

The Resonance of Picasso's Guitar

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My response begins with two epigraphs:

“... as a suffering creature I cannot do without something greater than I, something that is my life – the ... power to create.”¹

“Painting is freedom ... If you jump, you might fall on the wrong side of the rope. But if you're not willing to take the risk of breaking your neck, what good is it? You don't jump at all. You have to wake people up. To revolutionize their way of identifying things. You've got to create images they won't accept. Make them foam at the mouth. Force them to understand their living in a pretty [strange] world. A world that is not reassuring. A world that's not what they think it is.”²

Have you ever played Picasso's *Guitar*? Of course not. But perhaps you have heard it played? Or perhaps you've been *played* by it, which is to say *touched* by the resonance of Picasso's guitar? In Spanish, *tocar* is a verb that means both “to touch” and “to play.” So, when we say we have been “touched” by a work of art, we can also say we've been “played” by it, both in the sense of being “played” like a musical instrument, and also in the sense of being “played” by the irony or paradox presented by the work of art that *pretends to represent* something when in fact *it is the thing itself* it ironically *pretends* to re-present. The sound of Picasso's guitar already resonates here as an interruption to the banality of education as compulsory repetition and re-production.

I will come back to the sound of Picasso's *Guitar*, and to the possi-

bility of being touched by its sounds and, in being touched, *moved* in such a way that we encounter what is at stake in the phenomenological reduction of education.

Let me continue my response to David Lewin with a reduction of the essay to some key fragments; aphorisms if you will:

1. Education is essentially hermeneutical.
2. We suppose that the self and the world are mediated by way of representations.
3. Representation could arguably be the central pedagogical concept.
4. Educational representations involve pedagogical reduction.
5. Representational reductions are rehearsals, thus moving in the dimension of inauthenticity.
6. Education should be taken as intrinsically “inauthentic.”
7. Education entails representation utilizing reduction to represent the visible world to the child.
8. Are we forced to admit that education has no place when it comes to the unrepresentable (e.g., the referent of religion)?
9. The truth of representation lies somewhere in-between ... the straightforward representation of the world and the hermeneutical condition.
10. These fragments can be further reduced to the claim made by Klaus Mollenhauer, which Lewin cites as the touchstone for his essay: “[w]e long ago accepted that the realm of schooling consists of a huge montage of images and representations which are not ‘the things themselves’ but that instead ‘point out’ things and phenomena.”³

Mollenhauer’s is less a categorical premise than a presumption regarding an existing consensus, which can only include a finite set of philosophers

of education and, as such, is limited to whomever locates themselves within Mollenhauer's imagined community. In turn, it excludes those who don't accept Mollenhauer's claim. I am among those who would be excluded by this imagined community because, in my reading, Mollenhauer's presumption regarding the huge montage of images and representation is beyond the boundary of the phenomenological project that arose as a protest against philosophy as empty abstraction. In response to that practice of philosophical abstraction, phenomenology announced a desire to return to lived experience, the life-world. Here we need only recall Husserl's defining invocation that phenomenology is a return to "the things themselves."⁴ In turn, my response to Lewin pivots on an objection to Mollenhauer's claim, and offers the counter-claim that phenomenology is, on the contrary, concerned *not* with representations of things, but with things in-and-for-themselves, or what we might anachronistically call "the essence of things." In turn, a philosophical exploration of phenomenological and hermeneutical dimensions of education must unfold from an attempt to think through the concern for "the essence of things." And, as I hope to show, such thinking must ultimately focus on phenomenological reduction and hermeneutical interpretation as two moments in the ongoing constitution and composition of things *and* persona (i.e., the learner).

Lewin's essay presents us with a hermeneutics that is grounded in Ricoeur, who most describe as a textualist; specifically, one who focused on symbols, metaphor, and parable. In contrast to that approach is the ontological project of hermeneutics taken up by Heidegger. His was an attempt guided by the ancient Attic rendering of the revelatory character of Being through making and showing.

As early as 1923, in his lectures later published under the title *Ontology – the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Heidegger reminds us that hermeneutics was initiated by Aristotle in his treatise *On Interpretation* (or *On Hermeneutics*). The key fragment from that work for Heidegger is the one that shows *hermeneuein* (interpretation) to be a *techné*: a productive process, or a way of making via *logos*, which we can translate as "language" but also as "thinking." In the fragment that most interests Heidegger in those early lectures, Aristotle asserts:

“language is *making something* known through words.”⁵ Here we can already recognize how Heidegger’s identification of language as *techne* (as a tool) leads directly to poetic thinking, which is to say a revelatory thinking that discloses the self.

In these 1923 lectures, Heidegger insists that “hermeneutics ... [develops] for Dasein [persona] a *possibility* of its *becoming* and *being for itself* in the manner of an understanding of itself.”⁶ Put otherwise, hermeneutics is the *techne* that makes known a persona to them-self. What is important here is the “making known” or simply the “making” *that is* happening with hermeneutics. A *persona* (a who) appears from a process of making (both a *techne* and *poiesis*) that Heidegger calls hermeneutical questioning. This process takes us into a radical wakefulness to our ownmost possibility, and through hermeneutical questioning a human being *becomes* a person, or, as Hannah Arendt put it, becomes a *who* as opposed to a *what*.⁷

All this begs the question: how is *logos* put to work so as to awaken us to our ownmost possibility? Here, Lewin’s “tentative hypothesis ... around the category of the unrepresentable, which religious traditions generally have a particular interest in” is helpful. In response I offer the following thesis: in whatever way it happens, *logos* is put to work in the absence of God, in the place in-between visible and invisible, the void (*das nichts*), the nothing, where the absence of *anything* and *everything* compels us to create *something*, and in that process, create *someone*.

Art precedes metaphysics; indeed, before something, there is nothing, *no* thing. And now we must add, following Adorno, the autonomous persona follows from the making of art.⁸ *Logos* is put to work in the confrontation with our ownmost possibility, which Heidegger says is announced with the question that arises beyond science and metaphysics, beyond what *is*: How is it with the Nothing? Here, with this question that leads us to existential learning via making, we find a more *radical absence* than the bland simulacrum of the “not,” gestured by Mollenhauer with his assertion regarding the non-existence of “the things themselves” in education. The presence of the Nothing, the void left by the absence of God (Heidegger’s flight of the gods), gives rise to the passion

of the suffering creature that is sublimated by creating, as Van Gogh declared in his testimony. Here is where a *non*-representational phenomenology of education emerges: from a hermeneutics of making. Namely, of making *something* in the presence of nothing, disclosing the power to create, and, in the process, releasing autonomy. And with that we return to the sound of Picasso's guitar.

The critique of a phenomenology and hermeneutics of representation that I am offering here is inspired by Picasso's work *Guitar*, made in 1912. When I was first reading Lewin's essay, the critical questions and objections that were percolating all made the sound of Picasso's *Guitar*. The music from that guitar was a testament to the fact that it was not a representation of a guitar, but a guitar, in-and-for-itself.

Ruth Markus reminds us that in making his *Guitar*, Picasso had moved beyond the cul-de-sac of abstraction that the first phase of cubism, identified as "analytic cubism," had run into.⁹ Following a parallel path to Husserl, Picasso was attempting to bring back the autonomy of the object, which had the effect of compelling the spectator (or listener, in this case) to enter into a synthetic relationship with the work of art. In turn, the securing the autonomy of the work of art has the consequence of doing the same for the artist. As Markus puts it: "in the synthetic phase the artist no longer wishes to analyze the sense stimuli; he prefers instead to convert the work of art into an independent reality that exists according to its own autonomous rules."¹⁰ One of these rules, it turns out, is ambiguity, which liberates the object from the desire of the spectator to abstract a concept from the work, e.g., the concept of "guitar." Picasso thwarted this desire by challenging the spectators or listeners of his guitar to recognize it as *a* guitar, rather than a *representation* of the concept "guitar." Picasso in fact not only created a guitar but a new kind of guitar out of cardboard, wood, and steel. "A new guitar is created," Markus writes, "one that does not imitate any existing guitar."¹¹ Picasso, she insists, "presents a concrete object – one that does not represent another object but is an object in itself ... Picasso's 1912 *Guitar* is, indeed, such a new object."¹²

In creating his *Guitar*, in the very constitution and composition of this "new" guitar, Picasso is reminding us what is at stake when we resist the

reduction of education to a montage of representations: the revelation of a *persona*. In conclusion, I return to my central hypothesis concerning learning as poetic praxis: *logos* is put to work in the absence of God, in the place in-between visible and invisible, in the void (*das nichts*), the nothing, where the absence of *anything* and *everything* compels us to create *something*, and, in that process, create *someone*.

1 Vincent Van Gogh, cited in André Malraux, *Picasso's Mask* (New York: Da Capo, 1994), 141.

2 *Ibid.*, 110.

3 Klaus Mollenhauer, *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing*, trans. N. Friesen (London: Routledge, 2014), 34.

4 Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 2nd ed. 2 vols, ed. Dermot Moran (London: Routledge, 2001 [1900/1901]), 168.

5 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 6, 1450b13f cited in Martin Heidegger, *Ontology – the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John Van Buren (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 2009), 8.

6 Heidegger, *Ontology – the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, 11.

7 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

8 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum, 1997).

9 Ruth Markus, "Picasso's Guitar, 1912: The Transition from Analytical to Synthetic Cubism," *Assaph* 2, *Studies in Art History*, Tel-Aviv University (1996): 233-246.

10 Markus, "Picasso's Guitar," 236-237.

11 *Ibid.*, 237.

12 *Ibid.*