

Guiding a City's Soul

Examining the Brooks Museum's *Soul of a City* in light of the aesthetics of Hans Georg Gadamer

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It doesn't take any longer than a stop off of the interstate to get the idea that Memphis is a city of soul. The people of Memphis have found this soul mentioned in daily walks of life; whether it be in the works of generations of musicians, or simply a meat and two sides. With this idea of soul so caught up in the identity of Memphis, it should come as no surprise when it holds a place as the focal term in the title of an exhibit gathering works from twenty-three Memphis collections. The Memphis Brooks Museum of Art's exhibition, *The Soul of a City: Memphis Collects African American Art*, forms a cohesive whole in regards to both its subject matter, as well as its focus as an exhibit about Memphis. The exhibit functions in one sense as a collection of pieces by African-American artists that focuses upon the condition and significance of African-American art in the contemporary United States. However, the exhibit can also be defined in terms of its status as artwork evaluated and collected by a Memphis audience. The significance of this "Memphis audience", however, seems at first thought a tenuous one. The long-running understanding of the experience of a work of art defines the aesthetic experience to be a subjective one: the aesthetic experience, however valid, is not formed independent from the mind of a subject experiencing a work of art. This subjectivity poses an obstacle to the claim that a group of individuals and the collections that represent the history of their experiences in art can

be put forward with any significance as a kind of cohesive unit with a shared understanding of art. Yet, this is exactly what *The Soul of a City* invites us, as Memphians, to do.

How could this kind of communal understanding of art become possible? This is the essential question we must ask if we are to find significance in *The Soul of a City*. Clearly, if we are to address this question, we must formulate some kind of objective grounds that lie behind the subjective experience of art. In this task, we will turn to the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the hermeneutic theory of art as described in his essay “The Relevance of the Beautiful”. Gadamer will allow us to seek out the roots of the kind of experiences a subject has when confronted by the work of art. Gadamer locates these roots with the ideas of *play*, a phrase which describes how an individual is involved in the construction of any experience of meaning within a work of art, *symbol*, an evaluation of how this construction happens in the moment of the aesthetic experience, and of the sense and limits to which an aesthetic experience can be said to be about meaning, and of *festival*, the idea of how art, in the manner of a celebratory festival, is an act in which participating subjects are unified in their experience of the work of art. This concept of *festival*, quite clearly, will be one that we can compare closely to *The Soul of a City* to see, in light of Gadamer’s philosophy, if our status as Memphians as celebrated by *The Soul of a City* is able to influence the meaning of a work in any aesthetic situation that we find within the exhibit, or whether or not the exhibit can succeed in unifying Memphis’ understanding of art.

The first important step we must take in considering Gadamer’s philosophy is that of asking how a subject, when experiencing a work of art, is caught up in the aesthetic situation and all that it entails. We can begin this concern with reference to a term to which Gadamer draws our attention in preparing his discussion of *play*. The German *anbilden*, which we can roughly rephrase in English as “in-sight”, offers us a linguistic concept by which we can more readily

describe an aesthetic experience. Gadamer characterizes this concept of “in-sight” as “an expression that captures both the image, and the viewing of it”.¹ Such a term is helpful in establishing the boundaries of the experience of a work of art, which I will refer to also as “the aesthetic situation”. The notion of *anbild* directs us back towards the sphere of Kantian aesthetics, whereby a subject experiences a work as it appears subjectively: as a representation in consciousness.² This conception of the aesthetic situation allows us, generally, to locate the subject’s experience with the work of art: the subject is not involved with the work as it stands in itself, but rather its representation as it presents itself subjectively. This clarification becomes especially useful once we turn our attention to questions of artwork’s relationship with meaning. As we will soon discuss in our analysis of Gadamer’s idea of *play*, the subject, within the experience of the aesthetic situation, seeks to create meaning in connection with the work of art presented before it. As the proper object of the subject’s aesthetic evaluation, the representation of the work within *anbild*, stands apart from the work in itself, so too must the meaning which the subject experiences through this evaluation stand apart from the work in itself. Instead, the meaning that a subject finds through experience with art arises within *anbild*: a holistic aesthetic situation formed between the representation of a work of art and the subject experiencing it.

Before we can explain further this hint of an individual nature of meaning given to us by *anbild*, the question remains as to why the subject is disposed to an experience of meaning in the aesthetic situation at all. It is in this question that we can understand the importance of Gadamer’s idea of *play*. *Play*, in essence, is a constructive activity a subject must take when confronted with a work of art. To understand what this “constructive activity” entails, Gadamer

¹Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 17

² Kant discusses how an aesthetic judgment of taste refers to a subject’s feeling of pleasure or pain regarding a representation, and as such the aesthetic experience is bound in the subject. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Aesthetical Judgement*, First Moment, S1.

directs us first to a discussion of the term *play* itself. When Gadamer selects the term play, he uses it in a sense similar to the idea of “interplay”. Here, play is an activity that Gadamer describes as a simple activity of movement, self-regulated by reason.³ The importance of this activity lies in the accessibility of the “game” by a spectator. A spectator of *play* becomes involved in the “game” through the interplay of reason and imagination: the spectator, in encountering the “game”, is forced from observation to participation as he attempts to “follow along” with the regulation of the “game”. The spectator, in following along, must actively construct from the imagination an understanding of the regulation in question.⁴ In Gadamer’s view, this involvement by the spectator indicates a kind of intent in the regulation of whatever is at *play* to be whatever form the construction of the spectator’s imagination through participation takes. This intent then constitutes the grounds by which the spectator identifies and thus engages “the game” regulated by *play*.⁵

This idea of human play, by Gadamer’s explanation, lies at the base of our anthropological understanding of the identity of a work of art. The activity of the spectator to “the game” parallels the manner of reception of a work of art by an audience. The work itself is defined by an intention to produce some kind of participation by an audience.⁶ Consider this intent and participation in terms of the experience of meaning a subject finds in the aesthetic situation. The audience of a work, as formulated by the concept of *play*, must be a necessarily active element in order to recognize art as a proper object of meaning, that is, the work of art can only be identified as such by a spectating subject that has thus recognized the intent of the work

³Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 23

⁴Gadamer, 24

⁵Gadamer, 23-24

⁶Gadamer 25

of art and participates in the construction of the work.⁷ The work of art, understood as a form of *play*, cannot simply transfer meaning from its representation to the subject because its identity as a work of art is incomplete without the participation of the subject. It is the task of the subject to actively construct any meaning arising from a work, alongside the construction of the work of art itself.

Play is significant to any questions we have regarding the possibilities of individual or communal meaning in the experience of art because it shifts the origins of the meaning a subject experiences in a work of art from the work of art to the activity of the subject. This shift makes it explicit that we should expect the meaning found in an experience with a work of art to be a personal and individual experience. The experience of meaning in a communal sense seems from this perspective contradictory: it seems impossible to expect that every participant experiencing a work, regardless of any similarity in context, could construct the image of a work, and thus its meaning, in exactly the same way. If we are to find a significance of art in communal sense, clearly, this significance will have to come in a form apart from a simple experience of meaning. Gadamer can continue to guide us on what kind of understanding a communal experience of art might access with his discussion of *symbol* and *festival*.

The element of *play* does not specifically explain the involvement of the work in the creation of meaning. *Play* dictates that the audience of a piece of art is participating in the piece in some way in order to construct meaning, but it leaves out an explanation of how the work of art facilitates this kind of participation. It is here that Gadamer turns to the concept of *symbol*. Gadamer's *symbol* is simply the faculty belonging to a work of art to present a meaning to the participating audience, as described in the activity of *play*.⁸ We know, however, that the *symbol*

⁷Gadamer, 26

⁸Gadamer, 32

clearly cannot accomplish this by means of a rigid reference to a meaning which an audience is expected to recall, as *play* dictates that the meaning a subject experiences with a work of art is determined by the subject at the moment which the subject addresses the work. The art's identity as afforded by human *play* leaves the ultimate meaning of a work of art to the subject experiencing it.⁷ To understand *symbol* as a work's capacity for meaning, therefore, we must instead consider the *symbol* be a kind of open ended reference, a potential for meaning, which exists to be completed by any subject who approaches the work to construct its meaning.

It is in this open-ended nature, however, that the greatest significance of the *symbol* in Gadamer's philosophy can be found. The *symbol*, in its status awaiting completion by a participating subject, cannot be understood in terms of any single meaning that may arise from the *play* of the work and subject. The presence of *symbol* in a work of art, prior to any meaning determined in an act of *play*, must instead be said to represent the entire scope of possible meaning which could arise from the completion of the *symbol*.⁹ This point is incredibly significant for our exploration of meaning in art. When we consider presence of *symbol* in a work of art as the whole of possible meanings, the *symbol* demands that whatever meaning is constructed by the subject in *play* must necessarily obscure, simultaneously, other possible instances of meaning which the symbol could present to the subject. Each time a subject confronts the work of art, the partial concealment of the realm of meaning of the *symbol* leaves behind something else beyond the meaning that a subject constructs for a piece of art through *play*.¹⁰ Art, through *symbol*, transcends conceptual meaning, and thus the subject cannot help but recognize the insufficiency of the meaning it has constructed in capturing the totality of the work

⁷Gadamer 32

⁹ Gadamer, 32

¹⁰Gadamer, 34

of art. The individual subject understands art as something greater than any meaning it constructs itself.

It is in this point that we can find the third aspect of Gadamer's work, *festival*, so significant. Gadamer has shown us that the individual experience of art, centered upon the showing and concealing of the *symbol* by the construction of meaning, is necessarily lacking in attending to a work of art in its total sense. Our individual subjective experience of a work limits our understanding of art to the subjective experience of meaning and the awareness of something more that we are missing. Gadamer's *festival* offers a community of individuals an opportunity, by means of an activity that parallels festive celebration, this opportunity to experience art in a greater sense than the individual was previously capable of. The element of *festival* which will inform our discussion best is that of its power as a unifying force. Gadamer's idea of festival is bound up in the interruption of our normal day to day division for the sake of a time spent in unity. This unity, in Gadamer's view, arises from the status of the *festival* as a gathering for the sake of a common intention. This common intention unifies the array subjective experiences around a central festival theme.¹¹

The importance of this unification when *festival* addresses the work of art cannot be understated. As individuals, the subjective experience of art cannot understand the work as it stands as a whole: the subject is only capable of addressing the work through individually constructed meaning. The subject, crucially, is aware of the scope of possible meaning present in a work of art, and its own limitation in attaining the totality of the *symbol*.¹² The unification of these limited subjective experiences in the moment of *festival* allows the festival community an opportunity to address the work in a greater sense. As each subject joins in the *festival* around the

¹¹ Gadamer, 40

¹² Gadamer, 34

work of art, the *festival* intention directs the collected subjects towards an understanding of the work as a whole. As each subject completes the *symbol* with construction by play, they are illuminating a particular element in the totality of meaning which the *symbol* represents. Under the scrutiny of the festive community, the elements which are otherwise concealed by the subjective act of completing the *symbol* are brought to light through the unification of the meanings that each subjective experience finds in the work. The festive community, therefore, has the unique opportunity to address the “something else” that lies beyond the individual subject’s understanding of art. In this, the festival takes on its own meaning to those who participate.¹³ The *festival* becomes an experience in which the subject contributes to a communal experience of art which can address and understand a work of art by addressing the *symbol* in a pure sense: the community puts forth a horizon of subjective meanings to complete the horizon of possible meanings which the symbol represents.

These elements of the aesthetic situation described by Gadamer in his *Relevance of the Beautiful* offer us valuable insights through which we can evaluate The Brooks Museum’s *Soul of a City*. These insights, first, can allow us to focus our understanding of the kind of claims that *The Soul of a City* makes. Let us consider, in light of the ideas provided to us by Gadamer, what kind of questions we can address regarding the exhibit. It seems proper that our first question be whether or not *The Soul of a City* can be understood as an instance of a *festival* of the kind that Gadamer relates to art. Considering the exhibit with regards to the status of the individual meaning that subjects experience moving through the exhibit, can the exhibit’s status as a “Memphis collection” influence the meaning that an individual experiences from the works within? Can an individual, by virtue of the status as a Memphian, experience meaning in any sense that could be considered unique to Memphis? After this, we also have questions regarding

¹³Gadamer, 49

the possibilities afforded by the communal aspect of *The Soul of a City*. Is it possible to find a Memphis meaning in art in the shared festive experience of the exhibit? If not, what does the exhibit achieve as a Memphis festival to art?

The possibility that *The Soul of a City* might occasion an opportunity to for Memphians to understand art in a uniquely Memphis sense is founded on the reality of the exhibit's status as *festival*. In our discussion of the *festival*, we noticed how the reality of the *festival* is determined by its capacity as a unifying power. But more important for the proper characterization of a *festival* is that this unifying power is understood in terms of an intent shared by the individuals gathered for the *festival*.¹⁴ The ability for *The Soul of a City* to generate any kind of communal sense among its participants relies upon the status of this intention.

I think that it is clear that *The Soul of a City* has an intent of some kind. The nature of this intent presents itself immediately to us in the title of the exhibit. The exhibit intends in some fashion to invoke or identify some experience that attests to a uniqueness of the city of Memphis. However, the way in which we interpret the "intent" of the soul of a city will have significant consequences for the way in which the exhibit achieves this kind of unique experience. Remember that in our discussion of Gadamer, the idea of intent rises in two of the relevant concepts, in *festival*, but also in the context of *play*. I think arguments can be made that either of these interpretations of "intent" can be considered the kind of "intent" which belongs to *The Soul of a City*. However, the decision of which idea of "intent" we extend to the exhibit will have a considerable impact on our understanding of the exhibit's value, and of the kind of experience the exhibit affords.

We should first begin this examination by ensuring ourselves of the difference between intent as it relates to the *festival* and intent as it relates to *play*. Essentially, the difference

¹⁴ Gadamer, 40

between these two uses of “intent” involves a difference between intent as a representational quality versus intent as an identifying feature. What is it that we mean when we call intent a representational quality? In essence, that an activity we define as having intent is an activity that “is about something”. Consider again the activity of the *festival*. The *festival* describes a moment where a communal understanding of meaning engages with the *symbol* in art itself through the unification of subjects experiencing an art. The role of “intent” in the moment of the festival is described as a power to unify the subjects experiencing the work. However, the unification that Gadamer describes does not refer to the literal gathering of a community of subjects to address the work of art, but rather to a kind of awareness in the subjects as to the purpose of their shared experience.¹⁵ None can by themselves grasp the totality of the work of art as it stands before them so they gather for the sake of contributing to a community of meaning that can address the *symbol*. When we say that intent unifies them, we are saying that they are unified insofar as what they are doing “is about” experiencing a work in a ways otherwise unavailable. Now compare this understanding of intent to the idea of intent as discussed in Gadamer’s explanation of *play*. Whereas the intent of the *festival* was a description the subject’s action to understand representation, here the intent is a quality given to identify something in that it “means to do something”. Referring to the involvement of *play* in art, the intent here is a quality of the work inasmuch as the work “means for” a subject to engage it. The intent of *play* is the presence of the self-regulating element with which the subject can engage.¹⁶

If we consider each of these “intents” with regards to *The Soul of a City*, I think we will find the distinct possibility that either of these intents could be used to explain a kind of metaphysical activity carried out by the exhibit. The differences between the two, however, are

¹⁵ Gadamer, 40

¹⁶ Gadamer, 25

significant enough to warrant major differences in the status of *The Soul of a City* regarding its position relative to a subject, which in turn will inform the kind of activity we attribute to the exhibit. The nature of whatever activity we choose to use in our understanding of *The Soul of a City* will define the answers to our questions of whether or not *The Soul of a City* can foster a unique Memphis experience of art, either on the scale of individual meaning or as a communal understanding.

Let us now conceive of the intent of *The Soul of a City* as it stands in Gadamer's element of *play*. The principle of this intent, as we have discussed, lies in *play's* status as dealing with regulated activity. A subject engages in this activity by establishing for themselves the regulation of the activity on their own. The activity, it is said, intends the concept of regulation as it is produced by the participant. In this schema, we can conceive of *The Soul of a City* itself as holding the same position and many similarities with the work of art. The whole of the exhibit can be considered to occupy the same position as the role of the work of art within the scheme of *play*. *The Soul of a City*, in accordance with this role, provides for us a kind of regulation upon itself by portraying itself as a "Memphis audience". In doing so, the intent of the exhibit is revealed. *The Soul of a City* "means for" a subject entering to "play along" with its regulation: considering the works of art within in terms of a conceptual Memphis. This conceptual basis for the regulation of the exhibit's activity represents a point of departure by the role of *play* in the exhibit from the role of *play* in art. The basis we describe defines the kind of underpinning required for the question of *how* a subject decides to "play along" with the activity. In his discussion of *play* in art, Gadamer discusses how the work of art requires some basis such that we identify it as something proper for an aesthetic situation for evaluation. In this question, Gadamer takes a cue from Kantian thinking, explaining this capacity for recognizing this

aesthetic identity through the distinctness of the idea of “purposiveness without a purpose”.¹⁷

However, as opposed to the pure aesthetic value of art, the purposiveness of *play* in *The Soul of a City* is caught up in the purpose of understanding the work of art in terms of this concept of “Memphis”. In continuing our parallel between art and exhibit in *play*, we should recognize that this basis, while obscured in the realm of art, is made explicit with regards to *The Soul of the City*. The basis is expressed to the participant in the focus upon Memphis collectors: the unity of the exhibit lies in some connectedness through the concept of “Memphis”. Recognizing the identity of the exhibit in terms of a conceptual Memphis, the subject continues to act in accordance with play, actively constructing a meaning for the greater exhibit based within their recognition of Memphis.

This conceptualized purpose which guides the participant through *The Soul of a City* influences the constructive experience the subject encounters in *play*. Whereas in the act of *play* as encountered in the pure aesthetic experience of art the subject is constructing meaning without purpose, the subject in the exhibit is constructing a meaning in the exhibit for the purpose of understanding Memphis. In conceiving the “intent” of *The Soul of a City* according to the idea of *play*, we find that the subject is brought, by the conditions of this intent, to perform the constructive act of meaning indicative to *play* in a peculiar fashion: a meaning which is directed towards the subject’s concept of Memphis. What significance can this purposeful construction of meaning in *The Soul of a City* bear? Does the subject’s purposeful construction of meaning for the exhibit demand that the subject construct meaning with similar “Memphian” purpose for every individual experience with a work of art found within? This approach seems intuitive: how could a subject conceive of an entire exhibit without reference to the collection of individual works of art that it entails? The result would be of an experience with art is that it is an individual

¹⁷ Gadamer, 24

one unique to the subject, constructed with the purpose of refining the subject's understanding of Memphis. The subject must construct the meaning of the exhibit, or of each individual piece, in accordance with the subject's understanding of Memphis. *The Soul of the City*, when interpreted in terms of this understanding of "the intent" of *play*, appears to offer to an individual a unique, subjective, Memphian experience with art.

There is, however, a problem with claiming that this is the proper intent of *The Soul of a City* if we keep Kant's conception of a pure aesthetic judgment. To consider the experience of *play* within the individual pieces of art of the exhibit as being a purposeful activity would be to contradict its identity as a work of art that must be judged by means of an aesthetic experience. Kant considers the object of aesthetic judgment, crucially, as being purposive in that it intends something but yet lacks a conceptual purpose.¹⁸ In considering the prospect of fostering an conceptual understanding of Memphis as the purpose of the works of art within the exhibit, we must rather textualize the image and, in doing so, call into question its status as a work of art that requires a purely aesthetic judgment. Therefore, if we are to conceive of *The Soul of a City* in terms of furthering of an individual's understanding of Memphis by means of an experience of *play*, we need to question that the individual is involved a pure aesthetic experience at all.

Now we return again to the question of interpreting the "intent" of *The Soul of a City*. Previously, we explored how this idea of intent is conveyed in relation to the concept of *play*, and how that intent influences the possibility of an experience clarifying an individual Memphis identity arising from the exhibit. Now we turn instead to the idea of intent as conveyed in the *festival*, the property of the *festival's* "being about" something. Interpreting *The Soul of a City* along the lines of the intentional quality of the *festival* is a little more straightforward than relating the exhibit to *play*: the exhibit itself is already clearly identifiable as a "festival" as we

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Aesthetical Judgement*, Third Moment, S11.

understand the term. However, we still need to ask what intentional aspect gathers of participants in *The Soul of a City*.

In one sense, the option is available to us is to consider the most straightforward interpretation: that *The Soul of a City* fulfills its status as *festival* because its participants are gathered for the sake of an aesthetic experience with the works of prominent African American artists. Here, we need only consider whether the exhibit fulfills the *festival* as Gadamer presents it to us, which is indeed the case if the participants are gathered for the experience of the works in the exhibit. Regardless of whether we can claim that *The Soul of a City* “is about” a Memphis experience of art, which we will soon examine, it is clear that we can confidently state that the exhibit, at the very least, “is about” the works of art produced by these artists. Considered as such, we can clearly already claim the existence of a communal Memphis experience of art arising from the exhibit: again, the intention of the *festival* as it surrounds a work of art creates a community of meaning by unifying subjective experiences of art that completes the scope of meaning the artistic *symbol* represents in its objective state. Clearly the gathering of subjects within *The Soul of a City* constitutes a communal aesthetic experience brought about by collected participation in the unified intention of the exhibit: through the gathering of the exhibit, individual Memphian subjects escape their own subjectivity to form a communal experience of art which is able to transcend meaning in connection with *symbol*. It could be valid to consider such a communal experience a “Memphis” experience of art simply in that it is the composite of the array of individual “Memphian” experiences.

Before we leave this point, we should glance back to consider whether or not our evaluation of *The Soul of a City* as involving *play* can take on any additional significance if we consider it alongside this understanding of *festival*. Continuing from our examination of *The Soul*

of a City as considered by *play*, we can examine the intentional nature of the *festival* from the exhibits aspect as a “Memphis audience”. In this view, the participants in the *festival* of *The Soul of a City* are gathered for an exhibit that “is about” the purposive experience as revealed to us by *play*: the construction of a textual meaning in a work of art in terms of a subject’s conceptual understanding of Memphis. In what sense could this unification have significance? Quite obviously, only if the subjective experience of art as understood conceptually in terms of “Memphis” is divided in some way. Importantly, the meaning which we found that the subject constructed in our application of the exhibit is not an aesthetic consideration, but must rather regard reading the image as a text. This difference between these two experiences of a work of art becomes significant when one considers how the status of the *symbol*, and its connection to the *festival*, stands in regards to each of these experiences of a work of art. If we are to see if the *festival* can be applied to the array of subjective conceptualizations of Memphis, we must assess the possibility of variance in meaning within the scope of the textual Memphis meaning. The subject’s construction of this meaning, as we revealed in *play*, is built in *play* within the activity whose purpose is the recognition of Memphis. The necessary variation required for the unifying power of the *festival* must arise from a difference in the conceptualization of Memphis belonging to any given subject constructing meaning in *The Soul of a City*. However, this cannot on its own conclude our examination of whether or not this “Memphis meaning” can be properly unified by the *festival*: in order for the *festival* to take on the intentionality which unifies participating subjects, the subjects must themselves recognize this potential of the *festival* in recognition of their own shortcomings as subjects to grasp what is at hand in the *symbol*. In the case of an aesthetic concern and the *symbol*, this concern was addressed by the showing and concealing of the *symbol* in the work of art. In Gadamer’s description of the completion of the *symbol*, the act a

subject performs by completing the symbol closes the subject from other possible meanings the *symbol* could present. Remember that these concealed meanings made themselves apparent to the subject by means of an experience of “something more” than the subject understands the work to mean.¹⁹ This “something more” is crucial to the festival because it drives the subjects to unify around a work: the subject aims to address the work in a greater sense through the communal activity of festival than it can by its own individual aesthetic experience. However, if we change the subject’s experience of a work of art from an aesthetic to a textual one, we cannot say for certain that this property of showing and concealing still applies. Rather, the subject would be bound to determine the meaning of the work as a text. In doing so, we must call into question whether the feeling of “something more” that Gadamer describes is still present in the experience of the work. If the subject cannot indeed recognize any insufficiency in their own understanding of meaning in *The Soul of a City*, then there is no reason to think that subjects would feel compelled to unify as described in the manner of the *festival*.

In considering the difference between the way the aesthetic and the conceptual consideration of art address the *symbol*, we can evaluate the applicability of each kind of experience to the *festival*. In the instance of *symbol* as it relates to the aesthetic experience, the subject recognizes that there is a scope of possible meaning available through the completion of the *symbol*, and cannot fully grasp the work of art. Thus, it is in the nature of the *symbol*’s interaction with the subject in an aesthetic sense that any subjective view of the *symbol* is insufficient. This insufficiency reveals to us something very significant for Gadamer’s overall aim in writing his aesthetic philosophy. The scope of possible meaning present in the *symbol* and the activity of the *festival* in art shows to us that there is an objective truth to the work: there is some static element of the work of art that the subject could not attain in an individual subjective

¹⁹ Gadamer, 34

experience with the work, but does when engaged in the communal act of *festival*.²⁰ The full scope of the work of art is not determined exclusively in the subjective aesthetic experience. The conceptual understanding of Memphis, on the other hand, has no such indication whereby we can be confident of its basis in a truth: it may exist only as the collection of life context that defines an individual's perspective of Memphis. In addressing one's own context, the subject is able to make an exhaustive statement regarding the work of art and how it can be meaningful according to the subject's context of Memphis. It is difficult to consider, as opposed to the example of art, then, that unifying in a *festival* gathering different conceptual perspectives of Memphis could accomplish anything meaningful at all.

I wish now to move forward to our consideration of whether or not any of these "Memphis experiences" we have discovered in the Brooks Museum's *The Soul of a City* constitute an experience that is unique to Memphis. We need only look again to this term of "soul" in the title of the exhibit to find the temptation to think that Memphis is somehow better disposed to the possibility of such experiences than some other city. This quality of "soul", as we reference it to the city, is something often connoted as the kind of thing a place can either possess, or not. It seems unlikely that many would claim from intuition that a different city, one with none of the history that Memphis has, has "soul" in the same sense as Memphis does. This claim leads us to ask whether this idea of "soul" refers to some quality in the city that makes the experience of either individual or communal experiences of art possible. Does the idea of "soul" distinguish Memphis as the kind of place these kinds of experiences can arise? The short answer here is that *The Soul of a City* does indeed offer Memphis a kind of unique experience, but not in a sense that the kind of unique experience it offers could not be similarly unique, itself, in any other place with a similar exhibit. Let us consider again the kinds of experiences we have found

²⁰ Gadamer, 34

arise from *The Soul of a City*. The first of these experiences that we considered resulted in an individual meaning of Memphis fostered through a purposeful experience with a collection of works of art. In the activity of *play* within the context of the exhibit an individual has the opportunity to construct a meaning of the collected works art with the purpose of reflecting the individual's understanding of Memphis. In the second of these experiences, an audience of Memphis participants is united in *festival* to share a communal experience of the works of art within the exhibit themselves. Here, the claim that this festival experience is something unique is more nuanced. We can claim a uniqueness to the Memphis communal experience of art simply in that the collection of Memphian festivalgoers invokes a communal sense with which to understand the work of art through the unification of Memphian instances of meaning. However, as the communal experience of *festival* transcends the meanings created by any individual subject, approaching the totality of meaning of the *symbol*, it must necessarily become indistinguishable from any other communal experience of the work. *The Soul of a City* invokes a Memphian communal experience, but the communal understanding of the work which arises from that experience must necessarily be shared by any *festival* gathering around the work.

Either of these experiences can be considered unique to Memphis in light of the simple fact that they are involved in Memphis and Memphians. In the case of the activity of *play* brought on by *The Soul of a City*, the exhibit itself makes this experience unique in that the regulatory action of *The Soul of a City* directly involves a subject's concept of Memphis. Any subject that enters the exhibit, regardless of its connection to Memphis, is only properly participating in the *play* of the exhibit insofar as they perform the necessary constructive activity with attention to whatever status that they believe that they hold as Memphians. The necessary concept of Memphis that the subject must hold in order to engage in this *play* with purpose at all

is equally present for the individual who has lived in the city for their entire life and one who had never seen the city and slept on the way to the exhibit. The kind of meaning that the subject constructs in *The Soul of a City* will be a meaning that is unique to the subject, and unique to the subject insofar as it is involved with Memphis. The kind of experience of *play* that we find in this exhibit, however, could produce this kind of unique experience in any setting. In the act of regulation of *play* in terms of the setting, an exhibit supplies the participant with the necessary concept of the setting required to engage purposefully in the exhibit. Any exhibit which engages in this kind of *play* will produce this unique individual experience of meaning within the subject.

The ultimate significance of the *festival* experience in Gadamer's work lies alongside the realization that the communal understanding of a work of art as presented by the *festival* can never be considered unique. *The Soul of a City*, celebrated as a *festival* around each individual work of art within, unifies the subjects gathered in experiencing the works of art into a communal understanding of art. As we have discussed, this unification and understanding transcends the comprehension of any subjective experience by addressing the totality of the *symbol* within the work of art. That the *festival* interacts with the work of art in this holistic sense, however, must require that the communal understanding of the work of art exists objectively: there must be a totality of meaning within the *symbol* that is an objective element of the work of art which comes to be completed through the unified action of the *festival*. In the face of the *festival*, the holistic understanding of a work of art ceases to lie within the subjective construction of a single individual, and exists now by virtue of the work of art that gathers the *festival* itself. The meanings constructed by subjects who are gathered create the possibility of the composition of this understanding, but the final composition itself is the completion of the scope of meaning within the *symbol* in the work of art, in its pure state. As such, this communal

understanding is ultimately distinguished not by the community that engages in the festival, but rather by the work of art upon which the *festival* is founded. The actual communal understanding that we have found in *The Soul of a City*, therefore, cannot be an understanding unique to Memphis, but rather a unique effort by a Memphis community to assess the proper and true understanding of a work of art.

Herein lies our best vision of how the kind of communal meaning which arises in an exhibit such as *The Soul of a City* demonstrates the full significance of Gadamer's work. Through the activity of *play* and *festival*, *The Soul of a City* brings the Memphis community into a shared understanding of an objective truth behind a work of art as it is represented by *symbol*. The communal experience of art, as we now understand it, is not merely a celebration of Memphis' common aesthetic appreciation of a work. It is an activity that arises from the festive situation which makes it possible for human subjects, in the act of forming a community, to contend with the nature of truth in the work of art: a condition which is insurmountable for the individual subject through the *symbol's* dual nature of showing and concealing. Within *The Soul of a City*, the communal experience of art is not something displayed by the selections in works made by Memphis collectors. In fact, in regards to the activity of the *festival* in *The Soul of a City*, the status of the collectors is irrelevant to the existence of a communal experience of art. *The Soul of the City* represents the means for Memphis to develop a communal understanding of art, and thus allows us as Memphians to search for truth through our experience with the work of art. The power of *The Soul of a City* lies in the unification of the community as to make this pursuit of truth through the work of art possible at all.

I think, in light of each of these questions with which we evaluate the Brooks Museum's *Soul of a City*, we are able to form an idea of the kind of value *The Soul of the City*

offers to Memphis. Despite the allure of the title, I think we can safely say that *The Soul of a City* does not put this “soul” of the city of Memphis on display in the selection of the works, or serve as an example of some particularly unique meaning that Memphians can find in an aesthetic experience because of their historical background. The “soul” of Memphis that the exhibit at the Brooks Museum presents to us is not a matter of something that the exhibit shows to us, but rather is an activity that the exhibit drives its participants to do. Whether this activity is the evaluation of the meaning of Memphis to the individual subject as encouraged by the act of *play* or the aspiration of the collected Memphis community by means of an aesthetic experience towards a transcendent understanding of a work of art in the moment of the *festival*, the power of *The Soul of a City* is firmly grounded in the participation of Memphis within the exhibit. *The Soul of a City* does not give us a record or image of a communal understanding of art or Memphis: it acts as the roots for this understanding itself to grow and become real for the Memphis community.

Works Cited

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