred current in hermeneutics, possibly nowadays no longer dominant, but that gave an enormous imprint to hermeneutics for several decades, and which therefore cannot be underestimated. As we will see, while Erika Fischer-Lichte is well aware of all this, she does not see in this hermeneutical approach something compatible with the analyses developed within the performative turn.

contexts of reception. It is in this very respect that the experience of art becomes exemplary for the whole hermeneutical task, including its central one, i.e., the understanding of a text. The meaning of a textual artifact is not (as the performative turn has often claimed, in relation to the hermeneutical approach to culture) a *thing to be discovered*²², but rather a *disposition to be actualised* in the performances of the reader:

Just as we were able to show that the being of the work of art is play and that it must be perceived by the spectator in order to be actualized (vollendet), so also it is universally true of texts that only in the process of understanding them is the dead trace of meaning transformed back into living meaning. We must ask whether what we found to be true of texts as a whole, including those that are not works of art. We saw that the work of art is actualized only when it is “presented,” and we were drawn to the conclusion that all literary works of art are actualized only when they are read. Is this true also of the understanding of any text? Is the meaning of all texts actualized only when they are understood? In other words, does being understood belong (gehört) to the meaning of a text just as being heard (Zu-Gehor-Bringen) belongs to the meaning of music? Can we still talk of understanding if we are as free with the meaning of the text as the performing artist with his score?²³

²² In Gumbrecht’s characterisation of the *hermeneutic field*, the notion of interpretation as extraction of a hidden, already constituted meaning, constitutes its *vertical axis*. See footnote 15.

²³ Gadamer, 2004, pp. 156-157.

The (positive) answer to the questions cast in the last lines of this excerpt will be the object of the rest of Gadamer's work and will constitute the nerve of his hermeneutical approach. We don't have to follow it in detail: however, in the next section, we will highlight some key concepts of Gadamer's hermeneutics which will show how its performative approach is at work not only within the domain of philosophy of art. Before passing to it, however, I would like to conclude this section with the following consideration: If the self-understanding of the many representatives of the performative turn, as endorsing an approach to art *complementary* to the hermeneutical one, is based on the assumption that hermeneutics had the tendency to consider art, and more generally culture, as a *text to be deciphered*, then we have to conclude that such self-understanding is based (at least in Gadamer's case) on a false assumption. The analyses carried out until now should be sufficient to show that the very opposite is true: *Gadamer's main point does not consist in arguing that understanding of texts is paradigmatic for the experience of art, but conversely, that the experience of art, and more specifically of performing arts, is paradigmatic for the understanding of all artworks, including texts.* If the formula *culture as text* can *probably* still be maintained for describing Gadamer's main work, it should *surely* be completed by the formula *text as performance*.

3. The Fourfold Opposition Between Hermeneutics and Performative Turn and the *Performativity-Competence* of Gadamer's Hermeneutics

In the last section I tried to show how Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics, in spite of being constructed around the notion of *artwork*, still puts performance at the centre of its interest, mainly by characterising works of art not as *things*, but as *plays*. This already entails a series of consequences which highlight, in my view, what I labelled in this essay as the *performativity-competence* of Gadamer's hermeneutics. However, we have to say that *performance* and *performativity* are not synonyms, in spite of being deeply interrelated. So, showing the centrality of performance in Gadamer's hermeneutics does not yet constitute, *per se*, a satisfactory argument pledging for its capability of taking into account performative aspects of art (even if it already offers some important hints). In order to provide a more satisfactory and articulated argument, in this section I would like, as it were, to *confront* some important notions of *Truth and Method* with some passages from the most detailed and articulated analysis of the aesthetics of performativity (at least to my knowledge), namely Erika Fischer Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance*²⁴, in order to

²⁴ The original German title of this work, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, better expresses its ambition of formulating an *aesthetic theory of the performative turn*. I have chosen this text within the secondary literature exactly for its capacity of articulating the aesthetic insights, individually formulated within the framework of the performative turn, in

show how Gadamer's hermeneutics offers sorts of *ante-litteram-answers* to some challenging issues implicitly cast by Fischer-Lichte's seminal work. This duty will be split into two parallel tasks: a) firstly, I will analyse four *oppositional pairs of concepts* which emerge from Fischer-Lichte's analysis of the aesthetic of performativity, and in which one can, so to say, *articulate* the positioning of the performative turn and hermeneutics as two opposed aesthetic paradigms. This analysis does not have the ambition of being exhaustive, though it provides, in my view, an *effective guide for the reciprocal characterisation of these two aesthetic paradigms* which has been, implicitly or explicitly, broadly adopted in the secondary literature; b) secondly, and in parallel to the first task, I will try to show how Gadamer's hermeneutics furnishes, for each of these oppositions, a concept or a notion which matches the performative side of the pair, without having to be immediately identified with it.

By analysing some passages of Fischer-Lichte's text it is possible to articulate the opposition between hermeneutics and performative turn in four pairs of concepts, in which the different aesthetic approaches of these two paradigms are, as it were, *condensed*. The *first pair* I intend to take into consideration is the one between *work* and *event*, as explicitly formulated in the following excerpt relating to Max Herrmann's notion of *performance*, which is considered as one key forestalling of the performative turn:

a comprehensive theory and, more specifically, in a series of concepts which can be, and in some cases have explicitly been seen as *performative counterparts* of hermeneutical notions.

By defining performance as “festival” and “play,” based on a fleeting and dynamic process and not an artifact, Herrmann excluded the notion of a “work of art” from performance. If he spoke of accomplished acting as the “true” and “purest work of art that theatre is capable of producing,” this is part of his argument to recognize theatre as an independent art form. The prevalent notion of art in his time necessitated such a reference to a fixed work of art. From today’s vantage point, however, Herrmann’s definition of “performance” circumvents the concept of a work of art. The performance is regarded as art not because it enjoys the status of an artwork but because it takes place as an event. [...] At the heart of Herrmann’s notion of performance lies the shift from theatre as a work of art to theatre as an event. Hermeneutic aesthetics as well as the heuristic distinction between the aesthetics of production, work, and reception are incompatible with his understanding of performance. The specific *aesthetics* of performance lies in its very nature as an event.²⁵

In the last part of the quoted excerpt, what Fischer-Lichte implicitly states is that hermeneutics, as a work-centred aesthetic paradigm, cannot take into account the *event-dimension* of performance, which is on the contrary the

²⁵ Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 35-36. As stressed in the following lines of the main text, it is curious to notice how the two key notions of *festival* and *play*, which characterise Herrmann’s notion of performance, are also central in all of Gadamer’s aesthetic. It is not, however, the mere terminological dimension which is at stake here: it is content-wise that we intend to show how Gadamer’s hermeneutics already characterise aspects of the artistic domain along lines which prefigure the analyses conducted in the performative turn, without having necessarily to be identified with them.

core interest of the performative turn. The implicit assumption is that in such a paradigm the performance is always appreciated in relation to the work it refers to (as an *instance of the work*), rather than in its very event-character. In fact, Gadamer's hermeneutics not only, as already seen, lays at the centre of its attention the very notion of performance, but also devotes an entire section of *Truth and Method* (as well as the very important essay *The Relevance of the Beautiful*) to the notions of *Play* and *Festival*, which are evidently also central in Hermann's account of performance. However, in this section I want to focus on a specific notion which shows how Gadamer's hermeneutics, in spite of being undoubtedly work-centred, is characterised by an idea of performance as something which justifies itself not exclusively in relation to the work it is performing, but to the moment and the situation in which the performance takes place. This notion is the hermeneutic technical term of *application*, according to which a text acquires different meanings corresponding to the different situations in which it is performed:

In both legal and theological hermeneutics there is an essential tension between the fixed text—the law or the gospel—on the one hand and, on the other, the sense arrived at by applying it at the concrete moment of interpretation, either in judgment or in preaching. [...] This implies that the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly—i.e., according to the claim it makes—must be understood

every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way.
[...]. *Understanding proves to be an event.*²⁶

It is clear that, in this excerpt, what is meant with application is not the implementation of a rule, as a procedure to be mechanically utilised in the different contexts, but rather the opposite. It is about the capacity of the performer and/or interpreter to actualise the aspects of a specific text which are responding to a specific situation. In fact, performer and interpreter are also *part of this situation*, and for this very reason *understanding proves to be an event* rather than the *deciphering of a code*. This does not make the hermeneutic notion of *application* something which can be immediately and uncritically transposed within the context of the performative turn: it seems to me that here at work also is the notion of *judgment (Urteilkraft)*, analysed in the first part of *Truth and Method* as capacity of understanding and decision in absence of unambiguous criteria, and according to the specific situation. All this hermeneutical aspect is absent in the notion of performance, which the performative turn intends to propose. But it would be in our view false to assume that Gadamer's hermeneutics is not concerned with the event-character of performance: on the contrary, it explicitly characterises the very notion of understanding as performance and therefore as event, as something that *happens*.

The second opposition is the one between *object* and *situation*. Let's read Fischer-Lichte:

²⁶ Gadamer, 2004, pp. 307-308.

For hermeneutic and for semiotic aesthetics, a clear distinction between subject and object is fundamental. The artist, subject 1, creates a distinct, fixed, and transferable artifact that exists independently of its creator. This condition allows the beholder, subject 2, to make it the object of their perception and interpretation. The fixed and transferable artifact, i.e. the nature of the work of art as an object, ensures that the beholder can examine it repeatedly, continuously discover new structural elements, and attribute different meanings to it. This possibility was not offered in Abramovic's performance. The artist did not produce an artifact but worked on and changed her own body before the eyes of the audience. Instead of a work of art that existed independently of her and the recipients, she created an event that involved everyone present. The spectators, too, were not presented with a distinct object to perceive and interpret; rather, they were all involved in a common situation of here and now, transforming everyone present into co-subjects.²⁷

In this case too, the implicit assumption is that hermeneutics, as a work-centred paradigm, cannot adequately consider the situationally-determined position of the spectator. The idea behind this assumption, and explicitly formulated in the above excerpt, is that hermeneutics thinks of cultural products as *things* that just stand *in front of the spectators* and independently of them, in order to be viewed and/or interpreted. Also in this case, the very notion of *play* and the connected characterisation of spectator as *part* of it,

²⁷ Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 163.

and not as something staying *in front of the artwork, is already indicative of how Gadamer's hermeneutics* is generally not compatible with such a Cartesian constellation, as formulated in the first part of the passage above. In fact, such a Cartesian configuration of the relation between subject and object (Gumbrecht's *horizontal axis of the hermeneutic field*) is radically criticised by Gadamer as the configuration at the basis both of the aesthetic consciousness, which, as we saw in the previous section, *wants to make out of every artwork a picture to hang on a wall*, and the historical consciousness, which in a certain sense *aestheticised the history*, by simply framing the historical pictures hanging on the wall of the *imaginary museum of historical artifacts* in their corresponding historical contexts.²⁸ It is not by chance that Gadamer talks of an *unresolved Cartesianism* of Dilthey.

However, as in the previous case, I intend to show how Gadamer formulates in his hermeneutics a specific notion that somehow *falsifies in advance* the assumption that hermeneutics cannot envisage the role of the spectator in terms of participation and involvement in a situation. This notion is specifically the one of *hermeneutical situation*, which characterises

²⁸ This excerpt is very significant in this respect: 'The implicit presupposition of historical method, then, is that the permanent significance of something can first be known objectively only when it belongs to a closed context—in other words, when it is dead enough to have only historical interest. Only then does it seem possible to exclude the subjective involvement of the observer' (Gadamer, 2004, p. 297). All this almost literally corresponds to the so-called *horizontal axis* of the hermeneutic field, as characterised by Gumbrecht in footnote 15. But this is exactly what Gadamer, throughout all his work, heavily criticises.

the *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*:

Consciousness of being affected by history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*. To acquire an awareness of a situation is, however, always a task of peculiar difficulty. The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished.²⁹

We see how the whole subject-object schema utilised by Fischer-Lichte, and modelled on the Cartesian metaphysics cannot work in Gadamer's hermeneutics. The idea that Gadamer wants to plead for, in contrast with Dilthey's hermeneutics (at least according to his reading of it), is the impossibility of treating history as an *object of scientific investigation*, even if a scientific investigation regulated by an autonomous method, not modelled by the one valid in the natural sciences (if there is a single one). History cannot become the *object* of investigation, because we are part of it, we *participate* in it. So, when confronted with historical artifacts (included artistic ones), we cannot assume the position of a neutral observer, as our position will always and necessarily be determined by the specific historical (hermeneutical) situation in which we are situated.

The criticism of Dilthey's hermeneutics also constitutes a point for which Gadamer furnishes an answer to the third opposition formulated by

²⁹ Gadamer, 2004, p. 301.

Fischer-Lichte, namely the one between *performativity* and *expressivity*:

Performative acts (as bodily acts) are “non-referential” because they do not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance, or being supposedly expressed in these acts; no fixed, stable identity exists that they could express. Expressivity thus stands in an oppositional relation to performativity.³⁰

Even if in this case hermeneutics is not explicitly involved, the notion of expression immediately refers not only to Dilthey’s hermeneutics, but to the very (supposedly) hermeneutical notion of interpretation, as applied also to the aesthetic domain, according to which the aesthetic experience is mainly a question of *deciphering* something in order to reconstruct the original meaning *expressed* in it. According to such a vision, the hermeneutic approach to aesthetics should not be allowed to produce meaning, but only to reproduce a second time something which was originally in the mind of the author and consequently *expressed* in the text. This operation corresponds to the *vertical axis* of Gumbrecht’s characterisation of the hermeneutic field (even if this characterisation is not limited to the domain of artworks).³¹ All this, however, could *possibly* be valid for Dilthey’s hermeneutics, but *certainly not* for Gadamer’s, which explicitly considers the interpretative act as a productive one, and alongside criticises the Diltheyan idea of cultural artifact as an expression of life:

³⁰ Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 27.

³¹ See footnote 15.

Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well. [...] Such a conception of understanding breaks right through the circle drawn by romantic hermeneutics. Since we are now concerned not with individuality and what it thinks but with the truth of what is said, a text is not understood as a mere expression of life but is taken seriously in its claim to truth.³²

The last, possibly most important opposition, is the one between *understanding* and *experience*, where Fischer-Lichte explicitly states the incompatibility between the idea of the *transformative power of performance*, as characterised in the performative turn, and the central notion of hermeneutics, namely *understanding*:

Such a performance eludes the scope of traditional aesthetic theories. It vehemently resists the demands of hermeneutic aesthetics, which aims at understanding the work of art. In this case, understanding the artist's actions was less important than the experiences that she had while carrying them out and that were generated in the audience. In short, the transformation of the performance's participants was pivotal.³³

³² Gadamer, 2004, p. 296.

³³ Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 16.

We saw already in the second section how the very notion of *play* already involved the idea of the transformation of the people who take part in it, including the spectators. However, also in this case, Gadamer formulated in the section of his work specifically devoted to hermeneutics a notion of experience, explicitly based on Hegel's one, and which remains valid for all hermeneutical situations (including the aesthetic ones), whose main feature consists exactly in the transformative power of it:

We use the word "experience" in two different senses: the experiences that conform to our expectation and confirm it and the new experiences that occur to us. This latter—"experience" in the genuine sense—is always negative. If a new experience of an object occurs to us, this means that hitherto we have not seen the thing correctly and now know it better. Thus the negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning. It is not simply that through a deception and hence make a correction, but we acquire a comprehensive knowledge. [...] We saw that one's experience changes one's whole knowledge. Strictly speaking, we cannot have the same experience twice.³⁴

This last passage explicitly formulates a concept implicitly assumed in several sections of the first part of *Truth and Method* (for example the section devoted to Greek tragedy), where it was described how the very essence of the aesthetic experience is the *experience of a truth*, as one which changes, as it were, our *way of seeing things* (and this is the essence of the

³⁴ Gadamer, 2004, pp. 347-348.

Hegelian notion of experience as formulated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*). Also in this case, we don't want simply to identify this phenomenon with the transformative processes analysed (particularly in the fifth chapter of her book) by Fischer-Lichte, which has clearly a specific character, evidently much more tightly aligned to corporeal aspects than to cognitive ones. It is clear that the transformation provoked by the typical performance envisaged in the performative turn is not a simple transformation of our *Weltanschauung*. It is more *and* less than that. But such differences, and this is the main point of this paper, are not, in my view, best described in terms of *opposition* or *complement*. In this case, the opposition between understanding and (transformative) experience does not help, as Gadamer is able to formulate within his paradigm a notion of understanding based on an idea of aesthetic experience entailing a radical transformation of the subject involved. The subject who understands something is, in Gadamer's whole system, not simply a subject who gains a *supplementary piece of knowledge*, but rather one who has experienced a radical transformation of his way of thinking. The fact that this transformation cannot be immediately identified with the one analysed by Fischer-Lichte is another question, which surely deserves utmost attention but which, in my view, cannot adequately be answered by considering performativity as what lies *outside*, or *beyond*, hermeneutics.

4. Conclusion

Both the second and the third sections have shown how Gadamer's hermeneutics can be labelled as *performativity-competent*; not only, as argued in the second section, by putting the notion of play at the centre of his analysis, does Gadamer focus on the centrality of performance in the characterisation of works of art, and therefore of the whole hermeneutic enterprise; the third section shows also that *Truth and Method* contains notions and theses directly related to some aspects of art, which, in Fischer-Lichte's analysis, could only have been taken into account by the performative turn, as, so to say, supposedly exceeding the explanatory power of hermeneutics. Finally, I would like to formulate a couple of last considerations:

- (a) The conducted analyses have not the ambition of being exhaustive, but rather of constituting a first step for a better understanding of the difference between hermeneutics and the performative turn. The main intent is not to deny the fundamental break that the performative turn has produced in the aesthetic research field. The performative turn undoubtedly brought a new emphasis on some aspects of art which, until that moment, did not receive enough attention in a field of research strongly influenced by a work-driven (instead of performance-driven) attitude. What is questionable, on the other hand, is the consequent characterisation of performativity as *what lies beyond and outside* hermeneutics. The above-conducted analysis tries to provide a different account of hermeneutics, as least in the case of Gadamer (who conversely exerted a noticeable influence on several

authors and who cannot therefore be considered as a simple exception). The main point of this different account is not only the one of *rendering justice* to Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, but also of providing a first basis for better identifying the differences between the two paradigms, differences which cannot, in my view, be adequately individuated by characterising their reciprocal positions into a complementary modus.

- (b) A first, very provisory proposal for the characterisation of this difference is the following: the *aesthetics of performativity* should possibly be considered neither as the *opposite* (Hülk) nor as the *complement* (Gumbrecht) of hermeneutics, but rather as a *radicalisation* of notions relating to performative aspects of art and already formulated in Gadamer's hermeneutics. By recalling a formulation of Robert Brandom in his essay on Gadamer³⁵, I do believe that not only is such a characterisation more *legitimate* (as I hope to have shown), but that it is more *fruitful*, as it should lead to a better understanding of the break between hermeneutics and the performative turn. Performativity lies at the centre of Gadamer's hermeneutics (and also most probably of all hermeneutical approaches influenced by his work), articulated in a series of concepts which pledge for its *performativity-competence*. The question is to understand *what happens* when such concepts are employed in an

³⁵ See Brandom, 2002, p. 117.

aesthetic context (the one at the core of the performative turn) where the notion of artwork plays, in most cases, a marginal role (while performance acquires an autonomous value against it), and what is semantically entailed in this different use. The objective of this paper is, among others, to provide a first contribution for future answers to these questions.

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