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Heidegger and the Finitude of the Work of Art

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HEIDEGGER AND THE FINITUDE OF THE WORK OF ART

Abstract. Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* reevaluates how artworks are meaningful by offering a phenomenological description of the work of art as an historically situated event. This ontological interpretation of art not only rehabilitates our sense of the materiality and singularity of the artwork but it also enables us to think the conditions of the creation and genuine preservation of artworks. In this paper I develop the concept of *ruination* and argue that ruination is the essence of the artwork. My interpretation emphasizes Heidegger's insistence on the finitude of the artwork and reveals that Heidegger's example of the ruin of the ancient temple is exemplary precisely because the ruination of the artwork is an essential characteristic of its happening rather than something that befalls it from outside.

Keywords: artwork, difference, earth, finitude, materiality, repetition, truth, unconcealment

1. Introduction. 2. On thingliness. 3. On earth as the new meaning of materiality. 4. On createdness. 5. On finitude and truth. 6. On ruination and preservation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* the essence of art is unveiled as a happening, as an event¹. Thus, when Heidegger plainly states in the essay's addendum: "What art may be is one of the questions to which the essay offers no answer" this statement must be thought in

¹ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in: *Off The Beaten Track*, transl. J. Young, K. Haynes, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2002, 1–56.

light of the essential finitude of art. As a happening (*Ereignis*) art does not reflect an immortal essence, meaning or value and Heidegger's essay attests to the truth to be found in the artwork precisely because it admits to the impossibility of determining the essence of art. It turns out that Heidegger's essay can offer no answer because what art *is* can never be finally decided. The ideas that remain central throughout the essay, the concepts of 'earth', 'world', 'truth', and 'historical humanity' are best highlighted in the single example of the ancient Greek temple at Paestum². Heidegger tells us that the temple, "in its standing there (...) gives to things their look and to humanity their outlook on themselves"³. If the example of this artwork is to reveal the way in which the work 'works', precisely by revealing to us what we collectively value, why would Heidegger have chosen as an example a work whose world has clearly vanished? In this paper I argue that it is not, as some have suggested, that Heidegger is motivated by nostalgia for a Greek origin since he repeatedly reminds us that the world of the ancient temple has *disintegrated* and that we cannot simply will this ancient world to somehow manifest itself again⁴. Indeed, Heidegger emphasizes that, "[t]he establishment of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being of a kind which never was before and never will be again"⁵.

The key here is Heidegger's challenge to the metaphysical doctrine of truth as the adequation of a particular phenomenon to an unchanging, or eternal idea. Rather than speak of truth in connection with unchanging ideas Heidegger speaks of truth as the unconcealment (*aletheia*) of a world in all its finitude. The artwork is a finite being that opens up a world precisely by inscribing itself within the horizon of that world. It is because he means to show that the artwork is a singular bearer

² Though Heidegger makes reference to Paestum there is no reason to think that Heidegger is confining his thoughts to the specific temple. Cf. J. Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2001, 52.

³ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

of a finite truth, a being “which never was before and never will be again” that Heidegger invokes the temple as an example. That is to say, Heidegger chooses the temple as an exemplary work of art precisely because it is a *ruin*. Insofar as it is a work of art, a bearer of the truth of a world, the temple was exposed to the possibility of its own ruination from its very origin in the Greek world. The temple always already attested to the finitude of its world. Thus, in order to reveal the richness of Heidegger’s thinking of the finitude of the artwork, I argue that we should think of *ruination* as belonging to the essence of art. Furthermore, I will also argue that it is, in a particular way, the *materiality* of the artwork, manifesting its essential exposure to ruination, that makes it a bearer of the happening of truth. It is the artwork’s constant risk of becoming a ruin, its vulnerability and singularity that enables truth to manifest itself in the work. Ruination is then the finitude that enables art to be a bearer of truth as *aletheia*⁶.

A critical aspect of Heidegger’s engagement with art is its explicit challenge to aesthetics. The aesthetic interpretation of art in modern philosophy basically reduces the being of the artwork to its representation for a subject. For Heidegger, this subjectivizing interpretation of the meaning of the artwork displaces the meaning and value of the artwork: beauty is, as the saying goes, “in the eye of the beholder”. The aesthetic value of the representation is then sought in the subject’s aesthetic judgment. This judgment, which grants to the art ob-

⁶ My use of the notion of ruination is motivated by Heidegger’s choice of a ruin as an example however it is complimented by Heidegger’s own use of the term *Ruinanz* as an existential category in his 1921–22 lecture course, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research* (G 61). As Hans Ruin recently argues “ruination” or “ruinance” designates the “peculiar movement of factual life” and this life “(...) is life as dependency, relatedness, and as need, and ultimately as finitude”. Cf. H. Ruin, *Thinking in Ruins: Life, Death, and Destruction in Heidegger’s Early Writings*, in: *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 4(2012)1, 15–33. In another recent interpretation of the early Aristotle lectures Scott Campbell argues that *Ruinanz* is the defining feature of factual life and should not be thought of as the “degradation or abasement of life” but rather is a description of life’s dependence on objects in the world. Cf. S. Campbell, *The Early Heidegger’s Philosophy of Life: Facticity, Being and Language*, Fordham UP, New York 2012, 83–99.

ject its meaning and value, is understood as the accomplishment of a synthesizing consciousness. Heidegger does not directly challenge this aesthetic understanding of art in *The Origin of the Work of Art*; rather he challenges its underlying assumptions. He has, by this time, in the mid-1930s, already shown throughout his works, not least in *Being and Time*, that the idea of lived – experience (*Erlebnis*) relies on a metaphysics that mistakenly reduces the meaning of being to the presence of objects to consciousness. Furthermore, he has shown that modern subjectivism has its roots in a tradition extending all the way back to Plato’s notion of the ‘idea’ or ‘form’ as pure unchanging presence. In *The Age of the World Picture* Heidegger discusses this foundation of modern subjectivism with particular reference to the work of Descartes, and asks rhetorically, “But how far is Descartes from this beginning of Greek thought, how different is the interpretation of man which represents him as subject?” Heidegger then adds that, “in the concept of the *subiectum*, there still lingers on the sound of the Greek essence of being (the *hypokeisthai* of the *hypokeimenon*) in the form of a presencing that has become unrecognizable and unquestioned (namely, that which lies permanently at hand)”⁷. The point here is that ideality, form, or substance (*hypokeimenon*), has always been understood as pure, unchanging presence and that modern subjectivism, the idea of *a priori* forms or categories of subjective experience, prolongs that metaphysics. And so we can see, that in order to liberate the artwork from aestheticism and its inherent subjective interpretation Heidegger must return to his challenge of the ancient metaphysical determination of being as the eternal and unchanging presence of the idea. This shifts the focus slightly in his discussion of the artwork since the main notion that Heidegger needs to challenge is the seemingly self-evident idea that the artwork is a “mere thing,” a bare object, overlaid with aesthetic valuations. Again, the problem with the aesthetic view is that it uncritically takes over a subject-object metaphysics. In short, it interprets the art object as a “mere thing” to which an aesthetic value is added.

⁷ M. Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, in: *Off The Beaten Track*, transl. J. Young, K. Haynes, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2002, 80.

Heidegger recognizes the irreducibility of the thingly character of the work of art but wants to rethink this thingliness without getting caught in a metaphysical determination of the concept of a 'thing'. In fact he wants to show us that the prevailing notions of the artwork are derived from an onto-theological conception of the thing that does violence to its thingly character.

2. ON THINGLIENESS

Since the concept of the thing has its history in the metaphysical tradition, Heidegger critically examines the meaning of the thing-concept beginning from the thingliness of the work of art. Early in *The Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger notes that every work of art has a 'thingly' character: "The picture hangs on the wall like a hunting weapon or a hat. A painting – for example van Gogh's portrayal of a pair of peasant shoes – travels from one exhibition to another. Works are shipped like (...) logs from the Black Forest. (...) Every work has this thingly character"⁸.

Heidegger traces the history of the various metaphysical determinations of the thing in Western thought. He begins with the ancient idea of thing as the unity of '*hypokeimenon* and *symbebêkos*' that is then appropriated by Roman-Latin thought, which transforms these Greek notions into the notions of 'substance and accidents'. The second interpretation of the thing understands it as the unity of a sensory manifold. The third and final interpretation is the Aristotelian notion of the thing as formed matter. Heidegger tells us that it is crucial to recognize the "limitless presumption" and "semblance of self-evidence" of these concepts of the thing. In their own particular ways, all three of these interpretations reduce the being of the thing to its being present, a move that Heidegger judges to be an "extravagant attempt to bring the thing to us in the greatest possible immediacy"⁹. In the case of the first interpretation, with the notion of substance or *hypokeimenon*, the

⁸ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 2–3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

thing is reduced to immediacy or ‘pure presence’ by giving it a completely abstract determination that is, according to Heidegger, “too far away from the body” and our experience of things in the world¹⁰. On the other hand, the notion of the thing as simply “what is received by the senses” brings the thing ‘too close to the body’ in the sense that the thing, according to this interpretation, is exhaustively reduced to individual subjective impressions. As Heidegger makes plain, we need to discover an interpretation of the thing in which the thing is “allowed to remain unmolested in its resting-within-itself”¹¹. In order to discover a way of interpreting thingliness in a manner that resists the sort of violence manifested in these three thing concepts, Heidegger must consider the third and final determination of the thing, the one he repeatedly insists is both the most dominant and dangerous interpretation. Heidegger writes: “Thus, the interpretation of the thing in terms of matter and form, whether it remains medieval or has become Kantian-transcendental, has become commonplace and self-evident. But for that reason, no less than the other interpretations of the thingness of the thing we have discussed, it represents an assault on the thing-being of the thing”¹².

This third and most pervasive determination of the thing as matter and form is also the most fundamental interpretation of the thing for the purposes of Heidegger’s thinking in the *Origin* because it is particularly relevant for understanding modern aesthetics. As Heidegger argues, “The distinction between matter and form is *the conceptual scheme deployed in the greatest variety of ways by all art theory and aesthetics*”¹³. We have already indicated this in noting the way in which aesthetic value is understood to be a formal property overlaying a ‘mere thing’. In addition to this, Heidegger uses his main discussion of van Gogh’s famous painting to show how the matter-form schema is in fact borrowed from the equipmental being of useful tools. “The

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 11.

¹³ Ibid., 9.

permanence of a thing, its constancy, consists in matter remaining together with form. The thing is formed matter. This interpretation of the thing invokes the immediate sight with which the thing concerns us through its appearance (*eidōs*). With this synthesis of matter and form we have finally found the concept of the thing which equally well fits the things of nature and the things of use"¹⁴.

The importation of the notion of thingliness from out of the being of equipment reveals for Heidegger how far from being "self-evident" are our typical presumptions about materiality.

In this traditional metaphysical determination of the thing matter or *hylē*, is interpreted as the non-essential and passive component. Furthermore, the non-essentiality and passivity of matter also denotes destruction, change, unintelligibility, non-presence and even, particularly in the tradition of Christian Neo-Platonism, evil¹⁵. The other term of the duality, *eidōs* or form, is interpreted as the essential and active component. In this dichotomy form is thought of as eternal, intelligible, pure being that, as such, is unchanging, 'pure presence' and positivity. Heidegger seeks to identify the phenomenological basis of this form-matter dualism.

This duality is highlighted in the discussion of the peasant shoes in van Gogh's famous painting through which Heidegger lays out a genealogy of the matter-form interpretation in order to show how it has "achieved a particular dominance"¹⁶. Just before Heidegger takes up a phenomeno-

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ This form-matter dualism is taken up by Heidegger in this treatment of Aristotle and in his discussion in *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, in: *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1998, 178. This dualism is also discussed in Derrida's interpretation of Plato where "form" corresponds to what Derrida, in his later works, calls the "unscathed". According to Derrida dispersal, repetition, spacing and materiality are components of writing and represent a threat to and are nevertheless necessary to a happening of truth. J. Derrida, *Plato's Pharmacy*, in: *Dissemination*, transl. B. Johnson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1981, 168–169. See also J. Derrida, *Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone*, in: *Acts of Religion*, ed. G. Anidjar, Routledge, London 2002, 42–101.

¹⁶ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 13.

logical interpretation of the shoes in the painting, he explains that we see ‘form’ most readily in things like jugs, axes, and shoes precisely because with these sorts of useful things the form expressly “determines the arrangement of the matter” whereas in the case of a granite block or a clod of earth the form appears at best to consist of an accidental distribution of matter¹⁷. However, even more important is the fact that in the case of useful things like jugs, axes and shoes the form pre-determines the selection of the matter. We first select some impermeable matter to make our jug, a piece of durable hardwood to fashion our axe, and some soft leather for our shoes. As Heidegger puts it, “both the design and the choice of material predetermined by that design – and, therefore, the dominance of the matter-form structure – are grounded in such serviceability”¹⁸. However, it is only in uncommon moments when a tool is broken or worn out that the distinction gets made. The fact is that from a phenomenological standpoint human beings never encounter “mere things” in their everyday engagement. It is only when the equipment is worn out or broken that its thingliness obtrudes¹⁹. Otherwise, the thingliness of the tool is absorbed into its serviceability, its being ready-to-hand. The priority of form and intelligibility in our production and use of equipment encourages us to conceive of materiality separated from functionality as ‘mere matter’, but only after the thing has become worn out, used up, broken or just simply unavailable. The unavailability of the thing when it appears as divorced from form and function then encourages us to think of materiality as non-essential, passive, unintelligible, and non-presence.

When Heidegger first mentions van Gogh’s painting of the shoes he speaks as though he has selected this painting randomly, suggesting that while we do not need to consider actual examples of shoes to be able to describe them, nevertheless “a pictorial presentation suffices”²⁰.

¹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie, E. Robinson, Harper & Row, New York 1962, 102–107 (M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1972¹², 72–76).

²⁰ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 13.

However, Heidegger's discussion of equipment in the context of a work of art shows us that the work is doing something absolutely irreducible to the functionality or purposiveness of the equipment. Indeed, as we have indicated, for as long as equipment is functioning as equipment its materiality and made-ness disappears. "The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field. Only then do they become what they are. They are all the more genuinely so the less the peasant woman thinks of her shoes while she is working, or even looks at them, or is aware of them in any way at all. This is how the shoes actually serve"²¹.

The equipmental being of the shoes, then, is necessarily hidden while they are in use, as it must be in order for them to function seamlessly. Thus, in order to recognize their serviceability, their equipmental being and their utility must be suspended. So it would seem then that the shoes as equipment are not things in the form-matter sense, because their materiality disappears in the context of use. This interpretation of the thingliness of the thing, as the non-essential or 'pure passivity' gets reinforced through the serviceability of useful things that, by virtue of their being useful, seem to point to a form and order shaped by intelligible purposiveness. The danger then is that this matter-form structure comes to be taken as the self-evident constitution of *every* being and reinforces the subordination of 'mere' matter, of death, of darkness, and concealment to God's gift of intelligibility, light and life. However, Heidegger notices that in Western metaphysics the temptation to think that the matter-form structure constitutes *every* being "receives (...) particular encouragement from the fact that, on the basis of religious-biblical-faith, the totality of beings is represented, in advance, as something created"²². This onto-theological interpretation of things, even though it is based on an interpretation of faith by an "alien philosophy", Heidegger argues, can nevertheless remain in place once it has been established²³.

²¹ Ibid., 13–14.

²² Ibid., 11.

²³ Ibid.

To grasp the meaning of the artwork, we need to consider the power of art to suspend the usual modes of being. This will enable us to see the way in which the thing phenomenally exceeds the traditional determination of the thing – while simultaneously preserving something of the thingly. Again, the task here is to think the materiality in the artwork by setting aside the traditional notion of the thing since “to grasp this thingly element the traditional concepts of the thing are inadequate; for these themselves fail to grasp the essence of the thingly”²⁴.

3. ON EARTH AS THE NEW MEANING OF MATERIALITY

Heidegger’s discussion of van Gogh’s painting does not show us all that we need to see to follow his phenomenological explanation of the being of the artwork since we still do not grasp the character of the artwork’s own thingliness, which, as I have suggested, is connected to its materiality. It is in the context of the temple work that Heidegger introduces the notion of ‘earth’ as the new meaning of materiality, where materiality is re-thought apart from the duality of form and matter.

How does the art of the temple function so that through it we are able to see its thingliness or materiality? To make this clear Heidegger again contrasts the temple work with the tool. In the production of a piece of equipment, Heidegger notes that the materiality of the equipment is exhausted or used up. “It disappears into usefulness”²⁵. The hiddenness of the materiality of the tool is precisely what makes it suitable as a tool. On the other hand, the materiality of the artwork is distinguished from the being of equipmentality because the way the artwork works “does not let the material disappear, rather, it allows it to come forth for the very first time”²⁶. Thus, what distinguishes the materiality of the artwork is that it holds something in reserve. We will return to this phenomenon shortly.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The artwork viscerally calls out to us to consider its materiality. Most of us can likely recall times when we moved closer to a painting in order to see the thickness of the layers of oil paint, or reached out to caress the cool, smooth marble of a statue. Even in the case of religious artworks, statues or icons that perhaps are not meant to be touched are nevertheless capable of being touched. In a certain sense their calling out to be touched makes any prohibition from touching them more meaningful. Artworks are inherently touchable because art cannot be reduced to its meaning or form. The artwork is a particular, unique happening, not an idea capable of being simply and unambiguously reproduced or repeated. Thus, the work of art makes the singularity of its materiality conspicuous. This is another way of saying that the work's materiality or thingliness is not some abstract underlying substratum or *hypokeimenon*, but something that those who stand before it can touch.

The artwork shows us then, for the first time, the materiality that always already supports us in our everyday endeavors. Before we encountered the temple-work, the materiality of the masonry was taken for granted. There is something right about the usual way of interpreting the thing, since a silence pervades materiality. Nevertheless, the silence of the artwork's materiality is not the silence of 'dumb substance' just waiting to be imbued with form or intelligibility. The materiality of the temple work silently 'speaks' in its being juxtaposed with the intelligibility of the world. The materiality and density of the stone is not encountered as something distinct from the ways in which it is used, the ways in which it supports a community of people. An artwork works, at least partially, by "embodying and so selectively reinforcing an historical community's implicit sense of *what is and what matters*"²⁷. The towering temple standing there solidly in its place beside the Tyrrhenian Sea first revealed to the inhabitants of that community the violence of the approaching storm, the light of day, the invisibility of the air above them, and even the animals that lived in the midst of the temple community. As Heidegger argues, "Standing there,

²⁷ I.D. Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2011, 43.

the temple first gives to things their look, and to men their outlook on themselves”²⁸. The point is that the world is not a totality of objects but rather a referential structural whole and it is only by way of mutual reference that things show up as meaningful. Heidegger is arguing that an artwork achieves this setting up of world in a way that only a ‘work’ can. For example, our reliance on tools exhausts the materiality of the tool and when that tool breaks or ceases to be useful it points emphatically to its own exhaustion. We quickly search around to find another tool to replace it. On the other hand, when an artwork “breaks down” or ceases to function as a work it points to the disappearance of an entire context of significance. The ruined temple points to the withdrawal of an entire community, an entire world²⁹. We will return to this point since this is the sense of ruination that, as I have suggested, the artwork always risk. Now we must again turn to the new ontological meaning of materiality as ‘earth’. We had to take this detour through Heidegger’s understanding of the setting up of a world precisely because the ontological sense of materiality can only be seen in relation to a world’s being founded or set-up. As Heidegger writes, “[i]n setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth”³⁰.

It is within the artwork’s opening up of a context of significance, the setting up of a world in all its finitude, that human beings encounter the ‘earth’. Heidegger thinks the being of materiality as ‘earth’ – in connection with the ancient idea of *phusis*, the “coming forth and rising up in itself” that “lights up that on which man bases his dwelling”³¹. The steadfastness of the temple work lets us see the raging of the surf for the first time. There is something trustworthy about the materiality

²⁸ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 21.

²⁹ Cf. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op. cit., 228–235. The power of the artwork to disrupt our usual way of taking things for granted is different from the interpretive suspension that *Angst* can achieve. In the case of *Angst*, its suspension of everyday meaning temporarily strips me of my relatedness to my entire world. In the case of the ruined work of art we see the disintegration of the world of a particular community but not the disintegration of the entire context of significance.

³⁰ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

of the work, an earthiness that is at once inseparable from the world that the work opens and yet that remains irreducible to that world. Heidegger writes: “To provide an authoritative and deep interpretation of the thingliness of the thing we must turn to the belonging of the thing to earth. The essential nature of earth, of the unmasterable and self-closing bearer, reveals itself, however, only in its rising up into a world, in the opposition between world and earth. This strife (*Streit*) is fixed in place within the work’s figure and becomes manifest through this figure. What is true of equipment, that we experience its equipmentality proper only through the work is true, also, of the thingliness of the thing. That we never know of the thingliness of the thing directly, and if we know it at all do so only in an indefinite kind of way – in other words (...) we need the work”³².

The artwork then not only makes the particular happening of a world perspicuous but it covertly points to its own thingliness or materiality. We encounter the earth in the work in an “indefinite kind of way”. As Heidegger points out it is this very “self-refusal of the mere thing, this self-contained refusal to be pushed around [and used up, that] belongs precisely to the essential nature of the thing”³³. The ontological sense of this materiality is brought out in Heidegger’s description of the temple as resting on “rocky ground” and that the ground or foundation of the artwork’s world, is “dark” and “unstructured”³⁴. The determinacy of the world lies in stark contrast to the indeterminacy of its ‘earthy’, material, foundation, so it seems right to say that thought meets its “greatest resistance” in trying to think the thingliness of the thing³⁵. Consequently, we are not surprised to find that early in *The Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger describes the sense of the self-refusal of materiality as the “disconcerting and uncommunicative element in the essence of the thing”³⁶. When the materiality of the work is not reduced

³² Ibid., 43.

³³ Ibid., 12.

³⁴ Ibid., 21.

³⁵ Ibid., 12.

³⁶ Ibid.

to dumb substance the sense of its self-refusal, its self-concealing, is brought to light. This is the moment of truth in the artwork, it allows the materiality of the world to show itself in its very concealment³⁷.

4. ON CREATEDNESS

To understand the way in which the artwork works requires that we also consider the phenomenological significance of the artist's activity. I have been arguing that the artwork is particularly characterized by its capacity to foreground its materiality. Yet, another way in which the work gains this unusual perspective on its materiality is through its createdness. Just as with our attempt to think thingliness and materiality, the createdness of the artwork must be grasped in its non-metaphysical, non-onto-theological sense, that is, we must avoid thinking of it as something made in the manner of thing or a tool.

The createdness of the work brings to light another way in which the Greek temple is exemplary. It, more than the other works that Heidegger considers, obscures the specificity of its creator. In the case of van Gogh's painting we find that our knowing this famous artist can get in the way of suspending our tendency to think of the painting as an aesthetic object. We might wonder who the shoes belonged to, what actual pair Van Gogh used as his model and assume that these and similar puzzles will give us insight into the work he created³⁸. In *The Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger pointedly tells the reader that the "innermost intention of the artist" is to release the work into its standing-in-itself³⁹. That the artist only succeeds, is only truly great, when the work *speaks for itself* seems intuitively clear, for if the audience

³⁷ Ibid., 24: "Earth is the coming-forth concealing (*Hervorkommend-Bergende*)".

³⁸ Here are two commentaries that focus on details of the particular art object in question, considering what van Gogh is actually depicting: Cf. M. Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society*, George Braziller, New York 1994, 146; J. Kockelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Art Works*, Nijhoff, Dordrecht 1985, 128. My argument is, in part, that these details are not relevant to the main concerns of the *Origin*.

³⁹ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 19.

needs to be told that they ought to admire the artwork simply because a famous artist created it, then the work is, in an important sense, not working. As a work the artwork is misunderstood when it is interpreted as the product of ordinary “practical activity”, that is, when the artwork is catalogued and commodified like any other item of trade. But not only this, for the artist must allow the work to stand-in-itself in the sense of not fully determining the meaning of the artwork. If the artwork was interpreted simply as the expression of the artist’s consciousness it could not set-up a world, since this would confine its meaning to the artist’s particular interpretation thereby strictly determining its sense. Rather, the world must be revealed both in its determinacy and its indeterminacy, that is, it must open itself into the tension or strife of earth and world. As Heidegger points out, the earth only shows itself in the work “when it remains undisclosed and unexplained”⁴⁰. This is the risk that the artist must take. While setting up a world the artist praises and consecrates what already is, and yet at the same time lets the work set-forth (*Herstellung*) something new, something indeterminate and yet to be decided⁴¹.

This is why Heidegger contends that the artist is inconsequential in relation to the work, but rather is, “like a passageway which, in the creative process, destroys itself for the sake of the coming forth of the work”⁴². Thus, the creator’s hiddenness enables the materiality and singularity of the artwork to come through the work. Again, the salient feature is not that an esteemed artist made the art object, but rather “that this work *is* rather than *is not*”⁴³. Heidegger writes, “The more essentially the work opens itself, the more luminous becomes the uniqueness of the fact that it is rather than is not”⁴⁴. The ancient temple is exemplary yet again because in its setting up of the world it allows the indeterminacy of the material to show itself precisely *as* indetermi-

⁴⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁴¹ Ibid., 23.

⁴² Ibid., 19.

⁴³ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 40.

nate. This interplay between earth and world, between the irreducible remainder of materiality and the determinacy of a particular historical horizon is the happening of truth in the artwork.

5. ON FINITUDE AND TRUTH

For Heidegger to claim that art is the happening of truth clearly does not mean that truth is the correspondence or adequation of an appearance to an idea. Recall that in order to liberate the artwork from aestheticism and its inherent subjective interpretation, Heidegger had to return to his challenge of the ancient metaphysical determination of being as the eternal and unchanging presence of the idea. Heidegger challenges the tradition in *The Origin of the Work of Art* by showing that an idea never emerges *except* in the happening, which is to say, that the idea itself is finite. The significance of the notion that art is the happening of truth is then faithfully conveyed in the following line: “The establishment of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being of a kind which never was before and never will be again”⁴⁵.

Heidegger’s revealing of truth as *aletheia*, as unconcealment, through the example of the Greek temple does not suggest that he is proposing a nostalgic reenactment of an ancient idea⁴⁶. Heidegger asks, “Does this require a revival of Greek philosophy?”; He answers, “Not at all. A revival, even were such an impossibility possible, would not help us”⁴⁷. The fact is that the world of the work (of the temple at Paestum, or even Bamberg cathedral) has “disintegrated”⁴⁸. The worlds of the work-being that so long ago set these artworks into place are historical and insofar as the time of these worlds have passed they are no longer “self-sufficient”. These artworks no longer “speak for themselves”, we

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁶ For an example of the charge that Heidegger’s use of the temple is nostalgic see A. Borgmann, *Focal Things and Practices*, in: *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition. An Anthology*, eds. R.C. Scharff, V. Dusek, Blackwell, Oxford 2003, 293–314.

⁴⁷ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

must visit them in tour groups, pour over historical pamphlets or wear headsets that spout historical facts at us, all with the aim to “revive” these works for us for a brief time. Despite such efforts these works stand there now recalcitrant as object-beings rather than as works of art. And yet, even this does not go far enough. It is not just that these works of art are old and so belong to a particular historical moment.

The impossibility of revival stems from the being of the artwork as absolutely singular, as Heidegger says, a being which “never was before and never will be again”. We suppose that we have access to the original formulation of the idea when we read Sophocles’ *Antigone*, but even that artwork has been “torn out of its own essential place”⁴⁹. The “once only” character of truth as *aletheia* happens in the artwork precisely because it is a particular material being and therefore is not reducible to an idea or universal. Any claims to truth that a historical community is able to make happen within the horizon of that particular world. Truth is not transcendent to that happening, but conditioned by that very happening. Thus, historical “regimes of truth” or paradigms are not about the adequation of truth to a timeless idea, but rather truth must *be* as inscribing itself into the midst of the finite opening that it itself opens up. This means that any truth, any idea, happens as an enactment. Through the artwork’s speaking of an implicit and already-underway sense of ‘what is and what matters’ it both inscribes and simultaneously transforms that very sense of ‘what is and what matters’. Again Heidegger’s example of the temple enables us to see the finite character of truth as *aletheia*. Heidegger has us imagine the sculpture of the god that the victor of the athletic games erects in the temple. Clearly this artwork is not a representation or a portrait. The victor does not need to remember what the god looks like; rather, the work “allows the god himself to presence and is, therefore the god himself”⁵⁰. The gods can only be presencing to a particular historical community if the artwork happens as *enacting* the presence of the gods. The truth of the artwork, and in this case, the truth of the gods, only *is* as finite. The

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 21–22.

god's presence is necessarily threatened and so in a very real sense the truth of the gods must be incarnate.

The impossibility of the revival of the world of the artwork is tied to the idea that the incarnation of *truth is only repeatable as new*. And this means that with each repetition, within each appropriation of meaning, within each interpretive decision, there is the risk of loss. Heidegger writes: "To the open belongs a world and the earth. But world is not simply the open which corresponds to the clearing, earth is not simply the closed that corresponds to concealment. World, rather, is the clearing of the paths of essential directives with which every decision complies. Every decision, however, is grounded in something that cannot be mastered, something concealed, something disconcerting"⁵¹.

With his thinking of the finitude of the truth of the artwork Heidegger is pointing to the impossibility of a "pure truth" that is absolutely repeatable insofar as it is grounded in the eternal.

Thus, naming truth unconcealment does not mean that truth is an idea, a "pure unconcealment that has rid itself of everything concealed" but neither does it mean that everything is false, rather the artwork is able to enact the unconcealment of truth precisely because it does not, as a happening, rise above its historical contingency⁵². The happening of truth is menaced by its own historical specificity and situatedness in a determinate "this, here, now". Heidegger underscores the futility of attempts to secure artworks from their essential finitude. He reminds us that the Aegina sculptures, relocated to Munich, were not preserved by virtue of their being secured from the physical destruction of the elements, precisely because the ruination of the artwork is an essential characteristic of its happening rather than something that befalls it from the outside.

If the artwork is a creation of a human community then the finitude of the artwork is ultimately traceable to the finitude of *Dasein*. The creator and, as we will soon see, the preservers of the artwork find themselves in the being of the truth that presences there. The death that

⁵¹ Ibid., 31.

⁵² Ibid.

Dasein is, as finite, presences through the artwork, not just in the sense that the different perspectives necessarily occlude others but also in the very real sense of death, of the disappearance of a unique and utterly singular “this, here, now”⁵³. Heidegger subtly reminds the reader of this, noting that the peasant woman shivers at “the surrounding menace of death”⁵⁴. Notably, in his 1927 lecture course Heidegger quotes a lengthy passage from Rilke’s only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*⁵⁵. Rilke’s description is evocative, capturing the world that a young man from Prague finds himself confronted with in fin-de-siècle Paris and while it is also provocative that the passage quoted is the description of a *ruin* of an apartment house what is important for us here are the last lines of the passage that Heidegger quotes: “but I’ll take an oath that I began to run as soon as I recognized the wall. For that’s what’s terrible – that I recognized it. I recognize all of it here, and that’s why it goes right into me: it’s at home in me”⁵⁶. We see through this literary work then that the ruination that belongs to the essence of the artwork is the very ruin that claims for itself a home in the artist. The final stanza of Pablo Neruda’s poem *Ode to Things* captures this thought and also manifests a rich sense of the thingliness of the thing:

*O irrevocable/river/of things:/no one can say/that I loved/ only/
fish,/or the plants of the jungle and the field,/that I loved/only/those
things that leap and climb, desire, and survive./It’s not true:/many
things conspired/to tell me the whole story./Not only did they touch
me,/or my hand touched them:/they were/so close/that they were
a part/of my being,/they were so alive with me/that they lived half my*

⁵³ Ibid. The ontological sense of death, the finitude that *Dasein is* as existing, is not to be confused with biological death and yet the sense of the former is in no way independent of the fact of the latter. The logic in *The Origin of the Work of Art* then echoes the logic of the analysis of death in *Being and Time*. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op. cit., 279–311.

⁵⁴ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 14.

⁵⁵ M. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, transl. A. Hofstadter, Indiana UP, Indianapolis 1988.

⁵⁶ M. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, op. cit., 173.

*life/and will die half my death.*⁵⁷

Like van Gogh's painting, this poem makes out of ordinary objects extraordinary works. In lifting 'tool-things' out of the equipmental-ity in which they usually disappear, Neruda suspends our usual interpretation, showing us their createdness and their self sufficiency, and through this, simultaneously points to their finitude.

6. ON RUINATION AND PRESERVATION

I began this essay by noticing that at the end of *The Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger admits that his essay could not answer the question "what is art?" However, at this moment in the addendum Heidegger asks us to return to the essay with some directions for our questioning. To be precise, he gives us "two important hints", but these hints are also important ambiguities⁵⁸. The first ambiguity that Heidegger asks us to reflect on is the thought that truth is both the subject and object of art. The being of truth is the *subject* insofar as the truth of the interplay between concealment and unconcealment, between earth and world, sets itself into the artwork. This is of course the very ambiguity that we have been discussing over the last several pages. The second ambiguity emerges out of the thought that truth happens in the world as an *object* precisely because it is *Dasein* who sets truth into the artwork. The ambiguity that Heidegger is concerned with here is then the ambiguity between creation and preservation. This is another way of highlighting the ambiguity of the origin of the work of art and the question about the origin of the artwork is fundamentally a question about responsibility. If the artwork is a happening of truth as *aletheia*, then whose responsibility is it to keep this truth alive?

⁵⁷ P. Neruda, *Odes to Common Things*, Bulfinch Press, Boston 1994, 11–17.

⁵⁸ M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op. cit., 55.

If we were to think of the work as an aesthetic product of an artist we would likely surmise that it is solely the responsibility of the artist to set truth into the work. However, since the artwork is a finite happening, as we have been arguing, then we rather think that it is the responsibility of a community of creators and preservers to set truth to work in art.

We have already spoken about the way in which the creator of the artwork does not simply copy an original. The work is not a depiction of something already there; for instance, as we discussed previously, the sculpture is not a representation of the god. Art, insofar as it is a happening of truth, does not have a relation to an absolute origin or an original. Even the cave paintings at Lascaux are not depictions of the world, but rather they were happenings, the setting up of a world, the setting up of a certain interpretation of the world. Think, for instance, about what it meant for them to be human beings, what an animal essentially was for them, as food or perhaps as the presencing of a divinity. To say these are *depictions* of the cave dweller's world would be to completely misunderstand the works. And, yet, the cave drawings are not merely free spontaneous creations divorced from their particular place and time.

The setting up of a meaningful totality of significance as finite means that the worldly horizon is not closed, but rather in the setting-up a world risks itself by opening itself up to a genuine future. A genuine future, then, is one that falls outside of the horizon of intelligibility that characterizes a world in its historical present. Not wholly unlike Heidegger's description of anxiety in *Being and Time*, the artwork gives Dasein the possibility of being in touch with the beyond of the limit, beyond the worldly horizon precisely as what cannot be made actual, determinate, or *mine*, which is why the happening of truth must resolve to keep repeating itself⁵⁹. Modern subjectivism was mistaken to identify creation as "the product of the genius of the self-sovereign

⁵⁹ The relationship between the suspension of everyday interpretation that *Angst* is and the suspension that the artwork affects will need to be left aside in this article.

subject”⁶⁰. In this modern metaphysics genius is taken to be the imposition of mastery, of form on matter, which, for the many reasons we have discussed, cannot account for the way in which an artwork is able to work.

We should recall that Heidegger locates the genius of the artwork in the activity of its “speaking for itself” rather than in the artist’s ability to express his or her ideas or feelings. Heidegger even suggests that an artwork achieves greatness only when, through its solitude, it “seems to sever ties to human beings”⁶¹. But the happening of truth in the artwork only *seems* to sever ties to humans because humans for the most part have determinate interpretations, because they are singular and unique, and tied to a particular worldly situation. However, when Dasein is exposed to its ownmost finitude, Dasein is open to ‘the beyond’ of its particular worldly horizon, what Heidegger in *The Origin* calls ‘earth’. The artwork can only speak for itself *through the finitude* of the artist. Recall how Heidegger describes the artist as “a passageway which, in the creative process, destroys itself for the sake of the coming forth of the work”⁶². The singularity of the artist is then sacrificed for the happening that importantly includes a relation to the ‘earth’ – to the unknown. This openness is also a kind of solitude for the artist since to be open is to be open to the future *as* unknown, to the inexpressible, and thus to all that is radically *other* from the artist’s identity. The power of the artwork is that this future can be intimated in its revealing of ‘earth’, and it is this intimation that *secretly* brings the finitude of the artist and the artwork together. The severing of ties to the human, then, only *seemed* to be so.

However in order for the artwork to set up a world it must be more than just a secret between the artist and the artwork. If the artwork has no audience it has no world to set up. Thus, Heidegger insists that “just as a work cannot be without being created, just as it stands in essential need of creators, so what is created cannot come into being

⁶⁰ Ibid., 48.

⁶¹ Ibid., 40.

⁶² Ibid., 19.

without preservers”⁶³. Even in the case of an artwork having to wait for preservers, an artwork “always remains tied to preservers even, and precisely, when it only waits for preservers and only solicits and awaits their entry into its truth”⁶⁴.

This brings us to what we might call the difference between *aletheic preservation* and empty preservation. Aletheic preservation understands that artworks are not ‘mere things’ that simply need to be preserved by keeping them safe from the elements, or reproducing them in a mechanical fashion. The key to thinking this difference involves employing the logic that we have discussed above, which is the peculiar logic of the relation between a particular being and the horizon in which that being can manifest itself. If the artwork is not an eternal idea but rather the *happening* of an idea in a finite singularity, then the artwork’s ideality depends on repeatability – but this, as we have already noticed, always involves a loss. A preserver who is not also a creator merely repeats the idea. And yet, in order to preserve the idea as a *happening* of truth, every repetition must reach into the future – truth needs to be renewed. Any enactment, as historical, is not the same as the one that came before. Thus, preservation in the aletheic sense is keeping something alive, allowing it to continue existing as a happening, which means that aletheic preservation must necessarily risk that loss. Aletheic preservation relies on a kind of repetition that necessarily involves difference, while empty preservation is a repetition that attempts to make an idea present eternally without loss, without the possibility of ruination – which is to say, an empty preservation merely replicates. An empty preservation produces an artwork that has no secrets.

Heidegger mentions several examples of empty preservation in the essay. He mentions paintings and sculptures that are housed in museums in order to keep them protected from physical destruction, and the scientific techniques that are used to preserve and restore artworks to their “original” state. However, as Heidegger has made clear, artworks

⁶³ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 41.

cannot be reduced to “mere things”, they are not static objects and so this type of preservation will not fully preserve them. Heidegger writes: “As soon as the thrust into the extra-ordinary (*Un-geheure*) is captured by familiarity and connoisseurship, the art business has already begun to take over the works. Even the careful handing down of works to posterity and the scientific attempt to recover them no longer reach to their work-being itself, but only to a memory of it”⁶⁵.

Preservation, as a response to the event of the artwork, involves allowing ourselves to see the extra-ordinary way in which truth *must* be enacted; and each of those whom Heidegger calls “preservers” find themselves peculiarly responsible for this enactment, appropriated by the event of truth in the artwork. Thus, since the artwork only lives on insofar as it is born by, and renewed by, the responses of these preservers, the preservers are, in a sense, at the same time also creators. The finitude of the artwork is, as we have argued, its essential exposure to ruination. Truth or meaning shines forth only through contingent events, events marking the inauguration of worlds insofar as they call to be ceaselessly repeated and renewed. Clearly, the possibility of exhaustion and emptiness belongs to the artwork essentially. But the inverse side of this is that the artwork exists as a call to a community of creators and preservers to sustain it, and to let it live on in its precarious transcendence.

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⁶⁵ Ibid., 42.

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