# Table of Contents

- **Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas: An Ethical Query**  
  Maurice Friedman  
  3

- **Judith Butler: *Une Nouvelle Existentialiste?***  
  Alan D. Schrift  
  12

- **The Role of the *Beiträge* in Heidegger's Critique of Science**  
  Trish Glazebrook  
  24

- **Parent, Child, Alterity, Dialogue**  
  David Kennedy  
  33

- **Solidarity and Fear:**  
  Hegel and Sartre on the Mediations of Reciprocity  
  Craig Matarrese  
  43

- **The Speechless Image: Gadamer and the Claim of Modern Painting**  
  Daniel L. Tate  
  56

- **Merleau-Ponty on Truth, Language, and Value**  
  Douglas Low  
  69

- **Deleuze's Kant: Enlightenment and Education**  
  Christopher R. Groves  
  77

- **The Two Faces of Liberal Democracy in Habermas**  
  Deborah Cook  
  95

---

Volume 45  
Number 1/4  
Spring 2001
THE SPEECHLESS IMAGE
GADAMER AND THE CLAIM OF MODERN PAINTING
Daniel L. Tate

Since the publication of *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s reflections on art have increasingly sought to address the provocation of aesthetic modernity.¹ He readily acknowledges that the simultaneous emergence of such phenomena as hermetic poetry, atonal music, and abstract art points to a “genuine revolution” that took hold of European art shortly before the First World War.² For him, the advent of modern art poses the following question: how it is that such works of avant-garde art can “exert a claim upon us as powerful and as authoritative as that of the classic or traditional work?”³ The issue for hermeneutics is to comprehend this claim and our responsibility in light of it.

What prompts this issue for Gadamer’s hermeneutics is the unintelligibility of so much avant-garde art. The opaque yet insistent presence of the work of artists as diverse as van Gogh, Mondrian, Matisse, and Pollock testifies to the enigmatic quality of modern painting. Standing there impassively, self-contained in their “brute silence,” such works seem to withdraw in the face of any effort to penetrate them. Here we seem to encounter the strange speechlessness of an art poised at the very limits of intelligibility. At this limit the pictorial image falls silent and the claim of modern painting becomes problematic.

Faced by the enigmatic picture that stares at us with its “eloquent mute gaze,” hermeneutic understanding seems to falter. Here the task of finding a common language is not facilitated, but frustrated; likewise the fulfillment of sharing a common meaning is not redeemed, but repudiated. In this way modern painting challenges both the competence of hermeneutic understanding and the claim of hermeneutic universality. In the presence of the speechless image philosophical hermeneutics thus appears to encounter its own limit.

Nevertheless, such works arrest and address us. Speaking specifically of modern art, Gadamer says that we have to understand “how it comes about that the work addresses us.”⁴ This, I believe, marks the crux of his interpretation of modern painting. Ultimately Gadamer is concerned to show that even the unintelligibility of modern art does not invalidate his conception of the work of art as a hermeneutic phenomenon. To the contrary, the enigmatic quality of modern painting actually confirms the hermeneutic experience of the work of art as a communicative event. Whenever we genuinely experience a work of art “something happens;” we find ourselves addressed by the other, the work, and responsible to its claim. This remains true even where we are addressed in the unintelligible language of avant-garde art. So while it may appear to refuse meaning, the speechless image is still a communicative event that calls upon us to respond.

*****

What Gadamer finds most provocative about modern art is the fact that so many of its major works appear to be impenetrably enigmatic. Indeed, it has been argued that unintelligibility is characteristic of the most authentically modern—i.e., avant-garde art.⁵ Gadamer even asserts that modern painting constitutes an “unintelligible language” in which we seem to encounter the “rejection of meaning rather than its expression.”⁶ His aim, however, is not to explain away the unintelligibility of avant-garde art, but rather to understand how it is possible to be addressed by such works. In this respect, his reflection upon modern painting is best interpreted as a response to its “enigmatic character” (Adorno).

With such works it does not seem to be merely a matter of an inadvertent obscurity that can be overcome once its idiosyncratic codes have been mastered. Modern art,
Gadamer asserts, “offers us a pictorial code that we try to read on account of the meaning it expresses, but it is written in an inexplicable and indecipherable sign language.” It is this dual aspect of modern painting that constitutes its enigmatic character. Here we find ourselves addressed, but in a pictorial idiom that is virtually unreadable. He therefore asserts that “the modern language of painting increasingly tends to reject the demand for legibility in art.”

The “illegibility” of the pictorial image has been most pronounced in the drive to abstraction characteristic of modern painting. According to the art critic and theorist Donald Kuspit, the “direct... path to enigma was through the rejection of representation.” Nevertheless, Gadamer is especially impressed by the capacity of “non-objective” painting to make a claim upon us despite its rejection of representation and, along with it, the traditional means by which painting long sought to communicate meaning. In fact, this rejection leads him to conclude that the pictorial image in avant-garde art exhibits a veritable “speechlessness” that marks its enigmatic quality and constitutes both the problematic claim of modern painting and the challenge it poses to hermeneutics.

Gadamer broaches his interpretation of modern painting in an article length review of Arnold Gehlen’s *Zeit-Bilder* where he remarks on the “spiritual silence” (geist er haften Stummheit) that has taken over painting since the post-impressionists. In a passage approvingly quoted by Gadamer, Gehlen writes: “Abstract pictures such as Mondrian’s are utterly speechless and mute [sprachlos und verstummt]; they are able to radiate a downright brute silence [Schwi gen].” While he adopts Gehlen’s characterization, arguing that the pictorial images of the most important modern painters have indeed “fallen silent,” Gadamer does not share Gehlen’s view that this reflects the “heightened rationality” of modern painting. Instead, he believes that the strange silence of these pictures has more to do with their withdrawal from traditional symbols and categories of meaning. Bereft of a binding pictorial language shared in common between artists and audience, they seem unable to speak. For this reason he proposes “the speechless language of the pictorial image” as the most appropriate perspective from which to comprehend the enigmatic quality of modern painting.

When Gadamer uses the term “Verschweigen,” however, he does not mean to imply that modern painting has nothing to say. On the contrary, he insists that “speechlessness [Verschweigen] is really a kind of speech.” Nor does he mean to suggest (as has been recently argued) that modern painters pursue unintelligibility for its own sake. Rather, in Gadamer’s view, these artists are trying to “say” something for which they lack the “words.” “When we are at a loss for words in this way,” he observes, “what we want to say is actually brought close to us as something for which we have to seek new words.” If modern painting has fallen silent, this is because the traditional pictorial language inherited from the past masters no longer enables modern artists to express what they want to say. This search for the “right word” bears witness to a profound need, a “Sprachnot,” that calls for the creation of a new pictorial language.

It is not surprising, then, that Gadamer associates the phenomenon of speechlessness with the development of pictorial abstraction that constitutes, in the words of one art critic, “the most important energy center in twentieth century painting.” Gadamer assumes it to be well known that in the first decades of the twentieth century painters broke with the long-standing tradition that theirs is an art of representation—that is, an art of creating images that are bound by certain requirements of accord with the forms of nature. For centuries, artists represented religious, mythical, and historical subjects or depicted the world before them in landscape, portrait, and still-life pictures. But now painters were creating works that eschewed the traditional artistic task of representation by distorting or altogether eliminating recognizable object forms. Despite its inexactness, the term “abstraction” has become current for this tendency in all of its multifarious modes and ramifications. This drive to abstraction was clearly decisive for the emergence of modern painting. Indeed, once it took hold in the years just prior to the beginning of World War I, the break with the tradition of European painting was sharp and rapid. For the first time a completely non-representational art of painting.
was realized and, as the art historian Meyer Shapiro notes, "the result was shocking—an arbitrary play of forms and colors that had only a vague connection with visible nature."\(^{19}\)

However, pictorial abstraction is "speechless" not simply because it dispenses with the straightforward representation of ordinary visible things, but because in so doing it also tends to remove itself from the narrative and literary aspects of traditional painting as well.\(^{20}\) In the art of the past it was not just the depiction of objects that was important, but also the reference they embodied to events, stories, and symbols invoked by the mythical, religious, and historical scenes that were considered the most noble subjects for painting. Hence by rejecting representation modern artists have created an art that, as Gadamer tersely reports, "moves in a more formal element" that is "poorer in signification" than the painting of earlier ages.\(^{21}\) This is especially true of abstract art where the "language" of modern painting is completely reduced to the elements of point, line, and plane, of form and color, in structured (though often fluid) relationships. These elements constitute a purely formal language of abstract visual signs quite apart from any representational function. However, this new visual idiom can appear very spare relative to the abundance of narrative and symbolic connotations possessed by the classical pictorial subjects, not to mention the expressive physiognomy of the human face and form itself. Indeed, as Gadamer observes, "we encounter these signs as the surface elements of point, line, and color, but the meaning inscribed in these signs appears intangible, ineffable, incommensurable with anything we have ever experienced."\(^{22}\) That is why, compared to "the rich, colorful, and resplendent eloquence that speaks to us so clearly and fluently from the classical periods of painting," he finds the pictorial language of modern art to be quite alien and impoverished leaving, as it were, "an impression of speechlessness."\(^{23}\)

* * * *

This impression of speechlessness is therefore largely a result of the abrupt departure of avant-garde art from the great European painting of the past and its renunciation of the traditional pictorial means for the communication of meaning. As a consequence, artists could no longer rely upon an extant pictorial language; now they had to create a new visual idiom altogether. Compelled by this necessity, painters turned to the very elements of painting in order to develop a new vocabulary and syntax for their art. Resistant to our familiar categories of meaning, avant-garde art appeared to speak to us, but in an unintelligible language.

In this way, the speechlessness of modern painting testifies to the fact that here we confront an art that (as Gadamer says of hermetic poetry) "has reached the limits of intelligible meaning."\(^{24}\) Where we encounter such "painting at the limit" the claim of modern painting becomes profoundly problematic.\(^{25}\) At this limit hermeneutics itself seems to be brought up short. Confronted by the strange and uncommunicative character of a picture that withdraws into itself, it appears impossible to fulfill the hermeneutic task of finding a common language in which to enact the sharing of a common meaning. Here the competence of hermeneutic understanding is cast into doubt and the claim to hermeneutic universality called into question.\(^{26}\)

Yet, on the view I am arguing, Gadamer's interpretation of the enigmatic quality of avant-garde art should be read as a response to just this challenge. Indeed, the very notion of "the speechless language of the pictorial image" expresses the paradoxical predicament of modern painting situated at the limit of intelligibility. On the one hand, the notion of "the speechless image" is intended to describe the peculiar muteness of an art that, having repudiated representation, seems to renounce meaning and refuse communication. On the other hand, Gadamer also intends it to describe the capacity of pictorial abstraction to achieve a powerful presence without appealing to the expressive force of representational images. Despite having fallen silent, the speechless image somehow speaks to us; despite being impenetrably enigmatic, abstract art still addresses us. The hermeneutic problem is, in Gadamer's words, "how to account for the speechlessness which addresses us so forcibly with its unique mute eloquence."\(^{27}\)

In his account, Gadamer seizes upon the hermeneutic experience of being addressed.
Even where art has reached the limit of intelligibility, even where the pictorial image has fallen silent, address takes place. For Gadamer, that is the decisive matter. Wherever this happens, the work of art occurs as a hermeneutic phenomenon; that is, it takes place as a communicative event in which we find ourselves obliged to respond to the claim that meaningfully addresses us there. This event is nothing less than the “work-being” (Heidegger) of the work itself. With his insistence upon the priority of address, Gadamer opens up a perspective within which even the speechless image must be interpreted as a hermeneutic phenomenon.

The priority of address is implicated in Gadamer’s hermeneutic conception of the work of art as an event. According to this conception, the work of art is no longer understood as something closed and complete in itself which the spectator is merely called upon to observe. Instead the work of art is open toward the spectator so that he or she is taken up into the dynamic of the work’s self-presentation. Like play, the work of art requires a Mitspielen, a playing-along-with, on the part of the spectator who, as a participant, now belongs to the play. Engaged by the strange silence of an abstract picture, the work now has a claim on me that I cannot simply ignore; it addresses me even if I scarcely know how to respond. Gadamer no doubt attests to his own experience when he remarks that many of the most important modern painters “emphatically reject” the expectations with which we approach their work. Repudiating rather than confirming our anticipation of meaning, such works address us in their otherness, questioning the pertinence of our familiar concepts, even compelling us to reconsider how we make sense of art.

It is nevertheless here, in just such an experience, that the speechless image somehow speaks to me. Even if I do not yet understand its meaning the work makes a claim upon me that I may never be able to settle, but which I can certainly never deny. Addressed by the other, I find myself caught up by the work and bound by its claim. Hence I am obliged to recognize and embrace this claim, not to reduce or dismiss it. Addressed by the work I stand under a demand, more ethical than cognitive, to respond by attempting to understand what it strives to say, despite its having fallen silent. I thereby acknowledge my responsibility to the claim that the work makes upon me.29

In this respect, the encounter with modern painting confirms Gadamer’s understanding of the work of art as a hermeneutic phenomenon. Even where the pictorial image addresses me in an unintelligible language, it still calls for understanding. And even where the meaning communicated remains fragmentary, such communication still presupposes that the work of art occurs as an event in which address takes place. Even the speechlessness of pictorial abstraction is a kind of speech, its non-communication a kind of communication.30 The priority of address thus anchors the hermeneutic perspective within which the work is conceived as a communicative event.

By conceiving the work of art as an event Gadamer provides an interpretation of modern painting that does justice to its enigmatic quality, on the one hand, while affirming it as a hermeneutic phenomenon, on the other. On my reading, his notion of “the speechless language of the pictorial image” is intended to convey both aspects of avant-garde art. In the following three sections I want to pursue Gadamer’s interpretation by showing how his discussion of “hermeneutic identity,” “symbolic gesture” and “self-recognition” elaborate his understanding of the claim of modern painting interpreted as a speechless image.

* * * *

By rejecting the “organic” quality of the work, avant-garde art seems to call the very concept “work of art” into question, “as if it were a question of renouncing the unity of the work.”31 While defending the legitimacy of this concept, Gadamer argues that the unity of the work of art is misconceived if it requires the work to be understood as a self-enclosed entity. Instead, he argues, this unity is “more deeply grounded” in the fact that even the most fleeting and unique experience can be intended in its self-identity (e.g., musical improvisations). In his view, “it is the hermeneutic identity that establishes the unity of the work.”32 We encounter a work wherever there is sufficient unity such that something comes to stand so that it can be identified and understood as

THE SPEECHLESS IMAGE
something. For Gadamer, this identity alone constitutes the meaning of the work.

In modern painting, especially where the tendency toward abstraction dominates, the unity of the picture certainly does not lie, as it did for the great classical paintings of the past, in the unity of the object, scene or story being conveyed by the figures represented there. Nor does it lie in the unity of a single view made possible with the development of linear perspective inherited from the Renaissance masters; modern painting no longer presents itself as view that opens out onto an enclosed space. Nor does the requisite unity reside in the artist’s self-expression for abstract art, Gadamer believes, has no inwardness to express. Instead, its unity derives entirely from the very elements of the painting itself such that “the form and color of the picture fuse into a unity in tension that appears to be organized from within.” On this basis, Gadamer acknowledges a kinship between abstract art and the “abstract” nature of music. “Only the relation of form and color, without reference to specific objects, remains as a kind of visual music which addresses us in the speechless language of modern art.”

Perhaps it should still astonish us, as it apparently does Gadamer, that an abstract design of forms and colors, without reference to external objects, should constitute a genuine work of art capable of speaking to us. Yet he insists that, when compared to the painting of earlier ages, “the nonobjective painting of our time... can possess a similar density of composition and a similar capacity for addressing us directly.” It is by virtue of its composition that the abstract picture is a work of art capable of addressing us. Thus it is only when the abstract composition acquires the requisite unity and density that it becomes “a configuration [Gebilde]” that “now stands independently, set free in its own right.”

Gadamer’s emphasis on composition intimates the new understanding of what is essential in painting, one that reflects a new faith in the self-sufficiency of forms and colors as fundamental elements of the art and a concomitant commitment to the structure and coherence of the pictorial image. Shapiro summarizes this new understanding in “two universal requirements:” first, “that every work of art have an individual order or coherence, a quality of unity and necessity in its structure regardless of the kinds of forms used; and, second, that the forms and colors chosen have a decided expressive physiognomy, that they speak to us as a feeling-charged whole, through the intrinsic power of colors and lines.” These two “requirements” go hand in glove. Because the elements of painting (i.e., its forms and colors) are to be expressive in themselves without relying on any representational images, the order and coherence of the composition (i.e., its unity and necessity) become all important. Thus it is by virtue of its unity and density that an abstract pictorial composition constitutes a work of art that is able to speak to us “through the intrinsic power of colors and lines.” Here the dynamic interplay of forms and colors comes to stand in a configuration that somehow addresses us “as a feeling-charged whole.”

What is astonishing for Gadamer is the fact that even in abstract art we encounter something there that addresses us. Only where something comes to stand in the picture does it speak to us. When this happens, he avers, “we still say that the construction in question stands in its own right, that a dynamic interplay has been captured, or that a solution to a problem has been found.” Or again, when the tensive relation of form and color coheres, “it suddenly acquires the hallowed status of a unique achievement.” What it thereby acquires is the status of a work of art that asks to be understood. For it is only as a work that the speechless images of modern painting can address us with any expectation of response.

If every work of art “intends something,” this also implies that it is intended “for someone.” It is to this reciprocity of address and response that Gadamer appeals in formulating his notion of the “hermeneutic identity” of the work. The meaning and identity of the work does not reside in some feature of the work itself considered independently of the viewer. To the contrary, the work’s identity must be completed by the spectator as the one who takes up the challenge of responding to what it presents. Thus the hermeneutic identity of the work cannot be separated from the event in which we are addressed. Only insofar as we respond to the work’s claim upon us are we able to understand what it says. But in order to un-
nderstand something I must be able to identify it; and it is this identification which constitutes the meaning of the work. So the identity of the work "consists precisely in there being something to 'understand,' that it asks to be understood in what it 'says' or 'intends.' The work issues a challenge that expects to be met. It requires an answer—an answer that can only be given by the one who has accepted the challenge." Modern painting presents an especially difficult challenge precisely because what it "says" or "intends" is so obscure. Nevertheless, Gadamer insists that even the abstract picture, if successful as a work, "transforms our fleeting experience into the stable and lasting form of an independent and internally coherent configuration [Gebilde]." Where this occurs something comes to stand in the pictorial image. "That 'something can be held in our hesitant stay'—this is what art has always been and still is today:"

***

The enigmatic quality of the avant-garde art, the obscurity of what it "means" or "intends," has to do with what Gadamer calls "the indeterminacy of reference." The problem this poses is exhibited in an exemplary way by abstract art. Here the absence of any represented objects leave the viewer without a referent which could, at least in part, determine the meaning of the pictorial representation. Instead, in non-objective painting we encounter a purely formal language of abstract visual signs having, it seems, no definite referent whatsoever. It is this very indeterminacy of reference that renders these pictorial "signs" virtually indecipherable.

Gadamer recognizes that this indeterminacy severely qualifies the view that construes this language as a pictorial sign system. Especially with abstract art the basic elements of form and color, of point, line, and plane are no longer subject to the demand that would require these elements to efface themselves in favor of the represented object. If we consider that the self-effacement of the signifier in favor of the signified belongs to the very concept of the sign as a means of communication, then we can understand why Gadamer concludes that this concept "loses its proper significance" in the context of modern painting. For here the pictorial "signs" withdraw from their signifying function and assert their own sensuous presence.

With the turn to abstraction in modern painting we witness the convergence of a renewed focus on formal concerns with the unprecedented emphasis on the materiality of its medium. This turn makes evident that meaning in art is inseparable from its material manifestation in the work; that is, the abstract picture speaks to us by virtue of its sensuous presence. Hence, as with lyric poetry, in abstract art we discover a "unity of form" that is "sensuously present" and which, to that extent, "cannot be reduced to the mere intention of meaning." What is brought to the fore in modern painting is thus the corporeality of the pictorial image. Having renounced representation, abstract artists affirm the opacity of their medium by refusing to subsume the corporeality of the pictorial image to the demand for transparency traditionally required of the signifier. No longer conceived as a "magic window," the modern picture is to be looked at and not through.

So Gadamer holds that the work of art is better understood as a symbol rather than a sign. The indeterminacy of reference encountered so prominently in modern painting actually belongs to the "symbolic dimension" of art. The work of art is symbolic in that it "does not merely point toward meaning, but rather allows that meaning to present itself." In other words, unlike the sign, the work does not refer to something else that would bestow meaning upon it; instead, "the meaning of the work lies in the fact that it is there." So the indeterminacy has to do with art's peculiar mode of reference. "The significance of the symbol lay in this paradoxical kind of reference that embodies and even vouchsafes its meaning."

Gadamer brings this notion of the symbol to bear on the referential indeterminacy of pictorial abstraction above all where he claims that modern painting speaks "the language of gesture." Modern painting, he says, presents us with an "unintelligible language" in which "gestures suddenly acquire momentary significance only to sink back again into obscurity." No longer do pictures seek to communicate determinate meaning by utilizing representational images that invoke the narrative

THE SPEECHLESS IMAGE

61
and symbolic connotations of their referents. Even where we find things represented in modern painting they seem to be all but shorn of these connotations. He notes, for instance, that van Gogh’s sunflowers are “integrated into the surface articulation of the painting” in such a way that “the objective significance of the thing hardly adds anything to the picture.” Instead, the pictorial images of avant-garde art speak to us in the silent language of gesture that ask us to recognize ourselves even if we are unable to fully understand them.

In fact, according to Gadamer’s own characterization, gesture itself appears to be essentially symbolic. First, gesture exhibits the unsurpassable particularity of the symbolic in art: “What a gesture expresses is ‘here’ in the gestural itself.” Gesture does not point beyond itself to something that would give it meaning; instead, its meaning lies entirely within itself. It is therefore impossible to translate what the gesture “says” or “means” into other (e.g., conceptual) terms. Second, gesture possesses the revealing-concealing aspect of the symbol inasmuch as it “is a mystery that holds back as much as it reveals.” Gesture offers meaning while at the same time withholding it. Hence even though gesture is significant it remains opaque and enigmatic. Third, this implies that the gesture, like the symbol, is at once “wholly corporeal and wholly spiritual.” That is to say, the gesture is symbolic inasmuch as it embodies the meaning it presents. As Gadamer says, “what gesture reveals is the being of meaning rather than the knowledge of meaning.” Thus the paradoxical quality of indeterminate reference highlighted by modern art is expressed by the symbolic nature of gesture as the embodiment of meaning.

Gadamer thus interprets the speechless images of modern art as “pictorial gestures” that speak to us in an enigmatic fashion, concealing as much as they reveal. The meaning that addresses us in an abstract picture is at the same time absorbed into the sensuous presence of the image itself. According to Gadamer, “these images present us with nothing but gestures, gestures that bear their meaning within themselves.” Such pictures, he asserts, are “symbolic gestures” the meaning of which “remain[s] embedded in the textural surface of the painting itself.” By means of these pictorial gestures abstract art speaks to us, however obscurely, through the very corporeality of its images. Here color speaks as color, line as line, etc. But the irreducible opacity of these pictorial images makes them all but impossible to decipher. If, as Gadamer suggests, the indeterminacy of these images “implies a certain refusal of meaning,” that refusal is certainly correlative to the materiality of this new visual idiom. Speaking the silent language of gesture, the modern picture offers meaning, but its meaning constantly withdraws into the corporeality of the image. They are, as Arthur Danto says, “embodied meanings.” Hence what Gadamer says of the symbolic in art generally is especially true of the symbolic gesture we encounter in pictorial abstraction: “it preserves its meaning within itself.”

Gadamer’s interpretation of pictorial abstraction as offering a speechless image points to another aspect of the enigmatic quality of avant-garde art: its failure to facilitate self-recognition. Modern painting no longer seems to provide what one critic calls a “terrain of fraternal encounter” where there is a shared presentation of meaning in which we experience a growing familiarity with ourselves and our world. In such works the communication of meaning seems to be foreclosed rather than fulfilled. Absorbed into the materiality of its medium the work of abstract art no longer effects the communication of meaning so much as the communication of an enigma, a paradoxical notion aptly described as an “incommunicado communication” (Kuspit). As a consequence, it has become more difficult to achieve any meaningful self-recognition through the modern art. Here the recognition of who we are seems to be frustrated rather than facilitated. Indeed, Gadamer concedes that “it is a disturbing question whether modern painting can possibly contribute to the task of such self-recognition.”

No longer can we conceive the art of painting as a simple act of communication in which the artist conveys a definite message to a receiver through the image. This, as we have seen, would be to treat the picture as a sign. Instead, it is a symbolic gesture that exhibits a
non-identity of communication where the message is neither completely transparent nor perfectly reproducible. As Shapiro notes: “You cannot translate it into words or make a copy of it which will be quite the same.”65 Gadamer makes the same point when he asserts that the ideal of works speaking as works “ultimately implies their untranslatability.”66 As a symbolic gesture the meaning of the work can be neither appropriated to the language of concepts nor transferred to another bearer.67

Poised at the limit of intelligibility, the pictorial images of modern painting appear incommunicable and untranslatable.68 On the verge of falling silent, they seem to abjure the communication of meaning. Shapiro even underscores this trait, arguing that what makes modern painting so interesting is precisely its “high degree of non-communication.”69

You cannot extract a message from [modern painting] by ordinary means; the usual rules of communication do not hold here, there is no clear code or fixed vocabulary, no certainty of effect in a given time of exposure or transmission. Painting, by becoming abstract and giving up its representational function, has achieved a state in which communication seems to be deliberately prevented. And in many works where natural forms are still preserved, the objects and the mode of representation resist any easy decipherment and the effects of these works are unpredictable. The artist does not wish to create a work in which he transmits an already prepared and complete message to a relatively indifferent and impersonal receiver. The painter aims rather at such a quality of the whole that, unless you achieve the proper set of mind and feeling you will not experience anything of it at all. . . . The experience of the work, like the creation of the work of art itself, is a process that is ultimately opposed to communication as it is now understood.70

Yet despite its apparent resistance to communication, Gadamer believes that even modern painting does not completely renounce the “communicative dimension” of art. He insists that art of whatever kind will always be a language in which we seek to recognize ourselves. Thus even modern painting “whose mute gaze presents us with such disturbing enigmas re-

mains a kind of recognition.”71 Although we may be unable to decipher them, these pictorial images are “symbols of the unfamiliarity in which we encounter ourselves and our increasingly unfamiliar world.”72 Gadamer himself asks the pertinent question: “what is it that we recognize when confronted by an artistic language whose vocabulary, style, and syntax seem so peculiarly empty and alien, or so remote from the great classical traditions of our own culture?” He responds that “recognition of the symbolic is a task which we must take upon ourselves.”73 In this respect it makes no difference whether we encounter a traditional representational painting or a modern abstract picture; in either case we must first learn to tarry with the work in order to actualize the possibilities for recognition which it contains. Indeed, “every work of art only begins to speak when we have already learned to decipher and read it.”74

The problem remains, however, that in modern painting we encounter the extreme case of an art that no longer speaks a common language within which it becomes possible to share a common meaning. For this reason Gadamer acknowledges that the situation of the artist has changed rather dramatically in modern times. No longer can the painter simply depict familiar subjects in forms that would be readily recognized as a new artistic statement within an established pictorial language. As Gadamer observes, “there is no longer a unified symbolic language capable of commanding our acceptance.”75 Moreover, this further implies that the artist no longer speaks for the community. The shared self-understanding required for this no longer exists. Instead the artist today “forms his own community insofar as he expresses himself.” This created community is, in principle at least, a “truly universal community” that “extends to the whole world.”76 Here Gadamer affirms the hermeneutic dimension of the experience of art as a communicative event in which community is created through the sharing of a common meaning. But the creation of community is not the artist’s responsibility alone. It also requires that we respond to the claim that addresses us in the work by trying to understand what it says. There is community only when such address takes place. For “we must take it upon

THE SPEECHLESS IMAGE
ourselves to produce this shared community of meaning. Thus even where art speaks to us in the unintelligible language of pictorial abstraction, even where it seems to resist communication and refuse recognition, the communicative dimension of art is still affirmed.

* * * * *

According to the view that I have been arguing, Gadamer’s notion of “the speechless image” seeks neither to reduce the unintelligibility of modern painting nor to dismiss its claim to truth. The attempt to do justice to both aspects of our experience of modern art is what engenders the paradox that Gadamer tries to negotiate through this interpretation. On the one hand, he acknowledges the unintelligibility of modern painting and concedes that we cannot expect the simple communication of determinate meaning from such pictures. On the other hand, he maintains that, despite its enigmatic speechlessness, even the work of pictorial abstraction must be understood as a hermeneutic phenomenon. The very notion of the speechless image thus offers an interpretation that is at once an expression of the paradox that constitutes the challenge of modern painting and a response to this challenge.

Hence for Gadamer even the extremity of pictorial abstraction does not outstrip the relevance of hermeneutic experience. As he elsewhere writes, there is always a “potentiality for being-other [Anders sein] that lies beyond every coming to agreement.” What is required of hermeneutic experience, in its most genuine form, is precisely openness toward the other. In Truth and Method he describes such experience as an “I-Thou” relation wherein a communion is brought about by the enactment of a common meaning. But this, in turn, requires an openness that is well described as listening to “the voice of the other” (Risser). Listening to the other we are open to their claim. Gadamer writes: “In human relations the important thing is . . . to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him truly say something to us.” Such openness means that one does not “consume and assimilate the other” but rather “suffers what is beyond oneself.” Hence hermeneutic experience is ultimately a matter of letting oneself be exposed to the claim of the other and of being responsible to what is at stake in that claim. This is what happens in the experience of being addressed. When such address takes place there is a communicative event.

This, then, is the crux of Gadamer’s response to the provocation of aesthetic modernity. Inasmuch as it is capable of addressing us, even the speechless image must be affirmed as a communicative event. After all, the work claims us only insofar as we find ourselves addressed by the other who speaks to us in the work. And wherever such address takes place we are responsible to its claim. So the task of hermeneutic understanding is not simply to render the sensible presentation of the work in the intelligible language of concepts. To do this with modern painting—to subsume its corporeality by translating it without remainder into concepts—is to do violence to its unique symbolic gestures. Instead hermeneutic understanding must be responsive to what the work itself says.

As a communicative event in which address takes place, the claim of pictorial abstraction is appropriately understood as a hermeneutic phenomenon. Moreover, the response to this address falls under the hermeneutic demand that we achieve a common language within which the communication of a shared meaning can come about. Of course, this demand is constrained by what the work itself offers. One only receives this offer by taking up the possibilities of meaning opened by the work. This means that hermeneutic understanding can neither transcend the non-transparency of the image nor escape the possibility that the work may be ultimately untranslatable. The basic responsibility is just to let the voice of the other be heard as that becomes manifest in and through the work. To this extent, the speechless images of abstract art do not lie beyond the pale of hermeneutic understanding. Nor, it must be concluded, do such works stand outside the hermeneutic claim to universality.

In the encounter with modern painting we experience a claim that addresses us even before we can ask, “what does it mean?” Wherever this occurs an event takes place that is not reducible to the deciphering of meaning. And yet it is still a communicative event that opens

PHILOSOPHY TODAY

64
the space for the communication of meaning. Opening this space, the event of the work of art is something more than the communication of meaning; it is the "happening" in which we find ourselves addressed by the work whether or not we are ever able to determine its meaning. Anterior to any communication of meaning, "something happens"—a communicative event occurs in which we are addressed by the other, the work, even if it speaks to us with the strange mute eloquence of the speechless image.

ENDNOTES


7. RB, p. 74 = GW8, p. 323. In passages such as this Gadamer seems to adopt the view that modern painting offers a kind of "script" and that the picture itself is a kind of "text," its surface inscribed by a series of "signs" that must be deciphered. He makes this point explicitly when he insists (against Gebeln's neo-Kantian interpretation) that the faceted planes of cubist painting constitute a "pictorial script" (Bilderschrift) (cf. GW8, p. 307.) This view has been more recently expressed by Christopher Butler: "It can be argued that once Modernist painting abandons the recording of perceptions, it becomes a language of signs, so that Impressionism, for example, would be devoted to the recording of perception and Cubism would be a system of signs." See his Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900–1916 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 72. In the end, however, Gadamer holds that the picture is more like a symbol than sign.

8. RB, p. 96 = GW8, p. 29. The German text actually draws together the illegibility of the "pictorial script" of modern painting with its "falling silent." Gadamer writes: "in der Tat kommt seither die Forderung der Lesbarkeit solcher modernen Bilder schrift mehr und mehr zum Versstummen."

9. Kuspit, op. cit., 103. Immediately following this passage, he caustically remarks: "Enigma became a point of honor, correlate with the elevation of anti-representation as the avenue of 'new insight' into art."

10. In a 1987 interview (with Klaus Davi) Gadamer insists that "hermeneutics hasn't at all ignored the phenomenon of abstract art." In one respect, my essay serves as an elaborate footnote in support of this assertion. However, at the same time, Gadamer recognizes that pictorial abstraction has ceased to be the dominant force in avant-garde art. As he says later in the interview, "the preeminence of abstract art over other forms of art is now a thing of the past." Nevertheless, I believe that the impact of abstract art was as formative for Gadamer's own understanding of the provocation of aesthetic modernity as it was for the self-understanding of the avant-garde. See Jean Baudrillard et al., Art and Philosophy (Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1991), pp. 20, 23. Hereafter citations of this book will be abbreviated as AP.

11. GW8, p. 305.

12. RB, p. 83 = GW8, p. 315

13. RB, p. 83 = GW8, p. 315.

14. I am referring here specifically to Kuspit's claim that the work of modern artists exhibit a "will to enigma." At the very outset of the essay cited above he asserts: "Authentically modern (avant-garde) art has its main thrust the articulation—indeed advocacy—of enigma or unintelligibility. Where other critics have seen what used to be called the obscurity of modern art as something to be read away, I see it as modern art's desired end. ... Modern art is not just a difficult text waiting to be interpreted, but it pursues interpretability in and for itself." See Kuspit, Signs of Psyche, p. 114. While
Gadamer is not one who seeks to “read away” the obscurity of modern art, he does not see it as manifesting a “will to unintelligibility” that requires the sort of psychoanalytic reading that Kusmit provides. In his view, the unintelligibility of modern painting has more to do with their experience of the failure of the pictorial “language” inherited from the tradition.

15. RB, p. 83 = GW8, p. 315.

16. In this crucial respect, the predicament of abstract painting resembles that of hermetic poetry: both are marked by a “tragic speechlessness [Versstummung] in the face of the unsayable” (RB, p. 9 = GW8, p. 100).


21. GW8, p. 311.

22. RB, p. 74 = GW8, p. 323.

23. RB, p. 83 = GW8, p. 315.

24. RB, p. 9 = GW8, p. 100.


26. Theodore Adorno has decisively marked the problematic claim of modern art in relation to the traditional task of understanding. “If the artwork assumes the expression of incomprehensibility and in its name destroys its own internal comprehensibility, the traditional hierarchy of comprehension collapses. Its place is taken up by reflection on the enigmatic character of art...” Cf. Aesthetic Theory, trans. and ed. by Robert Hulot-Kentor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 347. It is within this problematic that I am proposing we situate Gadamer’s reflection on modern art as well.

27. RB, p. 84 = GW8, p. 315.

28. In “Art and Imitation” Gadamer explicitly asks: “How can we explain the stance of the painter who repudiates all of our previous traditions and expectations. How are we to respond to this new art?” (RB, p. 92 = GW8, p. 25).


31. RB, p. 25 = GW8, p. 116. Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 55–82, explicitly argues that the avant-garde departs from the traditional conception of the work as an “organic unity” of parts and whole. Insofar as he associates such organic unity with hermeneutic understanding (which circles from whole to part), the emergence of a distinctively “avant-gardist work of art” that negates such unity seems to mark the limit of hermeneutics. Nevertheless, he does concede that the avant-gardist work must hang together as a whole and to that extent must still exhibit some minimal unity of its own. “Even where the negation of synthesis becomes a structural principle, it must be possible to conceive however precious a unity. For the act of reception, this means that even the avant-gardist work is still to be understood hermeneutically (as a total meaning) except that the unity has integrated the contradiction within itself” (p. 82) I submit that this “precious” unity is all that Gadamer needs in order justify his notion of hermeneutic identity.

32. RB, p. 25 = GW8, p. 116.

33. Here perhaps we find a tacit reference to the foreshortening of pictorial space in avant-garde art. It is this development that provides the art-historical basis for Greenberg’s (now notorious) claim that “modernist painting” consists in the gradual, but progressive, embrace of the two-dimensional “flatness” of the canvas surface. Cf. Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” in Esthetics Contemporary, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1978), pp. 198–206.


35. RB, p. 90 = GW8, p. 320. Here Gadamer seems to intimate an account of the unity of the work of art pursued by Ruth Lorand in her “Beauty Order Without Laws,” Southern Journal of Philosophy 30 (1992): 43–63. According to this account the work of art achieves an immanent order without reference to an external principle. Its unity and necessity is defined by the internal relations among the work’s component elements. Thus the principle of unity proper to the work of art is one that integrates its parts into a meaningful whole.
36. RB, p. 88 = GW8, p. 319. It seems to me that, unlike Greenberg who insists on the literal order of effects produced by the physical quality of the medium alone, Gadamer implicitly acknowledges that abstract art is also like music in its power to directly move us. It is on this deeper level of effects that modern painting addresses us.

37. RB, p. 52-3 = GW8, p. 142.

38. RB, p. 90 = GW8, p. 322. In this respect, Gadamer even thinks that abstract art resembles nature and compares it to a crystal. Like the crystal, he writes, "there is something regular and binding about the self-contained picture that grows from within" (RB, p. 91 = GW8, p. 322).


40. Ibid., p. 215.

41. For Schapiro, this is due to the "peculiarity" of modern painting: "While it is indisputable that all painters, whether old or modern, work with colors and shapes, the lines of a Renaissance master, for instance, are complex forms which depend on the already ordered shapes of cultural artifacts or natural objects." By contrast, "modern painting is the first complex style in history which proceeds from elements that are not pre-ordered as closed articulated shapes. The artist today creates an order out of unordered variable elements to a greater degree than the artist of the past" (Ibid., p. 221).

42. RB, p. 75 = GW8, p. 323.

43. RB, p. 90 = GW8, p. 321.

44. RB, p. 26 = GW, p. 117.

45. RB, p. 53 = GW8, p. 142.

46. Greenberg was perhaps the first to emphasize this as the most distinctive feature of avant-garde art. Cf. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in Frascina, Pollack and After, p. 23.

47. RB, p. 146 = GW8, p. 149.

48. RB, p. 70 = GW8, p. 21.


50. RB, p. 34 = GW8, p. 125.

51. RB, p. 33 = GW8, p. 124.

52. RB, p. 37 = GW8, p. 128.

53. RB, p. 79 = GW8, p. 327.

54. RB, pp. 100-01 = GW8, p. 33.

55. RB, p. 87 = GW8, pp. 318-19.

56. RB, pp. 81-82 = GW8, p. 330.

57. All the quotes in this paragraph are taken from RB, p. 79 = GW8, pp. 327-28.

58. Gadamer introduces this claim in a commentary on the work of a contemporary artist, Werner Scholz, whose pictures, Gadamer says, offer gestures of a unique kind: "they speak the silent language of her-
75. RB, p. 75 = GW8, p. 324.
76. RB, p. 39 = GW8, p. 129.
77. RB, p. 48 = GW8, p. 138.
78. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation” in Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-
79. TM, p. 361 = GW1, p. 567.
80. Rissner, Hermeneutics and The Voice of the Other, p. 94.

St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778