Beyond the Autonomy-of-Art Paradigm: On Georg W. Bertram's Relational Aesthetics

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Abstract

The paradigm of the autonomy of art has been dominant in the last three centuries. It posits that art and literature exist independently from social, political, or moral functions, emphasizing its self-referential nature and intrinsic value. Rooted in the aesthetic theories of Immanuel Kant, this view holds that art should be appreciated for its formal qualities and internal logic rather than its utility or ideological content. One important challenge to this paradigm is posed by the German philosopher Goerg W. Bertram (1967-), who views art as a human practice. In this sense, there is a continuity between 'art' and 'nonart'. The present study, thus, explores Bertram's unstudied contributions to the field of aesthetics. It explains how he attempts to construct a nonreductive and sophisticated aesthetics, by indicating to what extent art is seen as a special practice of reflection, more specifically practical reflection, in a move that establishes, according to him, the specificity of art. For Bertram, art makes a specific contribution to human practice because it expands knowledge in a sensible and material way. By establishing a theory of relational aesthetics, Bertram seeks to articulate a theory of art that could avoid the shortcomings of the previous ones.

Keywords: autonomy-of-art paradigm; Georg W. Bertram; relational aesthetics; human practice; interpretive activities

ما وراء نسق استقلالية الفن:
حول علم الجمال التعالقي عند جيورج ڤ. بيرترام

(كرم أبوسحلي، أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي المساعد، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة بني سويف)

المستخلص:

كان نسق استقلالية الفن سائدا في القرون الثلاثة الأخيرة، وهو نسق يفترض أن الفن والأدب موجودان بشكل مستقل عن الوظائف الاجتماعية أو السياسية أو الأخلاقية، وهو يؤكد على طبيعتهما الذاتية وقيمتهما الجوهرية. وينطلق هذا النسق من النظريات الجمالية لإيمانويل كانط، حيث يرى أن الفن يجب أن يُقدَّر لخصائصه الشكلية ومنطقه الداخلي لا لفائدته أو محتواه الأيديولوجي. وقد تمثلت إحدى التحديات لنسق استقلالية الفن هذا في كتابات الفيلسوف الألماني جيورج ڤ. بيرترام (١٩٦٧-)، الذي رأي في الفن ممارسة إنسانية. وبهذا المعني، فإن ثمة استمرارية بين الفن واللا فن. وفي ضوء ذلك، تحاول الدارسة الحالية استكشاف علم الجمال لدى بيرترام، الذي لم يحظ بأي نصيب من الدرس والبحث بغية الكشف عن اسهامه في هذا المجال. وبذلك تشرح هذه الدراسة كيف يحاول بيرترام بناء علك جمال غير اختزالي من خلال تبيان الذي يمكن استخدامه لرؤية الفن على أنه ممارسة تأملية ذات طابع عملي، ما يؤكد على خصوصية الفن عند بيرترام. فالفن، وفقا لرؤيته، يسهم إسهاما خاصا في الممارسة الإنسانية؛ لأنه يوسع من نطاق المعرفة بطريقة ملموسة ومادية. فمن خلال تأسيس علم جمال علائقي يسعى بيرترام إلى تأسيس نظرية للفن يمكنها تحاشي أوجع القصور في النظريات السابقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نسق استقلالية الفن؛ جيورج ڤ. بيرترام؛ علم الجمال العلائقي؛ الممارسة الإنسانية؛ الأنشطة التفسيرية

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Introduction

The paradigm of the autonomy of art has a long history since the inception of aesthetics with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714 – 1762). It finds it most powerful culmination in Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), which is described as "the most powerful and comprehensive critiques of art and the discipline of aesthetics ever written" (Cascardi 7). Adorno's aesthetic theory has its central theme in the autonomy of art, where Adorno critiques committed art. As Brian O'Conner explains, Adorno contends that "committed art is no better than political theory in that it has no specific aesthetic quality, merely political aspirations" (240). However, Adorno confirms that art finds its essence in being both social and autonomous. In a negative dialectical style, Adorno thus writes: "Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society. Certainly through its refusal of society, which is equivalent to sublimation through the law of form, autonomous art makes itself a vehicle of ideology" (*Aesthetic Theory* 226).

After Adorno, the autonomy paradigm continues to concern philosophers of art and aestheticians. Most prominent among them is Georg W. Bertram (born 1967), a professor of aesthetics and theoretical philosophy at Freie Universität Berlin, mainly in his *Art as Human Practice: An Aesthetics* (2019). To the best of my knowledge, there is no secondary literature on Bertram's theory of art. This study, therefore, undertakes the task of starting from scratch, attempting to fill in such a gap, by exploring Bertram's aesthetics. In doing so, the present study explores Bertram's critique of the autonomy paradigm and his central notion of aesthetic reflection, being the corner stone in his affirmation of art as aesthetic practice. In his critique of the autonomy paradigm, Bertram underscores the degree to which art is a dynamic process, the production of which cannot be separated from its reception (Holznienkemper 680). The following sections attempts to trace Bertram's theory of art, which is guided by the question Bertram poses for himself: "How is it possible to develop a conception of art that does not fall short of capturing all the aspects relevant to art?" (Bertram, "Kant and Hegel" 97). The present study, thus, explores Bertram's relational, rather than separational, aesthetics.

Bertram's Conceptual Apparatus: Human Practice and Human Life Form

It is important, first of all, to expose Bertram's conceptual apparatus. This apparatus is based mainly on the two concepts of *human practice* and *human life form*. Human practice, for Bertram is tied to tradition. It is tied to tradition in a structural sense, which can better be understood in terms of Christoph Menke's notion of indeterminacy, where "human practical life is indeterminate from the ground up" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 50). Indeterminacy, Bertram affirms, is the "horizon of human practices" (*Art as Human Practice* 50). Like Heidegger's temporality as the horizon of Being, Bertram argues that impermanency permeates human practices, which makes them always standing in "relation to an open future" (*Art as Human Practice* 50). As human life is grounded and embedded in tradition, there would always be a negotiation between the indeterminate and the determinate; such negotiation is necessary for an open future for the human form of life.

The very negotiation between the determinate and the indeterminate highlights, for Bertram, an important fact: the essential self-determinancy of human practice. Human practices are self-determining when they are "shaped from within by moments of indeterminacy" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 51). This is an aspect of human rationality, where to be rational is to engage in "the process of constantly redetermining the coordinates of this form of life" that is ours (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 52). Rational practice then is one that contains a dialectic between the determinate and the indeterminate. As Bertram puts it in relation to tradition, "[h]uman practices are rational precisely to the extent that they relate to tradition; they are constituted by tradition to be open to revision and criticism. This is what makes up the human form of life" (*Art as Human Practice* 52).

Here Bertram reaches his analogy between human form of life, based on a dialectical relation between the determinate and the indeterminate, and art. Against this analogy, the theories of the contemporary philosophers of art, such as Christoph Menke's and Arthur C. Danto, are found lacking in that "they take human practice as a practice that is subject to determinacy in a one-sided way" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 52). Nevertheless, art, for Bertram "is a practice in which determinacy is constitutively bound up with indeterminacy" (*Art as Human Practice* 52). All products that fall within the human form of life should resemble what is essential to what it means to be human, that is, this negotiation between the determinate and the indeterminate. For human beings, as Bertram argues, "are defined by indeterminacy" ("Art

and the Possibility of Failure" 26), and at the same time they live and face a determined facticity. Here Bertram seems to oppose the thesis of the end of art advocated by Hegel, Benjamin, Adorno and other recent philosophers of art. Art cannot end because it has, like man himself, a determinate and indeterminate nature. It has "no firm foundations [and] there are no fixed criteria determining what can be a work of art … since art is unstable, it never ends" (Bertram, "The End of Art" 131).

Beyond the Autonomy Paradigm: Art as Reflective Practice

In his major book on aesthetics, *Art as Human Practice: An Aesthetics*, Georg W. Bertram develops a new perspective on the philosophy of art. For him, the old notion that art is strictly separated from other human practices is invalid. "The concept of aesthetic autonomy," he thus argues, "has often been invoked in order to articulate the independent character of art" ("Improvisation as Paradigm" 178). And this represents a delimitation. Such delimitation entails that there is a sharp distinction between art and nonart, a distinction that is integral to and constitutive of the concept of art itself. Nonetheless, art, Bertram contends, "stands in an essential continuity with other human practices, since it only gets its distinctive potential by taking up a relation to these other practices" (*Art as Human Practice* 1).

In the very first page of his book, Bertram states both his aim and his method. The aim is to change our perspective on the philosophy of art, in the sense of achieving an essential continuity with nonart. The method is based on relationality. The relational character of art appears in Bertram's main thesis, which he sates as follows: "Art is a practice for which reference to other practices is essential, and for this reason it cannot be thought of in isolation from these other practices, but rather only in recourse to the way in which these other practices are carried out" (*Art as Human Practice* 2). This proposition does not jeopardize the autonomy of art; rather, it makes the autonomy of art more intelligible. As, for Bertram, "[t]he autonomy of art cannot be grasped independent of other human practices." (*Art as Human Practice* 3).

Bertram then proceeds to account for his endeavor to go beyond the dominant autonomy paradigm. What underlies his quest is an organizing thread in his philosophy: the definition of what we are must be asked anew. Here one finds a link between his work on aesthetics and his book *Was ist der Mensch: Warum wir nach uns Fragen* [What Is Man?: Why We Ask About Ourselves]. In this book Bertram concludes that "the question of who we are does not have a conclusive answer" (*Was ist der Mensch* 74, *my translation*). As we have to ask the question of what we are

anew, it means that such a question is a reflective practice, that is, "taking a stance towards ourselves" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 3). Also, understanding art helps us understand what it means to be human. Art helps us realize what we are; as through the way we deal with art, we as human beings develop an understanding of ourselves. As Bertram argues, "[a]rt manages to make a contribution to the fact that the human takes a stance to itself and thus seeks to determine itself. Art is thus a practice that lays claim to playing a role in human freedom" (*Art as Human Practice* 11). Art is no different from the human condition, and the question concerning its essence should be a reflective practice. This reflective practice carries within itself a negation of the common interpretation of reflectiveness. A reflective practice is neither theoretical nor cognitive. Conceiving art as reflective practice that is similar to and also different from other practices, Bertram comes closer to his concept of art. He thus writes:

> The artwork thus distinguishes itself first and foremost from the whisk in that the practice in which it stands comports itself to other practices in a special way. And this means that the practice in which the artwork stands is a reflective practice (*Art as Human Practice* 6).

Bertram believes, in the light of understanding art as reflective practice, that we need a new conceptual framework. This new framework "requires not an ontology of the artwork, but an ontology of the practice in which the artworks stand—an ontology of art as a reflective practice." (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 6). Thinking of art as a special kind of reflection, one that is not theoretical but practical, Bertram bases his argument on Hegel and Kant, albeit with some modifications. Bertram also gives example of Proust and Cezanne that demonstrates how art, on the one hand, "stands in a constitutive relation with determinate moments of cultural and historical practices" and how it is "productive of these relations in a specific way," on the other (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 10). By these two aspects of art, Bertram highlights what kind of reflective practice art can be. These two aspects do not hold a sharp binarism between art and nonart; rather, they establish a relationality. In doing so, Bertram undermines the notion that the sheer autonomy of art establishes its objectivity. For his "aesthetic autonomy" becomes "an aspect of reflective practice in general" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 10).

As Bertram argues, art is not an element in the human practice. Otherwise, we would commit the same reductionism to either side of the dualism. Art, for Bertram, "does enrich human practice in an awe-inspiring manner," and this is exactly how we need to understand it (*Art as Human*

Practice 11). But how could Bertram go beyond the autonomy paradigm? For Bertram, autonomy does not mean to separate art from other human practices. Here Bertram deconstructs the very idea of the autonomy of art, possibly for the benefit of autonomy itself. He thus argues for "taking leave of a one-sided notion of autonomy in order to be able to articulate the true core of this concept" (*Art as Human Practice* 16). This entails that the autonomy of art would no longer be the demarcation line that distinguishes art from other practices. Such autonomy that separates art from other practices "*must* be rejected" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 16). Art should be defined instead relationally, that is, in relation to other practices. In other words, Bertram writes that autonomy is bound up with heteronomy. That is, "[t]he work of art, insofar as it is accessible, draws on the established everyday forms of communication. It breaks with them only partially and in this sense proves to be heteronomous" (Bertram, "Autonomie als Selbstbezüglichkeit" 223, *my translation*).

Seeking an Approach Based on Kant and Hegel

In searching for a new approach beyond the reductive autonomy paradigm, Bertram finds himself in front of two approaches: either to follow the logical makeup of concepts such as art and artworks, which is the path taken by analytical philosophy of language, or to understand art concepts in their own soil, which is the path taken by hermeneutics. By engaging with the permutations of the concepts of art, Bertram hopes to reach a nonreductive and unsimplified concept of art. The moment of premutation is that one taking place in the eighteenth century, where art emancipates itself from its connection to authority. This moment is related to Baumgarten, who founded the philosophical discipline of aesthetics as domain of its own, finding its roots in the sensuous. Bertram, however, ascribes the right start of aesthetics not to Baumgarten but to Kant, as "his work represents a revolution that overcame the one-sided focus on human rationality (rationalism) or sensibility (empiricism) in terms of the way in which the subject knows the world" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 57). This revolution enables Kant to view art as neither empirically sensible nor subjectively conceptual but as "essentially outside of such categories" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 58). Kant understands art as essentially relational and this is the reason why Bertram constructs his view of art by starting with Kant. Hegel, then, according to Bertram, enriches Kant's position on art.

Bertram works on what is often missed when dealing with Kant's and Hegel's positions on art. It is widely agreed that Kant is formalistically oriented, while Hegel is socio- and historico-culturally oriented in their

conception of art. Bertram introduces a reinterpretation of Kant's and Hegel's theories of art in order to foreground their marginal views, the very absence of which leads to misinterpretations by theorists such as Menke and Danto, as Bertram argues.

Kant considers the beautiful as the medium of reflection. The judgement of taste, of the beautiful being the object of the judgement of taste, tells something about "the way a finite subject of cognition … relates to the world" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 59). The judgement of taste, though saying nothing about the constitution of an object, as Bertram puts it, "expresses something that is valid in a universal way." (*Art as Human Practice* 60). As such, it contains a knowledge claim. This kind of knowing is only a capacity for knowledge and not knowledge in the strict sense. This knowledge in potency gets unleashed by the encounter with the beautiful, which "occasions a free interplay between the understanding and the power of imagination" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 60). Thus, Bertram, in his explication of Kant, concludes that

> [o]ur occupation with beautiful objects … relates to very particular practices, namely practices of knowing, or more precisely, practices of knowledge in their entirety. The entirety of our practices of knowledge is reflected back to us in our encounter with beautiful objects. The notion of 'knowledge itself' thus demonstrates itself to be the notion of an *indeterminate* and in this sense a universally *reflective* relation (*Art as Human Practice* 63).

Bertram lays special emphasis on Kant's notion of indeterminate relation and seeks to explain it with a concept of his own: infusing life (*Verlebendigung*). This notion of infusing life would be helpful, as Bertram states, in the shift from Kant to Hegel. In encountering the beautiful, the subject is enlivened by such encounter. What precisely gets enlivened, by the beautiful, in the perceiving subject, is the interaction between its sensible and conceptual dimensions. Both these two dimensions are necessary for knowledge to take place. Thus, our capacity of knowledge is reflected in dealing with the beautiful; such reflection, Bertram confirms, "is valuable because it enlivens the subject by means of an experience of the interaction of its powers of knowledge" (*Art as Human Practice* 64). The value of the beautiful then is that it makes knowledge in general possible. As the beautiful lies in indeterminacy, and so is art, Kant, according to Bertram, has nothing to say about the specific nature of art (*Art as Human Practice* 65). This lack of specificity has serious consequences, namely that aesthetic reflection severs the relation

to knowledge. The judgment of taste, then, is one based on free play, and such free play is 'harmonious,' that is, it is not known how it can render a relation of knowledge.

Kant's account of free play, which is connected to the notion of life being infused into the subject in her perception of the beautiful, remains open. Kant also does not associate any kind of action following the perception of the beautiful. The pleasure accompanying the perception of the beautiful is a disinterested pleasure. Bertram then states one important point about Kant's position on art and human practice: "it becomes clear that for Kant aesthetic reflection is bound up with a departure from everyday practices" (*Art as Human Practice* 66). This, however, is interpreted by Bertram as conveying a 'mixed message.' In this message, there is both an emphasis on the "reflective quality of aesthetic experience" and an emphasis on the irrelevance of such reflection in practical respects (*Art as Human Practice* 67). This dialectic renders Kant's notion of enlivening the powers of knowing incomprehensible. Such enlivening of the powers of knowing in the reflection on the beautiful must related the subject to a kind of praxis. Yet, as disinterested reflection, it is irrelevant to such praxis. It becomes, as Bertram puts it, "nothing more than a foamy crown on the waves of our powers of knowledge" (*Art as Human Practice* 67).

Moving to Hegel, Bertram argues that Hegel was aware of Kant's *mixed message*. Hegel's definition of art is somehow connected to that of Kant, Bertram still argues. According to Hegel, aesthetic reflection "makes a real contribution to other practices within the human form of life" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 68). Such contribution starts with the reflective dimension of art rather than with autonomy. This is taken by Bertram as a Hegelian development of Kant's position on art. As, for Hegel, "we cannot think of the powers involved in knowledge independently from actual practices of knowing" (*Art as Human Practice* 68). Such practices of knowing must, thus, be conceived as historical and cultural practices. In contrast to Kant's position, aesthetic pleasure in Hegel's account is historical and culturally situated. In this sense, Bertram argues, aesthetic pleasure according to Hegel "must be bound to a real practice" (*Art as Human Practice* 69). In this sense, too, Hegel turns Kant's transcendental universality into a "universality [that is] concretely realized" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 69). This concrete realization of universality takes, in the human form of life, the form of self-understanding, with all its shades of meanings. "Following Hegel," Bertram writes, "all of the practices that make up a form of life are rooted in such acts of self-understanding" (*Art as Human Practice* 70). Art

thematizes the human self-understanding and thus directly contacts the concerns of the human form of life. In thematizing the orientations of the human form life, art has an 'enlivening effect.' Such enlivening effect concerns the human powers of knowing, not generally, as is the case in Kant's account, but culturally and historically. This means that art, through its thematization of the orientations of the human form of life, enlivens and empowers such orientations, in a way that helps dereify them and give them a new life over and over again. Bertram thus concludes that "Hegel succeeds, unlike Kant, in relating the notion that art infuses life to something that actually needs this infusion, since it can lose life" (*Art as Human Practice* 71). Unlike Kant, Hegel "understands the infusion of life as rooted in the concrete nature of objects" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 71). As such, the infusion of life by an object is a *determinate* state of infusion due to its specific form. "Artworks," Bertram confirms, "occasion … a determinate play: determinate play in relation to social practice. In this play, it is a matter of bringing forth and empowering the essential orientations of such a practice" (*Art as Human Practice* 71-2).

With this said, art has yet a specificity of its own in Hegel's account, as the infusion of life in human orientations is also characteristic of religion and philosophy. For Hegel, what makes art a specific domain is its presentation of thematization of our orientations in "media that are sensibly intuitable" (Betram, *Art as Human Practice* 72). Such sensible semblance (*Schein*) of art, unlike its status in Kant, brings an engagement with reality, as sensation is everywhere in our daily activities. In the aesthetic context, however, there is a "unique form of *disinterested sensibility*" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 73). In such unique form, there is no conflict between the autonomy of art and its reflexive dimension. Bertram explains Hegel's position as follows:

> Artworks are not just objects that have a meaning, but rather they contribute something special to our historical and cultural practices within the framework of a form of life by reflecting those orientations that are central to our practices, and hence they manage to infuse life into these practices (*Art as Human Practice* 74).

Such Hegelian account of the specificity of art is criticized by Bertram as being too general: relating art to real practices comes at the expense of its specificity. This account is thus deemed as reductionist.

For Bertram, both Kant and Hegel are relevant to his theory in one major respect: both have confirmed that "the beautiful has to be conceived of as a reflective practice. However, neither of them manages

to spell out this thought in a plausible manner" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 78). What is at stake in this move is the concept of reflection. Here Bertram gives such a concept a due attention. For him, reflection is "the process of becoming a self-conscious and self-relating being" (*Art as Human Practice* 78). For the purpose of his own theory of art, Bertram distinguishes between two understandings of reflection: theoretical and practical understandings. In the theoretical understanding of reflection, reflection is 'a process of knowing' that takes place at a distance in the conceptual sense of the word. Such keeping of distance from the object of reflection, Bertram argues, "objectivizes something about the self, so that it is as if taking the perspective of another on one's self" (*Art as Human Practice* 79). In its practical dimension, "reflection is an event that intervenes" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 79). Bertram argues elsewhere that a practical reflective practice "makes an impact on another practice of the same subject who reflects" ("Kant and Hegel" 108). The practical dimension of reflection is found in Hegel's account of aesthetic reflection more than in Kant's. Artworks present the orientations of the human form of life and thus infuse life into the practices based on these orientations. Yet, Bertram argues, the aesthetic infusion of life into such practice remains ambivalent, as the uniqueness, or the specificity thesis, of the aesthetic reflection remains inadequate. With this, Bertram reaches a conclusive description of both Kant's and Hegel's position on reflection: "for Hegel and Kant, a theoretical understanding of reflection is the guiding force, despite all of the countervailing practical elements" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 82). In order to fill the gap of relating aesthetic reflection to practice in Kant's and Hegel's account, and thus move beyond them, Bertram elaborates on the practical understanding of reflection.

Bertram on Practical Understanding of Reflection: Going Beyond Kant and Hegel

For Bertram, the occurrence of reflection necessitates the shaping of the meaning of practice. Such shaping is related to self-understanding. As Bertram puts it, "reflection manages to give definition to practice in a way that makes these practices self-posited" (*Art as Human Practice* 83). Such self-posited attitude does not take place from outside the practices; rather, it is an internal working of practices, where each one determines the other. Such determination Bertram calls 'commitment.' He thus writes: "reflection happens through making commitments" (*Art as Human Practice* 83). For a reflection to be practical, therefore, it must bring about a self-posited determination of practices. A clear example of

such practical reflection is the explanation of one's feelings to another. Such an explanation has "a determining impact" on both, and thus "reflection demonstrates itself to be practical" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 84). In explanation, there is a potential for change and therefore a relation to the self. Another important element in reflective practice is that it establishes a relation between the past and the future. As connected to the future, the reflective practices "have an imaginative character" (Betram, *Art as Human Practice* 85). This also entails that imagination should no longer be conceived as lacking in practicality. In this sense, Bertram concludes, "[r]eflection, when understood practically, is an imaginative event" (*Art as Human Practice* 86). As far as art is concerned, imagination is to be understood, Bertram confirms, not as bringing into presence of something, but as "the capacity to allow the representation of something to become productive that is not present to the senses" (*Art as Human Practice* 86). The practice of imagination is not something inert; rather, there is a free play between imagination and the objects brought forth by such imaginative practice. Understanding reflection practically entails a temporal and imaginative relationship. As these two dimensions of reflection, especially in aesthetic reflection, are characterized by openness to future potentials, understanding reflection practically also entails change.

In order for Bertram to go beyond Kant and Hegel, he provokes Schiller' notion of aesthetic freedom and play. Schiller, Bertram asserts, "puts special emphasis on art becoming practical" (*Art as Human Practice* 91). This can be a reaction to the impracticality of the aesthetic free play in Kant's account, as Bertram argues. In Schiller's notion of free play, the "aesthetic practice as such produces the state of freedom" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 91). Schiller's account of aesthetic freedom, however, remains vacuous. As, for him, "aesthetic practice [is] a practice that transforms everyday practice in its entirety" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 91). This, on the one hand, negates the specificity of art and negates the contribution of art to everyday practice, on the other. Still, for Schiller, as Bertram asserts, the aesthetic state is one that is "liberated from any kind of relation to other practices" (*Art as Human Practice* 92).

Bertram then answers the question of why Kant and Hegel do not make art comprehensible as a realization of freedom. His answer is: "both of them essentially see freedom as independent of aesthetic practice" (*Art as Human Practice* 92). Against this view, Bertram sees a relation between aesthetic practice and the realization of freedom, and he paved the way to such a relation by his notion of art as a reflective practice.

Besides, by asserting the practical dimension of reflection, Bertram moves a step further beyond Kant and Hegel and states that freedom can also be realized in reflection. Such freedom realized in practical reflection is always negotiable, always open and in play within human practice. The concept Bertram sticks to here is neither restricted following Kant nor exaggerated following Schiller. Rather, Bertram designates 'free play' "as a form of play in which aesthetic practices interact with other everyday practices. This kind of play contributes to the realization of freedom and is thus precarious" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 94). The very nature of such play is that it is an 'unassured process."

After retrieving the Kantian insight concerning art as a practice that reflects on human practices, Bertram now explains to what extend art is a special practice of reflection, more specifically practical reflection, in a move that establishes, according to him, the specificity of art. He thus formulates art's specificity thesis as follows: "Art makes a specific contribution to human practice because it expands knowledge in a sensible and material way" (*Art as Human Practice* 98). For Bertram, the specificity of art lies not in its being an object but in its being a practice. This approach takes a remove from theories viewing art in terms of objecticity (*Gegenständlichkeit*), such as that of Günter Figal. Bertram's main idea here is that "in art, various human practices come to be negotiated in a practical way" (*Art as Human Practice* 100). The contribution of art to the negotiation between other human practices is achieved by the fact that art "is characterized by a special dynamic between objects (in the broadest sense) and practices" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 100). In art, there is either confirmation or negation of other practices. And in this sense art as a practice comes to be related to other practices.

In viewing art as sensible-material practice, Bertram establishes his position by starting with Hegel's and Nelson Goodman's philosophies of art, where he corrects the 'insufficiencies' he finds in Hegel by Goodman. As for Hegel's notion of the sensible-material form of the aesthetic, Bertram is quite critical. This Hegelian specificity of art has nothing to say about the relevance or the value of the sensible-material form to other practices. In Hegel's account, Bertram writes, "the sensible and material aspects of artworks do not make any substantial contribution to their meaning or to their influence on the world outside of the aesthetic," and hence "they do not lead to an expansion of knowledge" (*Art as Human Practice* 105).

In Goodman's account, the sensible-material form of the aesthetic has a symbolic function. In doing so, Goodman, as Bertram argues, "hopes to

find an account of the specific nature of aesthetic practices, and in doing so he places value on the idea that this specificity is not meant to be 'essentialistic'" (*Art as Human Practice* 106). Because the syntactic density of artworks, Goodman claims that there are no 'definite criteria' for the presence of aesthetic practice. What we can find is simply symptoms of the aesthetic. Parts of the specificity of artworks is that they are materially self-reflexive, in the sense that they "make reference to their materials," out of which they are composed (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 108). This means that their specific material form "is relevant to their meaning in a variety of ways" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 108). According to Goodman, as Bertram writes, "[a]rtworks make special sensible patterns apparent to those who occupy themselves with them" (*Art as Human Practice* 108). Now what is the relevance, in Goodman's account, of this sensible feature of artworks to human practice? The answer that Goodman would have, according to Bertram, is that the material pattern in artworks can also be found in the external world to art, and thus helps in the discovery of the world, and expands our knowledge. In this sense, Goodman sees art as "a set of signs that are like other signs. This leads him," as Bertram asserts, "to emphasis the continuity between art and other practices" (*Art as Human Practice* 112).

Of these considerations, Bertram comes out with his own notion of the specificity of art. He explains that art "expands human practice, that artworks equip human practice with something special" (*Art as Human Practice* 113). To push this hypothesis further, Bertram believes that such expansion made by art to human practice is not because artworks are 'constituted' in a special way. Nothing of the composition of artworks is concerned here. He also asserts that "[a]rtworks may not … be understood as objects if they are to be understood in what specifically defines them as art" (*Art as Human Practice* 113-14). The specific nature of artworks, Bertram adds, should be understood "in relation to those practices that are bound up with artworks, and must understand these practices in terms of how they relate to other, extraaesthetic practices" (*Art as Human Practice* 114). In Bertram's view, art as an aesthetic practice is bound to other human practice. Conceptually speaking, Bertram formulates his thesis as follow: "Art has to be understood as a *process of negotiation*" (*Art as Human Practice* 114).

What does this notion that establishes a connection between art and human practices entail? For Bertram there are two aspects: perceptional and relational. First, in the perceptional aspect, that is mainly the domain of the recipient, there is 'interaction' between humans and artworks. Second, the practices of perception are connected to other nonaesthetic

practices in the world. At this specific point, Bertram makes a rupture from the view that sees artworks as object. This means to think of art in terms of aesthetic practice, where both recipients and producers *interact* with artworks. In this case, Bertram states, "we are not basing our account on the property of an object, but rather on the constitutive connection that pertains between an object and the practices of those who occupy themselves with it" (*Art as Human Practice* 114).

The specificity of art in Bertram's account, then, has nothing to do with the object in itself but in the *interactive practice* with the object. For Bertram, treating art as object does not "comprehend the human relation to self" (*Art as Human Practice* 114-15). This entails that we must think of the specificity of art in terms of being "a practice of reflection within our way of relating to the world, and this means that we must take the notion of reflection in a practical sense" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 115). Establishing the specificity of art as interactive reflective practice, Bertram restores the notion of free play in a new light, mainly as "a play that is practically realized" (*Art as Human Practice* 115). It is practically realized in the sense that we immerse in art as reflective practice that connects to other practice beyond art. This in fact is a more comprehensive understanding of play. In this sense, Bertram writes, "[a]rt gives impetus to new determinations of human practice" (*Art as Human Practice* 115). Play becomes a play of reflection.

The Self-relationality of Art

Bertram then elaborates on the notion of interaction by recalling Goodman's notion of exemplification, where artworks relate to themselves, as signs. Yet, Bertram extends this notion by saying that artworks "determine for themselves the properties that are essential to them" (*Art as Human Practice* 116). This entails no givenness of such properties but negotiation. Although Bertram criticizes the idea of treating artworks as subjects as obscure, he keeps dealing with them as such, however self-consciously. For him, "artworks are *dynamic objects*. They unfold out of themselves a dynamic that permeates them as objects" (*Art as Human Practice* 117). He makes it clear that recipients, in their interaction with artworks, "pursue the configuration that artworks develop in relation to themselves" (*Art as Human Practice* 117). This means that recipients interact with a dynamic object. Such dynamicity can be found, for instance, in the variation of a rhyme scheme, the stress on a certain type of metaphor and so on. This makes speaking about the universality in art a difficult matter. The weight given by artworks to certain artistic aspects within themselves necessitates that "we have to conceive of what

characterizes each artwork by examining the dynamic that it unfolds from its own self-referential constitution" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 118).

The self-relationality of art, where artistic elements relate to themselves dynamically and variably, does not expose artworks as objects. Such self-relationality entails also a process of internal negotiation between elements in the sense that "it negotiates what gets determined within it and upon what it has a determining effect" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 121). At this point, Bertram thinks of the issue of art's self-relationality as a reformulation of an Adornoian central concept: "artworks are objects with their own 'laws of form'" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 122). According to Adorno, Bertram argues, art "seeks to secure its own autonomy within society, because only by retaining autonomy is it capable of resisting the pressure of social forces" ("Art and the Possibility of Failure" 31). Although this self-referential essence of art is used by Adorno as part of the autonomy paradigm, Bertram goes beyond the self-referential formality in Adorno's account for being too simplistic. As Bertram writes, "Adorno's conception is … misleading in that he emphasizes the formal aspect of the artwork's self-relation in a one-sided manner" (*Art as Human Practice* 123).

Another critique to be directed against the notion of the laws of form is improvisation. Improvisation, as Bertram confirms, "demonstrates that the self-relational nature of an artwork does not emerge out of a unified, closed form" (*Art as Human Practice* 124). It is also one way of how art can intervene in social, historical-cultural practices. Improvisation, Bertram believes, is an essential dimension in the human form of life ("Improvisation as Paradigm" 178). We improvise in both artistic and social practices. In both art and society, we are "confronted with actions that belong to an interactional structure," and this is what is meant by improvisation according to Bertram (Bertram, "Improvisation as Paradigm" 181). As Bertinetto and Bertram argue, our rational norms, to which we submit ourselves, "are constantly developing, transforming, and changing" ("We Make Up the Rules" 203). This constant change makes improvisation an essential dimension of human practice.

The fact that there are always negotiations within artworks as for which elements to have weight in their self-presentation puts aside, for Bertram, Hegel's and Goodman's notion of the sensible materiality of art. As there are, for instance, philosophical novels and other form of conceptual art to which such sensible materiality does apply. In the place of sensible materiality, Bertram argues, "we have to understand the artwork as a dynamic structure constituted by self-relations, within which

these specific aspects of it are negotiated" (*Art as Human Practice* 126). Such negotiation includes improvisation as an essential aspect of human artistic practice.

The dynamic of artworks might be conceived as immanent process taking place within the confines of artworks. This is not the case in Bertram's account. Such dynamic is "made up of those practices" brought to the artwork by the recipient. What arises in the interaction of recipients with the dynamic of artworks is a negotiation between both. Such interaction takes the form of a challenge on the part of artworks, a challenge to what the recipients bring about to them. The challenge is thus practical in nature. This makes the recipient not a passive player in the game of aesthetic practices. As Bertram puts it,

> aesthetic practices always have two sides: On the one hand, these practices reflect a dynamic that gets its impetus from the artwork by following it, but on the other hand, these practices also involve the recipient in new activities, and thus new approaches and interventions (*Art as Human Practice* 127).

This means that the dynamic of an artwork moves from potency to actuality by the interaction of the recipient. On a mutual base, the recipient gets guided and his reception actualized by the dynamic of the artwork. As Bertram states, "[t]he dynamic of artworks is part of a comprehensive dynamic in which artworks are bound together with each other through the different reactions that they provoke (*Art as Human Practice* 128-29). Speaking of the artwork and the recipient in such a way gives the impression that artworks have a quasi-subjective status. Bertram responds to this by stating that artworks "are self-relational because of the dynamic relation in which producers and recipients stand to each other while dealing with the artwork" (*Art as Human Practice* 129). The artwork becomes the arena to the dynamic elements with which recipients come to engage. Bertram further confirms that "[a]rtworks are objects that have to be conceived of primarily within the context of the dynamic in which they stand. They do not exist independently of the practice of reflection that they develop" (*Art as Human Practice* 129).

Art as Human Practice

The interaction of the recipients with the dynamic of artworks Bertram calls 'interpretive activities.' In these activities, one orients oneself towards the inner dynamic and the self-relationality of artworks, tracing in them how they present themselves and, hence, articulating such self-presentation. Interpretation here is not to be conceived, Bertram warns us,

as "a distanced, cognitive way of dealing with the artwork" (*Art as Human Practice* 131). This is because an interpretation "can only succeed," as Bertram argues, "if a recipient enters into the configuration of the work with her linguistic interpretation…" (*Art as Human Practice* 131). This is a critique of the Kantian aesthetics, in which the subject engaged in the aesthetic experience is ultimately passive. The aesthetic experience is viewed by Bertram in a practical way. For him, aesthetic experience does not mean that an art object affects a passive subject. Rather, "[t]he recipients experience a sort of dependence in (their) independence. In their activities, subjects are independent. But if their activities are guided by an objects, the result is an experience of dependence in independence" (Bertram, "Aesthetic Experience" 70).

Interpretive activities, as a human practice, have an improvisational character, which further stress the dynamicity of aesthetic experience. Such dynamicity, as Lydia Moland argues, makes aesthetic experience "embedded in and enhancing human practices" (179). The interpretive activities change the artwork with their changing interpretive perspectives. On their part, recipients always interact with artworks with many perspectives and so arises a conflict between them concerning their interpretive activities. In this sense, Bertram writes, interpretive activities must be understood as "a continuation of the dynamic inherent in artworks, and as this continuation, they belong to the artwork. This dynamic belongs to the structure of the world" (*Art as Human Practice* 144). Now the connection between the self-related constitution of artworks and the interpretive activities is one that relates aesthetic practice to nonaesthetic practice in the world. The interpretive activities are widely connected to the human form of life. For instance, the "activities of perception that we develop in dealing with an artwork have the potential to support the further development of activities of perception in the rest of the world" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 147). Another example is that of cinema. A film can move us to think about our human condition, our existence and our success and failure. With such reflective practice we *relate* to both self and world.

The connection between interpretive activities and other practices in the world is one of permeation. As Bertram puts it, "[o]ther practices in the world come to be permeated by those interpretive activities that relate to the artwork" (*Art as Human Practice* 148). Artworks first provoke a response in the form of interpretative activities. Then these activities "have the potential to provoke a renegotiation of other practices on the basis of their specific imaginative potential" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 149). The key thesis here, as Bertram states, is: "In the dynamic

event that an artwork unleashes, the determinations of human practices get renegotiated" (*Art as Human Practice* 149). Aesthetic experience here is not a secluded activity; rather, it is a practice that invigorates other practices in daily life.

Now what are the specificity and the value of art in Bertram's account? The specificity of art comes about from its evocation of interpretative activities in the recipients based on artworks' self-related constitution, which leads recipients to articulate the challenges posed by such constitution. As for the value thesis, which at the heart of Bertram's account of art as human practice, Bertram writes: "In dealing with art, we manage to redefine other activities in the framework of human practices, although this redefinition can also result in confirming already established activities" (*Art as Human Practice* 150). The connection between art's self-related constitution and interpretive activities is not restricted to such aesthetic practice; rather, it is open to other human practices. And this is what makes dealing with artworks valuable: "Art reflects human practices and their embeddedness in the world in a practical manner" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 150).

With such established understanding of art as aesthetic practice that is related to other human practice, Bertram sets out to establish the precarious position that his account provides *an aesthetics*. Being self-conscious that such a step may fall back into the autonomy paradigm, Bertram avoids choosing between either Kant or Hegel, that is between art as indeterminate free play and art as culturally embedded. He rather works on the idea of reflection that the aesthetic object brings about. As Bertram puts it, if we work with such an idea of reflection,

> we see that art, culture, and nature stand in a connection with each other. They belong together within a practice that has the potential to inspire dynamic interactions by evoking activities among recipients. The potential of objects to inspire reflection depends on a dynamic interrelationship that is irreducible to any one term (*Art as Human Practice* 156).

Bertram is keen to affirm the irreducibility of aesthetic experience. This is reminiscent of his account on the nature and essence of man in his *Was ist der Mensch? Warum wir nach uns fragen* [What Is Man?: Why Do We Ask about Ourselves?], where he gives no final determination as for what man can be. The dynamic interaction between art, culture and nature allows for no closure of horizon of the interpretive activities, which lead, in turn, to dynamic relationship among recipients. This further defies the reification of human scene, in that no interpretive community has the

final word. Art, in Bertram's account, is to be conceived "as a form of practice within the framework of the human form of life" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 156). With both artistic objects and the interpretive activities that come as response to them, there are negotiations with everyday practices. In this sense, there is no opposition between aesthetic practice and everyday practices.

Art as a Practice of Freedom

The last move in Bertram's aesthetic theory is that art is a practice of freedom. When we deal with art, we enjoy a reflection of dynamic objects. In such aesthetic experience, artworks have their specific nature not their particular formal properties as object, but rather in "the way in which they provoke us to negotiate new practices" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 159). As such, art, for Bertram, becomes a practice "by which people define themselves, and this self-definition is connected in a special way with objects that are valuable to humans because of their special potential for negotiating practice" (*Art as Human Practice* 159).

To set out proving art as a practice of freedom, Bertram resorts to and develop the notion that art is indeterminate in a special sense. This is to "consider art as a practice that gives expression to the fundamental indeterminacy of human existence" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 161). Bertram understands practices of indeterminacy as those practices that surpass everyday usual practices. This makes art "a fundamentally *unassured practice*," as Bertram states (*Art as Human Practice* 162). As unassured practice, art's endeavor towards its own success cannot be realized without moments of failure. "This is how," Bertram writes, "every determinacy within art has an indeterminate moment" (*Art as Human Practice* 163). This is how art can essentially be a practice of freedom for the human form of life. Both producers and recipients of art do what they can to 'sound out' art's contribution to human freedom.

Another link between art and freedom is established by the diversity of artworks and types of arts. Bertram argues that artworks refer "to a constellation;" this constellation is made relevant by each work of art (*Art as Human Practice* 171). In such constellation, a multiplicity of elements becomes relevant, including sensible, intersubjective, spiritual elements and so forth. That is, such constellation of elements is irreducible to any of them. What is at stake here is the relation between elements within the constellation. Each constellation springs not from itself but is modelled on a previous constellation that Bertram describes as *generic*. A generic constellation is thus "a model for establishing constellations of elements and relations to other aspects in the work. It arises through various

readaptations of the constellations in question" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 173). The generic constellation is therefore not a closed form but a possibility. The principle of generic constellation thus entails that artworks are plural, and that generic constellation works through various genres of art. For instance, rhythm can be found in music and in other types of art. The constellations are also in interplay with interpretive activities. With such interplay between constellations and interpretive activities, what also comes into play is "their complementary practices in everyday life" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 180). Aesthetic perception, for instance, is not only restricted to a work of art, but it is related to the perception of other thing in everyday life. Likewise, the state of reflecting on a work of art ignites reflection in general as one reaction to the everyday life practices. Bertram thus concludes that the "constellations are an element in the comprehensive play of reflection that art initiates in the framework of human practice" (*Art as Human Practice* 181). This play of reflection contributes to human freedom.

The major contribution made by Bertram to the theory of art is now clear. "Artworks," Bertram argues, "do not carry out a competition for their own sake. They carry it out in the framework of a social practice" (*Art as Human Practice* 225-6). In interacting with artworks, recipients enter a process of negotiation and are related to other practices in everyday life. Artworks also have "a reflective potential because they challenge us to engage in interpretive activities" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 226). Such reflective practice contributes to human freedom in the form of the challenge posed to the human practices. The artwork, in this case, serves as a disturbing or challenging 'event.' Therefore, any approach to the specificity of art must not do without the value of art within the framework of human practice. This means that both the specificity and the value of art, in Bertram's account, are genuinely integrated and related to each other. Artworks, thus, play the role of a mediation. As mediating objects, artworks "do not stand on their own, but in relation to human practices" (Bertram, *Art as Human Practice* 134).

A Relational Aesthetics: Toward an Ontology of the Work of Art

Bertram thus establishes an ontology of art. He argues that there are two positions as for what a work of art is. The first approaches the essence of the work of art in terms of its constitution, and the other in terms of aesthetic experience. The two positions represent work aesthetics, where "the peculiar constitution of the work of art" is the important issue, and reception aesthetics, where aesthetic experience is the characteristic of art (Bertram, "Was ist Kunst?" 77, *my translation*).

Bertram finds both position lacking, as they imply a narrow circle of engagement with art. He thus argues that "[a]rt is a practice that people develop within the framework of their world. For this reason, the contexts in which art is what it is should be at the center of a philosophical definition of art" ("Was ist Kunst?" 78, *my translation*). Therefore, Bertram argues that "a plausible ontology of art must take into account the comprehensive contexts that are unfolded through art" ("Was ist Kunst?" 78, *my translation*). This leads to his idea of constellation, where a work of art has relationships to other works of art. As Bertram puts it, "[i]n their establishment of particular configurations of elements and relationships, works of art often continue to work on constellations that have already been established in other works of art" ("Was ist Kunst?" 85, *my translation*).

The work of art has a self-referential character in their own constitution as objects. This self-preferentiality is also relational in that it points beyond the works of art through the challenges they pose to those engaging with them. Such challenges stir the interpretive activities. The interpretive activities in turn are relationally connected to other practices in everyday life. For instance, an art installation can enhance our attitude towards politics. That is, "[i]nterpretative activities of producers and recipients lead to related everyday practices being questioned and renegotiated" (Bertram, "Was ist Kunst?" 87, *my translation*). Such renegotiations are quite productive. They are intimately related to who we are and how we see ourselves. To propose an ontology of art that capture its essence, Bertram poses two theses, negative and positive. The negative thesis sees that a definition of art cannot establish a distinction between art and non-art. The positive thesis states that "we can grasp the specific nature of art in relation to other practices by defining art as a reflective practice" (Bertram, "Was ist Kunst?" 91, *my translation*). The essence or ontology of art, thus, is that it is a practice of reflection, where those engaged in the challenges posed by it question their self-understanding. This is because interpretive activities and everyday activities are inextricably linked. "Art," as Bertram confirms, "is about particular objects, but not for the sake of these objects, but for our own sake" ("Was ist Kunst?" 93, *my translation*).

Conclusion

Viewing art as a human practice helps Bertram establish an aesthetics that can best be described as relational aesthetics. Unlike the autonomy paradigm that has been in vogue in the last three centuries, Bertram questions the autonomy paradigm and goes beyond its reductionist

attitude towards artworks. Thus, going beyond autonomy is a critique of the status of art as an object with absolute singularity. Bertram emphasizes art's relation to the usual everyday incidents. In doing so, he makes a paradigm shift in the history of aesthetics by critiquing the one-sidedness of the distinctiveness of art and advocating the relevance of art in our everyday lives.

Be dealing with previous theories of art, such as those of Hegel, Kant, Adorno, Menke and others, Bertram highlights the shortcomings of these theorists, especially their failure to go beyond the autonomy paradigm. He advocates a relational approach to art in order to avoid being reductionist. This relationality is manifested in the continuity between art and other human practice, simply by art's relation to practical reflection, and in the self-relationality of art itself, where artistic elements relate to themselves dynamically and variably. Another element of this relationality is the notion of improvisation, which expose the self-relational nature of artworks in being anything but a closed form. All this indicates, for Bertram, that autonomy entails heteronomy. Autonomy becomes only one side of the dynamic process of art as reflecting on an artwork enhances our general faculty of reflection related to other everyday practices.

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