

MARTIN HEIDEGGER ON AESTHETICS

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Aesthetical experiences, for Martin Heidegger, are more fundamental than what was traditionally proposed by Western philosophy. Self, work of art and world, consequently, are a co-constituted structure of Being. Heidegger believes that art is an act of the unconcealment of beings. Truth, for Heidegger, is not the result of judgment, as it is, for example, in the traditional approach of aesthetics where judgment is the result of the subject/object dichotomy. Truth is, in fact, external to judgment and belongs to beings themselves. Art must, in addition, depend on its essence as it unconceals truth. The artist acts as a pathway for the truth during the process of creation of art. The result is a world where Being is signified and put on display. Art, for Heidegger, redraws the lines to establish what truly and historically is. The artist uses lines to bring about a basic outline in which, later through creativity, a truth is brought into the light of the world out of inexhaustible possibilities.¹

One vital element of Heidegger's philosophy of art is that all art is, in essence, poetry. For Heidegger, art is rooted and has its base in language. Language, however, is not a mere tool of communication. It is, rather, the possibility of bringing beings into the openness of unconcealment. For Heidegger, Art and language share the same characteristic of the unconcealment of Being.² In this paper, I shall explicate how, for Heidegger, poetry is a privileged art, how it finds truth and how such notions came about.

Heidegger begins, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, with his hermeneutic circle. He starts by questioning the very source of a work of art. For a mind not as profound as Heidegger's, such questioning could end with an artist as the source of a work of art. But isn't the artist, also, an artist because of the work of art! Artist and work of art, in fact, co-constitute each other where "Neither is without the other."³ We must, therefore, investigate art, which gives rise to both artist and work of art. Thus, this is also problematic since we don't know what art and work of art are yet. This circular reasoning could go on, but Heidegger's answer is to investigate the "thingness"⁴ of a work of art; it's inner essence.

A work of art is more concrete than art, therefore, Heidegger moves to understanding its thingness. He presupposes that a thing is that which exists; an "entity."⁵ Since such presupposition is too general, it's necessary to theoretically allocate with more specificity. Heidegger, therefore, applies different views to arrive at the essence of a work of art.

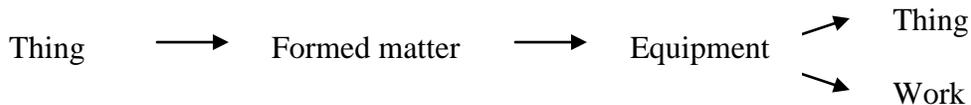
First, there is the notion of substance where attributes constitute such substance. Thus, a thing is defined by its qualities. Second, there is the thing as a collection of sensations. It is, therefore, perceived by the mind. Third, the thing is a combination of matter and form. Heidegger, however, rejects all three. None gives exactly what he is looking for, but the third view seems to offer a closer interpretation to what is needed; a

thing-being and an “equipmental being of equipment,”⁶ which is the result of human making:

This definition of the thing derives from an interpretation of the equipmental being of equipment. And equipment, having come into being through human making, is particularly familiar to human thinking.⁷

In art making, I could, for example, impose the form of a hammer on the matter of iron and wood. This production of a hammer contains matter of wood and iron standing together to form what is a hammer; its thingness. If water, for example, was formed as a hammer, such hammer would not be a hammer. It would not have the same thing-being of a hammer. A hammer also has a purpose and specific usefulness.⁸ This specific use lies in the heart of its equipmentality, where a hammer is used for hammering and not as weight to hold down a piece of paper. One could use the hammer to hold down a piece of paper, of course, but this does not give the hammer the quality of its equipmentality. Heidegger, then, goes on to tie three concepts to the view of a thing as formed matter, which are thing, equipment and work. Such concepts will be clearer as this paper goes on.

In the meantime, however, the following chart should outline the basic process of Heidegger’s thought at this point:



To define a thing, Heidegger uses the theory of formed matter. He amplifies the theory to go beyond; arriving at the concept of equipmentality. Equipment lies intermediately between thing and work. Heidegger, then, applies hermeneutic phenomenology to a work of art to further his theory of aesthetics.

When Heidegger examines Van Gogh’s painting, “A Pair of Shoes,” the themes of formed matter, equipmental use, equipmental reliability, earth, world, truth and unconcealment of being arise. As formed matter, the shoes are made out of leather, which is joined together by thread and nails. Such shoes are made for a reason and a certain use. They are made to clothe the feet. The worn inner parts of the shoes, for example, represent their use. Their ultimate equipmental quality is, however, when they are worn by the user unawaresly; being ready-to-hand. Their equipmental reliability is represented by the long years during which the shoes served its user. This equipmental reliability is the essential being of equipment. The consistency in reliability shows what equipment, in truth, is. Such shoes, also, unconceal the being of their user. They represent the user’s world and earth by being used in the field; accumulating dirt, dampness, sap and pollen:

...Everyone knows what shoes consist of... there will be leather soles and uppers, joined together by thread and nails. Such gear serves to clothe the

feet. Depending on the use to which the shoes are to be put, whether for work in the field or for dancing, matter and form will differ... The equipmental quality of equipment consists in its usefulness... The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field. Only here are they what they are. They are all the more genuinely so, the less the peasant woman thinks about the shoes..., or is even aware of them. It is this process of the use of equipment that we must actually encounter the character of equipment... From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth... On the leather lie the dampness and field swept by the raw wind... In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth... This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself... The equipmental quality of the equipment consists indeed in its usefulness. But this usefulness itself rests in the abundance of an essential being of the equipment. We call it reliability. By virtue of this reliability the peasant woman is made privy to the silent call of the earth; by virtue of the reliability of the equipment she is sure of her world. World and earth exist for her, and for those who are with her in her mode of being, only thus—in the equipment... Only in this reliability do we discern what equipment in truth is... The art work let us know what shoes are in truth.⁹

Heidegger states, however, that we still did not arrive at the thingness of the thing, which we originally tried to understand. We, furthermore, don't know what the work-being of the work of art is. There is, nonetheless, an interesting realization, as seen in the end of the previous quote, which is the unconcealment of truth. This work of art has allowed the shoes to emerge as an unconcealment of truth of their being. The essence of art is, therefore, the unconcealment of the truth of beings. It is not the reproduction of some object, but the reproduction of the thing's essence.¹⁰ Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological circle, here, has revealed the nature of work of the work of art, which is the unconcealing of the truth of that which is. We hermeneutically interpret art to be able to understand it, yet concurrently, art phenomenologically reveals itself to us. We extended our senses to Van Gogh's painting, and the painting gave itself to us.

What has been said up to this point has a lot to offer but, according to Heidegger, it is not really the way to approach aesthetics. Instead of treating art only in terms of equipments and things, we need to understand the work in the work of art and the Being of beings; that which all is a co-constitution of.¹¹

“Art is truth setting itself to work.”¹² To be able to arrive at such truth, the work of art has to stand on its own. This is, in fact, the artist's original intention; art in “pure self-subsistence.”¹³ To examine art in terms of truth and work, Heidegger chooses a Greek temple.

The temple sets up a world for truth for worshiping and for those who relate to it. The work of the actual temple, for instance, sets up a world for those who worship in it.

It is how a world is intelligible to beings. The temple-work, here, sets up a world of openness.¹⁴ A work of art that sets up a world, in addition, does so on earth and by using its materials, such as stones in the case of the Greek temple. The second feature of a work of art, therefore, is the setting forth of earth. The work keeps the earth in the openness of the world. The setting up of the world and setting forth of the earth are the unity of the work-being of the work of art.¹⁵ World and earth are different yet never separate. They relate in the way the world grounds itself upon earth and earth juts through the world. The opposition of the self-opening of the world and concealing of the earth is constantly striving. Such striving enables each, world and earth, to take the other beyond itself where neither alone could go. The work-being is the actual struggle between world and earth.¹⁶

The dialectic nature of truth, similar but not the same as world and earth, is concealing and unconcealing. Aesthetics in demonstration, for example, is a depiction of truth as unconcealment. Beauty, as well, is an unconcealment of being. “*Beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness.*”¹⁷ It is the shining forth of that, which was originally concealed, as it becomes a work of art.

Things, for example, are unconcealed when they truly show themselves as they are. Beings phenomenologically show forth through the clearing caused by the dialectic movement (struggle). The work of art, as well, projects truth as the struggle between world and earth. The essence of the work of art is to set forth truth, which is the result of strife between world and earth. This is a non-static happening, a becoming since such struggle is continuous. The artist creates by bringing forth being into the physical reality of that which shows and unconceals itself. To create, for Heidegger, then, is to cause an emergence of something. This creating causes the emergence of a unique being as the happening of truth. The work of art, thus, is a work when it is created to bring forth the truth of that which is and when such truth is known to those who stand before it; preservers as an example. Preservers, for Heidegger, are those who stand “within the openness of beings that happens in the work.”¹⁸ They are not the ones who have art, for example, marginalized in the background. They, in fact, stand within the awesomeness of the work of art willingly and knowingly; especially of its truth. Such willing and knowing is the “existing human being’s entrance into and compliance with the unconcealedness of Being.”¹⁹ This, according to Heidegger, is what is intended by resoluteness as mentioned in *Being and Time*. It is, thus, the opening up of human beings to the openness of Being.

Based on the unconcealed truth, a work of art is revealed to its audience. It is how art speaks to people. This is how it establishes its historical nature. Since art is within an earthly and worldly context, it is within a certain culture, historical context and above all within a linguistic framework. This is beyond the “thingly thingness” mentioned earlier. It is, here, that the creation of the work of art is revealed through the artist, not as mere imitation of something or mere equipment, but as unconcealment of being and truth. It is, nonetheless, an equally important part of art to be preserved. This is truth in creation and preservation:

Being a work, it always remains tied to preservers, even, and particularly when it is still only waiting for preservers and only pleads and waits for them to enter into its truth.²⁰

Art as the becoming, happening, revealing and opening of truth is openness by and openness for. An openness by the artist for the preserver in which all; artist, preserver, earth, world, truth, art, work of art; are co-constitution of Being. But what gives art such ability to unconceal truth? Heidegger's answer is the nature of art:

It is due to art's poetic nature that, in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual. By virtue of the projected sketch set into the work of the unconcealedness of what is, which casts itself toward us, everything ordinary and hitherto existing becomes an unbeing. This unbeing has lost the capacity to give and keep being as measure. The curious fact here is that the work in no way affects hitherto existing entities by causal connections. The working of the work does not consist in the taking effect of a cause. It lies in a change, happening from out of the work, of the unconcealedness of what is, and this means, of Being.²¹

What gives poetry such privilege, for Heidegger, is language, which is the house of Being. Language, thus, is not a mere tool:

Language is charged with the task of making beings manifest and preserving them as such—in the linguistic work. Language gives expression to what is most pure and most concealed.²²

Language, like art, unconceals and reveals *Dasein's* truth and puts *Dasein's* way of being on display; an illumination and preservation of the truth of Being.

The truth is opened, revealed and preserved in artistry as the poet composes a poem. The linguistic nature of poetry, as in art, allows it to bring beings into manifestation and preservation. Due to language, furthermore, beings are brought into unconcealedness by calling/naming. Unconcealedness, in addition, allows for the historical context of humans to be illuminated into the world. In poesy, language enables poetry to comprise art and found truth.²³ Such founding of truth is the result of bestowing, grounding and beginning.

Language alone brings what is... into the Open for the first time...
Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance.²⁴

Language, furthermore, is not only the creation of beings. It reveals the true being that is already there by bringing it to the light of expression; illumination. Language, then, is poetry. Poetry stands, on the other hand, within language and is preserved by it. This revelation of being, for Heidegger, is projection where confusion of

concealment is disavowed by bringing to light the unsayable. Illumination is, also, projective in a historical context. It grounds people's self-understanding, the understanding of their image and their existence within world history.

Such historical function of the poetic nature of art gives art and poetry the ability to found truth. As has been noted, such founding is bestowing, grounding and beginning. Beginning is a leap and:

contains the undisclosed abundance of the unfamiliar and the extraordinary, which means that it also contains strife with the familiar and ordinary. Art as poetry is founding of the strife of truth.²⁵

This is transformation of truth by which people live. Beginning as a leap, however, is the result of bestowing and grounding, as they are contained within it. This, in fact, is a beginning because the truth, as unconcealed by the work, can never be derived from what is previous to it. The work, thus, is bestowal. Just like the word, as the building block of language where poetry and art stand, is a beginning of a leap from silence but is not derived from it. Silence does not contain the signification of sounds to make the word what it is, yet gives it distinction and rise in a dialectical manner as it contains unlimited possibilities. Grounding, in addition, happens as the foundation of the poetic vision, which is not derived from the available yet does not come from nothing.

To conclude this paper, I will abridge Heidegger's account and bridge the abovementioned. Art is the origin of the work of art and artist. In order to know what art is, Heidegger has to examine works of art. When works of art are examined, new horizons emerge, which are deeper than what normally is considered in traditional theories of aesthetics. Art, thus, is not mere equipment, a craft made, mere imitation or copying of something. Art is a revelation, an opening up of a world and a bringing forward of earth. The work of art erects a world, which is grounded upon earth. Both are ontologically interdependent. In strife, each gives rise to the other and makes it what it is. The work-being of a work of art is constituted by the struggle between world and earth. They stand in strife to reveal the truth as the truth of Being.

Truth, here, is of the first order; an ontological truth. It is the unconcealment of Being. In art, truth is openness, which is the strife between world and earth, truth and untruth, concealment and unconcealment. Work of art sets forth a world of truth. Beauty is the appearance and revealing in a very unique manner, which is particular to the situatedness of all aspects, such as artist and historical context, coming together. For completion of the work of art, openness stands in relation to reciprocity. This is where createdness meets preservation. Now, the work of art enters history.

Art is poetry. Poetry is most adequate for unconcealing truth. It is rooted in language, but not the mundane language. The language of poetry goes beyond to reach the ultimate truth and illuminate Being. This is possible because without such language beings could not be brought into appearance by naming. Projection of names, here, puts

beings into the struggle between world and earth where poetry can illuminate them out of concealedness.

Notes:

1. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 20. Thingness, for Heidegger, is thing-being. This will be clearer as this paper goes on.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
8. Heidegger is actually using these views to generally critique Western philosophy. He uses the third view, for example, to particularly critique Aristotle's metaphysics. Critiquing classical views is typical in Heidegger's works. This is how he grounds his views. He mentions that we keep falling into misconceptions by following some of the classical views of philosophy in *Being and Time* and *Poetry, Language, Thought...etc.*
9. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought, op. cit.*, p. 32-35.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
22. Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry*, ed. Keith Hoeller (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 55.
23. Thomas Langan, *The Meaning of Heidegger: A Critical Existentialist Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p.115. Langan considers naming the Holy is the specific job of the poet according to Heidegger. The act of illumination is that moment of contact which gives rise to the words of the poet which then becomes poesy, that which the poet writes. It is the act of naming which illumines Being.
24. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought, op. cit.*, p. 71.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 74.