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# Thomas Hilgers, "Aesthetic Disinterestedness: Art, Experience, and the Self."

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**Thomas Hilgers.** *Aesthetic Disinterestedness: Art, Experience, and the Self.* Routledge 2016. 190 pp. \$165.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138905009); \$49.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780367361495).

This book is an extended defense of the fundamental role ‘disinterestedness’ plays in aesthetic experience and art. Given the general suspicion that has been cast on the notion of disinterest, a defense is, indeed, in order. Within philosophy, for example, thinkers as diverse as Martin Heidegger and George Dickie have objected that the prevalent focus on disinterest has mischaracterized our engagement with art. Meanwhile, if we survey artistic trends in the 20th and 21st centuries, it is not difficult to find ‘anti-aesthetic’ bodies of work, e.g., in conceptual art or performance art, which explicitly resist the paradigm of disinterest. So too if we consider pre-modern art, e.g., ancient, medieval art, or non-European, it might seem that the model of disinterest does little to make sense of our ritual or religious engagement with it. Sensitive to these concerns and others, in *Aesthetic Disinterestedness* Thomas Hilgers offers a theory of disinterest that attempts to articulate the nature of disinterest, to defuse these criticisms, and to vindicate the value of disinterest not just for aesthetic engagement, but for our lives as a whole.

Hilgers builds his theory of disinterest on two cornerstones: an account of aesthetic experience and an aesthetic conception of art. Beginning with the former, according to Hilgers, aesthetic experience has three moments: (1) a person ‘temporarily lose[s] the sense of herself,’ (2) she ‘gain[s] a sense of the other,’ and (3) she ‘achieve[s] selfhood’ (3). For Hilgers, these moments do not unfold chronologically; rather, aesthetic experience involves the dynamic interplay between each. However, for his part, Hilgers is largely interested in the role played by the first moment, which he identifies as the moment of disinterest.

In order to explicate disinterest, Hilgers begins in chapter 1 (‘Introducing Disinterestedness’) by tracing this concept back to Kant, Schopenhauer, and Adorno. And he distills out two key ideas about disinterest from this tradition. The first is a negative notion, which he draws from Kant and Schopenhauer, according to which disinterest involves a person relating to things neither in a ‘practical way,’ nor ‘according to her specific perspective’ (51). She does not relate to them in a practical way because that relation is no longer mediated through the subject’s personal interests, desires, or needs. Meanwhile, Hilgers claims that she does not relate to them according to her specific perspective because she adopts a different perspective, viz., the perspective of the work of art. In analyzing this perspective, Hilgers suggests that works of art invite us to adopt a variety of perspectives, paramount being the ‘meta-perspective that unifies the work as a whole and that determines which categories, principles, schemata, and interests are meant to structure fundamentally and continuously a recipient’s experience’ (26).

This remark about meta-perspective is closely related to the positive point about disinterest that Hilgers draws from Kant and Adorno. Following Kant, Hilgers claims that our disinterested relation to art is one of ‘free play.’ And, on Hilgers’s analysis, free play involves the attempt to construct the meta-perspective of a work of art. However, following Adorno, Hilgers acknowledges that there are ‘antagonistic moments’ in works that resist our efforts at a conclusive construction of their meta-perspective (35). Hilgers thus characterizes play as an essentially open-ended effort to construct the meta-perspective of the work.

This said, in chapter 2 (‘Defending Disinterestedness’), Hilgers further refines his account of the disinterested attitude in crucial ways in light of the many criticisms of disinterest, including those of Dickie, somatic and affect theorists, Nietzsche, and Gadamer. Against these criticisms, Hilgers

argues that the disinterested attitude is something that is not conceptually, affectively, somatically or practically void. Rather, he argues that all disinterest requires is that we set aside our idiosyncratic concepts, affects, somatic reactions, interests, desires, and needs and take our cue, in each case, from the work of art instead.

According to Hilgers, setting aside our practical and personal ways of relating to things through play ultimately amounts to a ‘temporary loss of our sense of self.’ In chapter 3 (‘Explicating Disinterestedness’), Hilgers makes clear that he has something quite specific in mind by the relevant ‘sense of self.’ Following Ernst Tugendhat, Hilgers specifies the relevant sense of self as a ‘practical’ one. In more detail, Hilgers claims that this practical sense of our selves involves a ‘voluntative’ relation to ourselves, which we have when we decide to act in a particular way, and an ‘affective’ relation to ourselves via our moods and emotions, which evaluatively reveal how the world responds to our decisions (113).

However, in order to fully appreciate why art makes us lose this sense of self, we need to look to the second cornerstone of Hilgers’s theory, viz., his aesthetic theory of art. In Hilgers’s view, a work of art is ‘aesthetic’ in the sense that it ‘asks’ us to adopt a disinterested attitude (3). More specifically, in chapter 4 (‘Generating Disinterestedness’), Hilgers argues that a work of art ‘establishes an aesthetic sphere, which is separated from the practical sphere of a recipient’s ordinary life’ (118). In relation to the aesthetic sphere, Hilgers claims that the recipient ‘cannot feel personally addressed by what she perceives and who, as a practical agent, is excluded from it’ (120). Although he by no means denies that works of art can have personal, practical, or political consequences, Hilgers insists that the ‘immediate’ response they call for is one in which we are not personally, practically, or politically engaged, but are rather disinterestedly engaged (156). And, ultimately, on Hilgers’s view it is because a work of art establishes an aesthetic sphere that is distinct from the recipient’s practical sphere that we ‘cannot’ relate to a work of art practically and thus temporarily lose our sense of self when engaging with it (118).

While there is much more about Hilgers’s philosophically, historically, and aesthetically rich analysis of disinterest that I cannot consider here, I want to raise some concerns about his version of the aesthetic conception of art and the implications this has for how widespread the disinterested attitude is in aesthetic experience.

To begin, I worry that his claim that works of art establish an ‘aesthetic sphere’ threatens to misconstrue the relationship art can have to our world. Hilgers suggests that the ‘world’ of a work of art is typically a ‘fictional’ one that is separate from the world in which we live (the exceptions he notes are experimental theater and performance art) (119). However, it seems to me many works of art serve as ‘mirrors’ for our world and are thus continuous with it. Consider, for example, Solange’s song, ‘Don’t Touch My Hair.’ While there are many layers to the song, it is, in part, a criticism of the practice of white people touching Black women’s hair. This is not a practice relegated to the aesthetic sphere; it happens in the ordinary world. And the title of the song is in an imperatival form for a reason: it demands a condemnatory attitude toward and cessation of this behavior in this world.

However, even in cases of fictional works of art, the world is often meant as our own. Consider, for example, George Eliot’s claim in the Victorian Realist spirit that, ‘Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot’ (*Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*. Penguin 1990, 110). When one reads *Middlemarch* in this spirit, rather than the reader treating the world as ‘a fictional world that lies outside her immediate practical reach and that is different from the world she lives in,’ it should be read as a world that amplifies characters, choices, and actions much like those we encounter and enact, and that call for personal, practical, or political attitudes (Eliot, 141).

Insofar as Hilgers defends a ‘normative’ conception of art, he may, in fact, embrace the possibility that his view will disqualify many politically-inflected or representational works as works of art (4). However, my deeper worry is that his aesthetic conception of art appears to occlude one of the most powerful aspects of art, viz., its ability to show us the world that we live in, but are so often blind to.

This said, I think that Hilgers’s account has the resources for a less demanding aesthetic conception of art. As Hilgers emphasizes, one appealing feature of an aesthetic conception of art is that it emphasizes the need to engage with a work of art on *its* terms, rather than on *our* terms (3, 73). And earlier in the book, Hilgers suggests that we do this by playfully engaging with the meta-perspective of a work of art and letting the categories, principles, schemata, and interests relevant to this perspective guide us. Sometimes this meta-perspective may ask us to enter an ‘aesthetic’ sphere, but sometimes this meta-perspective asks us to remain in our world and adopt a personal, practical, or political attitude accordingly. Adopting the latter sorts of attitudes could still take us out of ourselves to the extent that they are a result of the work’s perspective, rather than our own. Nevertheless, it would not amount to a loss of our sense of self; indeed, doing so would fail to adopt the perspective the work asks of us. While this weaker aesthetic conception of art does not rule out the possibility of disinterested engagement, it points toward a more limited account of disinterest as one attitude, among others, that works of art ask call for.

Concerns aside, Hilgers’s subtle book offers theorists interested in aesthetic experience and art an opportunity to reconsider disinterest, with its potential value, and perhaps limits, anew.

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