

## Artwork Beyond Boundaries: Heidegger & Experimental Forms of Art

### Daniel Mehus

#### Introduction

In *Origin of the Work of Art*, German thinker Martin Heidegger turns the idea of art on its head in order to explore if and how truth (defined by him as *aletheia*/unconcealment) is revealed through great works of art. Examples of great art that Heidegger deploys are one of Van Gogh's paintings titled *Peasant Shoes* and a Greek temple. Through these works of art, he maps out how and why truth is revealed through a work of art.

Heidegger was certainly not the first to explore and challenge conceptions of art as well as art itself. *Origin of the Work of Art* was written between the years of 1935 and 1937, and in the eighty plus years that have passed since then, art and artwork have expanded to new domains both in their inspiration and execution. Art is no longer limited to the framed painting, photograph, or sculpture; more recent forms of art such as interactive art, conceptual art, participatory art, and land art (or earthwork) lie on the periphery of what is considered to be art for most, let alone "good" art. It is unclear how expansive Heidegger's view of what constitutes great art is. For this reason, I would like to look at what will be called *experimental* art through a Heideggerian lens.

We now encounter perhaps the most important question of this paper- how do ? To answer this question, I will first provide a brief account of Heidegger's writing concerning artwork. In this account, I will retrace some of the steps Heidegger takes in *Origin of the Work of Art* by discussing the concepts of work, earth, and world. Once this has been done, I will introduce art forms that are on the periphery of mainstream conceptions of art, namely

earthwork, interactive art, conceptual art, and participatory art. Through exploring these fringe art forms, Heidegger's conception of artwork will be pushed to its limits.

### **Framing the Question**

To understand what art is to Heidegger, it is necessary to make clear what art is not. It should be noted that in *Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger is only concerned with great art. One scholar described Heidegger's idea of great art to be that which, "changes one's way of viewing the world and of finding one's way about in it" (HVSI, 122).

Heidegger also is opposed to views of art which are dominated by aesthetics, stating, "The way in which aesthetics views the artwork from the outset is dominated by the traditional interpretation of all beings" [PLT, 38]. Given Heidegger's striving in other projects such as *Being and Time* to present a new interpretation of beings (a new fundamental ontology), it naturally follows that he would desire to break from this perspective. This rejection of aesthetics is twofold, and in it Heidegger challenges the idea that 1. art is only concerned with beauty and 2. a work of art is a thing with subjective aesthetic values asserted onto it (HVSI, 116).

With this break from aesthetics, Heidegger wishes to view artworks as more than simply objects. Heidegger acknowledges that a work of art is an object. To him, the hanging painting is like a rifle or hat, earthwork is like a park bench, slam poetry like the PA system as one boards the train. This highlights the object-being of an artwork, but not the work-being of the artwork. Heidegger is interested in the work-being of artwork specifically. In efforts to preserve, make intelligible, and restore art, there is a risk of only treating a work of art as an object-being which does not have a propensity to let truth shine forth in its being. Communities around art may lose

sight of the work-being of art and only perceive as an object. He expresses this concern when he says, “The whole art industry, even if carried to the extreme and exercised in every way for the sake of work themselves, extends only to the object-being of the works. But this does not constitute their work-being” [PLT, 40].

### **Works and Works of Art**

With art now located in our realm of thinking, it is now possible to discuss what a work of art is in Heideggerian terms. Heidegger states that, “In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made” [PLT, 19]. There is a two-fold occurrence in a great work of art- the setting up of a world and the setting forth of the earth. What is meant by world and earth will be discussed later in the paper. The interaction between world and earth is called strife. This strife, however, is better viewed as a dialectical relationship in which one component is meaningless without the other and they both thrive in their electric and opposing movements. But why bring up world, earth, and strife at all? Put simply by Heidegger, “Art is truth setting itself to work” [PLT, 38]. Truth is uncovered through the work, and this truth makes itself known through the strife of earth and world. Truth, to Heidegger, is the illumination of the Being of beings [PLT, 38]. Each work of art will shed light on truth, or a being’s Being differently.

To recapitulate, a work of art necessarily has interactions of earth and world, which create the necessary conditions for a truth about Being to be revealed. While it is a worthy enterprise to see what Heidegger precisely means by truth and Being, this paper will only be concerned with the concepts as they relate to various artwork and art forms.

## Peasant Shoes

To flesh out Heidegger's thinking, we will turn to the painting he himself mentions in discussing a work of art. Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes* is a prime example of a work in which truth happens. But what does it mean for truth to *happen*? *Peasant Shoes*, despite its name, does not merely represent a pair of shoes. According to Heidegger, something is *at work* in the work of art, and the essence of what a peasant shoe *is* becomes clear. Beyond the shoes' materiality, its location in a set of symbols, its cultural significance, something else begins to emerge. According to Heidegger, "Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being" [PLT, 35].

The beauty of Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes* lies in its ability to represent a whole new world outside of what is in the frame. Through colors, textures, placement, the spirit of the work is made known with all its intricacies. As mentioned before, artwork goes beyond representation and discloses the truth of being not for the viewer alone, but in itself. This truth of being, however, is only made intelligible through Dasein.

## The Greek Temple

Moving beyond works of art that are framed, Heidegger introduces the Greek temple. In explaining the artwork of the Greek temple, Heidegger says, "[T]he temple-work, in settings up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work's world" [PLT, 44-45]. Here, Heidegger moves beyond the mere materials and structure of the temple and focuses on what comes forth from the existence of the temple itself. In his words, "The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world

and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground” [PLT, 41]. What the temple is as a being related to Being is not known until truth shines forth through the work- this is what Heidegger means when discussing art.

## **World & Earth**

Michael Inwood describes the relationship between world and earth in an elegant and concise manner, saying, “World and earth are opposites in conflict. World strives for clarity and openness, while earth shelters and conceals, tending to draw world into itself. Each needs and sustains the other. The artworks straddles both contestants” [Inwood, 119].

By opening up a world, it is meant that something is brought out of the work that was previously not able to be seen. In Van Gogh’s *Peasant Shoes*, a life, perspective, and energy are elicited from the work that cannot be achieved merely by a conceptual or representational understanding of what a peasant shoe is. Heidegger himself conjures a beautiful vision of what can be drawn out from the painting itself, speaking of winds, furrows, and labor, and landscape. Worlds open possibilities previously unknown and inaccessible to viewers of art. To enter the world of the peasant or the temple-goer can occur by experiencing the art itself. Art does not imitate life, but life is an imitation of art. Heidegger himself says, “It is not a portrait whose purpose is to make it easier to realize how the god looks; rather, it is a work that lets the god himself be present and thus *is* the god himself” [PLT, 42]. Furthermore, world can not merely be reduced to what an artist intends, a viewer experiences, or an archivist preserves. Only art as art can explain how and what is opened and set up in a world through an artwork.

In describing earth, Heidegger's own terminology is not far from that of the people he admires most, the Greeks. In describing earth, he says, "The Greeks early called this emerging and rising in itself and in all things *physis*. It clears and illuminates, also, that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the *earth*" [PLT, 41]. Earth can be understood as the platform on which world unfolds. There is a mystery and unintelligibility in earth that is reminiscent of Heidegger's flavor of thinking. Earth resists knowing, but that does not mean that it does not want to be known in some sense. The concealed nature of earth is itself a positive aspect, and attempts to coldly dissect artworks or any natural phenomena in the name of understanding will only strip away aspects of the work or thing that cause wonder in the first place. To this point, Heidegger says, "Color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wavelengths, it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it" [PLT, 45].

## **Experimental Art**

Now that Heidegger's own thoughts have been charted out, I will present and discuss the art forms of interest. The works I am interested in will be called *experimental*. Loosely defined, this term merely serves to label art forms I will discuss that may defy common definitions of art and also break away from aesthetic notions of art. Again, it is worth noting, the styles of art discussed in this paper already at times align with Heidegger in their challenging of aesthetic norms of art. Another point needs to be made: Heidegger is not interested in what creator and viewer do in the presence of a painting. The upshot of his investigation of the origin of the work of art is to see how the truth of being's being comes to light in works and things, or in other

words, Heidegger is continuing his work on presenting a new fundamental ontology. The discussion of experimental art forms in this paper will be concerned with creator and viewer as well as how it relates to Heidegger's fundamental ontology.

The setting up and setting forth of worlds as Heidegger speaks of it seems to occur with a different type of intentionality in experimental arts as opposed to a portrait or landscape painting. While art as Heidegger discusses it opens up the gates of a world in which the preserver or viewer can enter, more recent art seems to have a valence and intentionality that not only opens up gates to a world, but leads its preserver by the hand and then pushes it inside the perimeter of the world. While all great works of art open and set up worlds, set forth earth, and disclose truths, it may be argued that experimental art does this in a way that is more difficult to account for or describe with a Heideggerian framework than other forms of art.

Another question arises: is it possible that these fringe forms of art engage in world opening and earth setting forth in a different manner than what Heidegger originally conceived of? It could be argued that Heidegger's definition of artwork is already so expansive (think of the inclusion of the Greek temple) that any work which is even defined or conceived of as art would easily fall into it. Perhaps then, it is necessary to refine the question: how do the artforms discussed open worlds and set forth nature in a unique way that Heidegger may not have originally conceived of when writing *Origin of the Work of Art*?

One example that one can turn to is abstract art. At first it is difficult to conceive of any type of world that is opened up through works which are seemingly incomprehensible, but worlds need not have their meaning written on their sleeve. Abstract art opens up a world of playfulness and defiance of norms that was previously unintelligible and unrecognized in other

works of art which often aimed at conveyance and aesthetic pleasure. In regards to the setting forth of the earth, abstract art illuminates but simultaneously complicates and conceals conceptions of what art is and is not. This double concealing of earth not only puts into question the truth of a being's being, but also puts into question what does and does not constitute a being that could have a truth doubly concealed at all. To state this differently, abstract art not only sheds light on a being's being, but uncovers beings that a viewer of the art didn't even know existed. In these experimental and fringe forms of art, uncharted territory is uncovered where Heideggerian operations of truth opening were not known to be possible.

## **Earthwork**

The first type of experimental art that will be discussed is land art, or earthwork. Put simply, earthwork is artwork which is distinguished by its use of earthly materials (such as soil, water, rocks, vegetation) and its construction/placement in a natural environment. Intentionally or otherwise, earthwork pushes the boundaries of how and where art can be located in the world.

In earthwork, the materials used escape their indifference and become part of a whole that opens up a world previously not possible, or at least not accessible, in the configuration prior to the artwork being formed. In earthwork, one potential challenge is transcending or escaping the cultural symbols and associations of organic materials. Ironically, not all earthwork may aim toward the "natural." With the view of earth as *physis* rather than nature, limitations placed on earthwork may be able to be lifted.

Perhaps the most notable piece of earthwork to date is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, a 1,500 ft long and 15 ft wide spiral which extends into the great salt lake in Utah. This mammoth



piece can be exposed or hidden depending on the water levels of the lake it is placed in. There is no denying that *Spiral Jetty* is a work of art, but its representational and aesthetic meaning do not appear to be as obvious when compared to works such as da Vinci's *Last Supper*, which is supersaturated with cultural significance and intelligible subject matter. This is precisely why representational understandings of art are limited.

It is now well established that a world is opened up in a work of art. In earthwork, a world may be radically different than what is typically conceived in with the word *world*. A world does not always have to be a *people's* world. Perhaps world can be understood as a re-framing of the Real (with the word *framing* being coincidental to the Heideggerian notion of framing, or *gestell*). Heidegger is often seen as a post-humanist or post-human thinker.

The examples of artwork that Heidegger provides, Van Gogh's peasant shoes and the Greek temple, seem to be examples that are almost too good at making his point. The earthiness in a pair of shoes is not only intuitive but essential for a proper understanding of what a shoe is or does at all. Likewise, the Greek temple, with its columns and portico carefully crafted from stone millenia old, make perfect sense when crafting an argument for earth as a component of art.

## **Conceptual Art**

Conceptual art can be loosely defined as art in which the concept that inspired the piece is the primary focus as opposed to corporeal or "artistic" aspects. This art form is unique in pushing the boundaries between language and reality and was created within a movement that pushed back on the formalism and commercialism of art and art culture. Challenges against monetization

of art and emphasis of object-being over work-being seem to have motivated artists to create works that were invisible, intangible, or impossible to display in a typical gallery setting.

One work that comes to mind is Mark James' *Sorcery*, which is composed of invisible orbs installed in various locations, from the north pole of Saturn to inside prestigious art museums (without their knowledge or permission until James made the claim) [mirror.co.uk]. The beauty of this art does not exclusively lie in the invisible, 12mm orbs themselves, but rather in the idea of placing them at all, let alone in their unexpected and strange locations. Another example is a work by artist Stanley Brouwn, who declared that every shoe shop in Amsterdam was an exhibit of his own work [artistsbook.com]. Not all conceptual art need be invisible, however. One of the forerunners of the conceptual art movement was Marcel Duchamp. In his 1917 work, *Fountain*, something comes to life that could not have been possible merely by the porcelain of the urinal itself; beyond even the act of placing the urinal in an exhibit, the work defies or rather goes beyond its placement. In world, *Fountain* discloses a polemic against the bourgeois, normative valuing of matter, and the art culture in general. A type of subversion takes place in which the class of a porcelain fountain is undercut by the cultural meanings imbued on the artifact it is made from- a urinal. In the setting forth of earth, we see the...

Conceptual art is both strange and captivating due to the fact that it explores and challenges the relationship between language and the Real. Can one speak a work of art into existence? If so, what are the implications for Heidegger's conception of a work of art. The movements of concealment and unconcealment in earth may be seen, but the groundedness or phusis of earth do not seem to map on quite as neatly conceptual art. In works such as *Peasant Shoes* and the Greek temple, one can see the earth (referring to dirt and soil), grass, stone, and

rock physically or representationally. An explanation of earth for many pieces of conceptual art is yet to be seen.

## **Interactive Art**

Interactive art is defined by having any type of change in the work itself occur as a result of the viewer engaging with it. Interaction with a work of this kind can be physical or non-physical. Art of this kind not only attempts to challenge creator and viewer dichotomies, but also allows any viewer, and oftentimes invites them, to engage in an activity which enhances or changes the way in which the art is understood or experienced. It is possible to engage with a static piece of art from multiple perspectives and have an enriching experience. In interactive art, however, the piece itself literally changes as the viewer experiences it, adding a dynamic quality that may have previously been unattainable under more conventional modes of art. But what exactly qualifies as interactive art, and how can the operative word, *interactive*, be interrogated? The Greek temple is art in Heideggerian terms, and while the temple as an architectural feat does not move, one may consider it inherently interactive solely by virtue of the various activities that can take place in it. The temple is a place of celebration and worship, but also of desperation, mourning, and contemplation. And in this case, the Greek temple may simply be a static yet multifaceted work. Structural and/or significant qualitative changes and occurrences intended by a creator seem to be lacking here.

Interactive art has a unique way of engaging in the setting up and opening of a world. Interactive art implies someone is doing the interacting which is anticipated by the art. In this sense, a world that is formed by an interactive artwork can easily be considered a people's world.

Interactive works, like other experimental works, may be jarring and encourage a break from the everydayness that seems to be the baseline of experience. The thinking, feeling, and being outside of everydayness is encouraged by Heidegger, seeing as he pushes for emphasis on work-being of an artwork as opposed to the shadow cast by the object-being of a work. When thinking of world, another question emerges: does interactive art change or add a dynamic nature to the world that is opened up? This is unclear, but it seems unlikely that anything more than a singular world is opened up by a work of art. It is worth mentioning that interactive artwork is not only possible but more easily facilitated thanks to advances in technology, which make analyses of world and earth more complex.

### **Participatory Art**

Another form of experimental art that pushes Heidegger's thoughts is *participatory art*. The participatory nature of many forms of art may have been outside of Heidegger's conception of art itself, or at least in regards to what he considers good art. It should be noted that not all works of art are participatory, and conversely, not all participatory activities are works of art. With Heidegger's lack of concern for creators and viewers of art, participatory art in which an individual can be creator and viewer may prove challenging to accommodate for.

In participatory art, the world opened up by the artwork can be multi-modal. Sensory experiences as well as kinetic ones semiological ones may come to light in the participant's acts of or in relation to the artwork. Depending on how liberally the definition of participatory art is applied, even marches and acts of protest may be considered participatory art. Again, it is worth

noting that not all participatory acts are considered works of art, but drawing definite demarcations between participatory acts and participatory art may not be possible.

## **Performance Art**

As mentioned before, performance art blurs the lines between artist and artwork. Heidegger writes that in great art the artist is merely a pathway destroyed upon the creation of art. In the artists becoming the artwork, the artist must be transformed; in becoming part of the piece of the piece itself, every other aspect of the artist that is not part of the artwork itself will be obliterated until that artwork ceases to exist or continue being performed. The death of the artist is doubly so in this case because 1. once the artwork emerges from the artist they no longer have control over it, and 2. the artist ceases to be a person and merely becomes a vessel of vehicle for the truth of the artwork to shine forth. One may view the phenomenon of artist transforming into artwork as *ekstasis*, or being *ek-sistent*, in Heideggerian terms. In relinquishing the self, the artist ek-sists outside of themselves.

In Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, an exhibit in which Abramović stood still and viewers could interact with her using various objects, the opening of world appears to be obvious, but the setting forth of earth less so, for one of the primary materials is the artists own body. The artist's own body does have earthly qualities which are unique to each piece, but one wonders if this is simply too different from Heideggerian nostalgia of carvings made in wood, buildings made in stone, and music made in sound. Heidegger makes it clear that art itself grounds both the artist and the work of art. Performative art such as Abramović's seems to blur the lines between artists and work of art, but the unconcealment of truth through art still operates in the same way.

## Challenges, Limitations

Heidegger's notion of world leaves many questions open. It is unclear whether or not the world opened up remains after a person experiences an artwork. This may be a possibility since Heidegger emphasizes the necessity of a human presence to shine light on what is so that a being's being may be seen if approached correctly. Furthermore, Heidegger's idea of world seems to be contingent on a pre-existing understanding of the human's world and everydayness. Heidegger does privilege humans and Dasein over plants, animals, and rocks, but world as understood through everydayness can vary radically. It is possible that the essential component of world lies in the breaking away from everydayness of individuals in their speculating and experiencing of new worlds.

Most are familiar with the experiencing of a great piece of art; one feels as if their whole life has been shifted as a result of being in its presence, and the realm of understanding for the person changes in order to accommodate for this. This feeling, however, is often fleeting, like a flash in a pan, as the person continues on in their everydayness. The opening and setting up of a world does occur, but its lasting power has yet to be fully understood.

Could it be the case that some experimental artwork and art forms do not translate into Heideggerian terminology well because they do not disclose truth in the way Heidegger is intent on explaining? Perhaps this is the case, but it is more likely the case that an artwork would/could not disclose truth or shine light on the Being of beings because it was not formulated or cultivated in world or earth. The strife or rift that sets the stage for truth disclosure may not be formed because the art, artist, or work of art is underdeveloped and not yet ready. Regardless of these concerns, it is worth exploring these questions in depth in the future.

## Conclusion

Heidegger's thoughts and ideas from *Origin of the Work of Art* have been applied to forms of experimental art, thus providing new insights into how these forms may be understood. Notions of truth, world, and earth speak to experimental art in ways that classic aesthetic and representational ideas of art cannot. Furthermore, analyzing various works of experimental art has demonstrated the some strengths and weaknesses of Heidegger's concepts of world and earth, namely how earth becomes increasingly difficult to account for when dealing with non-physical or unorthodox materials and how world may possibly be conceived of outside of personhood. The tripartite division of art, artist, and artwork has also become blurred in the evaluating of interactive, participatory, and performance art. In analyzing Heidegger's conception of artwork along with that of others, we have gained an enriched perspective on what makes great art impactful and how art shines light on beings and existence itself.

## References

Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

Michael Inwood. *Heidegger: A Very Short Introduction*.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/conceptual-art>

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/artists-claims-installed-invisible-orbs-12057245>

<http://artistsbooksandmultiples.blogspot.com/2012/03/stanley-brouwn.html>