

## SEAN KIRKLAND

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**ASAGE (Mike Gutierrez):** I'd like to make my way toward asking about the collaborative projects you've worked on involving the cover artist for this issue (ASAGE, 6.1), Peter Karklins. But, first, can I ask you for a general remark about the thinkers, and the traditions, that have shaped your approach to aesthetics and the philosophy of art?

**SEAN KIRKLAND:** In general, my thinking has taken up questions that would usually be understood as belonging to ontology, or metaphysics; and then, in addition, questions concerning human comportment in light of that conception of being (or what is required of us by how we understand being or beings). So, for me, the way to approach thinking about art and aesthetics is to ask how they relate to this fundamental philosophical project of posing the question of "what is." In this, I would turn to a very early articulation of the human condition in the Western tradition, I'm thinking here of Empedocles, who understands the human as essentially a *φουγάς* or an "exile," as dwelling in a place where one is not entirely welcome or not entirely intended to dwell, away from one's proper home. I think that conception of the human condition, if it is not reduced to the positing of some *other* world in light of which this world is seen as secondary or deficient; but if it instead marks our experience of being in a world that withholds itself from our understanding, that exceeds our capacity to know it, master it, control it, being in a world that seems to essentially resist us—that fundamental experience, I think, is what philosophy and poetry and art are responding to each in their own way. It seems to me that once you have that notion of human experience in place, then philosophy, poetry, and art become able to illuminate and supplement one another in the project of responding to this *exilic* condition. Philosophy and poetry seem to want to manipulate the subject, the human being, by generating extraordinary forms of discourse according to which we can let this strange alienating world—

**A:** —that is within our own world?

**SK:** Yes, that is within our own world. What I'm thinking about in terms of this conception of the human condition as one of exile (that Empedoclean notion) is that—although, for the most part, the world in which we carry out our ordinary, everyday lives is very familiar, almost stupefyingly familiar—there are moments where we feel and suffer the world's alienating character, its distance, its excess. Those are the moments that I think philosophy, and poetry, and art, are responding to. The insight that we have in those moments fuels the work of philosophy, poetry, and art.

So philosophy and poetry seem to want to manipulate the subject in the sense of manipulating the subject's discourse; making it into something extraordinary; altering it from everyday discourse so that this strange, alienating world can be brought to language in a new way. In this, either the aim is to overcome this condition of exile, or it is to simply make it more livable by clarifying that condition of exile as such without transcending it.

Art, I think, operates in the other way (I'm thinking about the plastic arts perhaps primarily, but not exclusively): art tries to manipulate the object in such a way that this strangeness, this distance, or excess, presents itself more dramatically and more clearly as such. That's what characterizes the work of art over, say, any ordinary object. The strangeness and excess that gives

us a feeling of being in exile is more manifest in the work of art than it is in a normal object like a table.

**A:** I find the approach of going back to the pre-Socratics and ancient philosophy to answer some of these questions to be fascinating, and potentially illuminating, in view of the fact that aesthetics always seems to have a sort of uncomfortable relationship with philosophy of art. You're never quite sure if they are the same thing, have the same task, or whether they are different. And it seems to me that going back to the ancients can help us understand the ground out of which both aesthetics and philosophy of art emerge.

**SK:** I agree with that. That's a very nice way to think about what the study of ancients—the ancients' thinking of beauty, of tragedy, of poetry—what that has to offer us today. If I were to name a figure that has given me access to art and aesthetics, I would name Nietzsche. And it's a peculiarity of Nietzsche's thought that when he takes up the three elements of the artistic situation—the artist who creates a work, the work of art, and the recipients or audience to whom the work of art appears—Nietzsche is interested almost exclusively in the artist, in the moment of creation and emergence out of which a work of art can arise. And he's not terribly interested, as most aesthetic theory and philosophy of art is, in the formal characteristics of the work, or in the characteristics of aesthetic judgment on the part of the subject (judgments of taste, etc.).

**A:** The spectator's assessment of the work of art at the end of the process...

**SK:** Exactly. Neither of those things really concern Nietzsche when he is thinking the essence of art. But when we talk about aesthetics we're often interested in aesthetic judgment, the nature of aesthetic judgment; what does that judgment look like when we're judging something as beautiful rather than useful or true; or we're interested in the formal characteristics of the work of art, what makes it beautiful, symmetry and so on.

But only Nietzsche, and perhaps the Romantics, focuses his philosophy of art on the creative genius and the moment of creation. So, for me, Nietzsche is important for thinking the philosophy of art precisely at the moment where he focuses our attention on the artist, especially if we emphasize here how his conception is different from the Romantic conception of this creative genius. Nietzsche sees at the source of artistic creation an individual personality invested with a kind of greatness, a kind of genius—but for him that personality (for him, "*Persönlichkeit*") isn't an individual subject with a peculiar set of characteristics that make that individual the solely authoritative and responsible source of a work of art. Instead, the artistic personality that is at the source, so to speak, of creation for Nietzsche is actually a kind of threshold, a membrane where the creating agent is contacted or even struck by the movement of emergence that is nature—which is what he describes in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the play of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. So this poetic genius, which he finds there, creates not on the basis of his or her own *individual* personality...

**A:** Right, you always hear artists of all types say, "The work came through me, I didn't make the work."

**SK:** Exactly. Artistic inspiration—I think Nietzsche is very focused on that feature of the experience of creating works of art. And what he's trying to uncover in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he tells us directly, is an *Artistenmetaphysik*, an artist's metaphysics. If you take that term seriously, what you realize is that he's trying to uncover in the creation of tragic poetry a certain ontological register that subtends it; a quite radical ontology whereby nature unfolds itself into the forms of

life with which we're familiar, the things that we can identify in our world—but nature does so *through* the human individual, making use as it were of the creative activity of the human individual and thereby unfolding itself into certain appearances, certain intelligible, Apollonian appearances. And on the other side, that's the human condition for Nietzsche: being a conduit for nature's unfolding. The artist is just a particularly dramatic form of the human; a particularly clear instance of what nature's doing with all of us all of the time: unfurling itself, emerging into intelligible appearances. And it uses our capacity to recognize, our ability to speak, our ability to universalize, in order to appear in those Apollonian forms from out of Dionysian disruption or chaos. So I think there's something interesting about *that* conception of art, which is very different from most philosophies of art, in its focus on the ontological condition to which the experience of artistic creation attests.

**A:** Parenthetical remark: a lot of overlap with the work we're doing here at the Collegium Phaenomenologicum?

**SK:** Definitely—that has occurred to me at a number of points this week in our text seminar here on Heidegger's *Feldweggespräche*: Heidegger's characterization of Being as requiring Dasein is very much—

**A:** —and the work that works through the artist as an unwilling willing...some parallels?

**SK:** I think so. Rather than expressing his or her individual subjective experience or feelings, the Nietzschean artist evacuates his or her individuality: Nietzsche talks about the “dissolution of the individual” at the moment in which the Dionysian poet, Archilochus, descends into this primal unity with nature, out of which nature emerges through him back into these beautifully explosive, sparkling forms that he creates in writing his poetry. And I think that evacuation of the self—that disindividuation—tries to think something like Heidegger's interpretation of a *Willen des Nicht-Willens* as a mode of waiting, holding one's self back or *Gelassenheit*, preparing for the appearance of something. Of course, Nietzsche remains in this text, as he remarks in the later preface, caught in Schopenhauerian metaphysical language, but what he's trying to think is that kind of opening, that letting something present itself. That's what I believe he's thinking in terms of the disindividuation that happens in truly artistic creation.

**A:** To inch a little closer to the Karklins piece, can you tell me a bit about the *Brute Neighbors* volume?

**SK:** Sure. That was a volume put together by the DePaul Humanities Center. It was edited by and organized by Liam Heneghan, who works in the Environmental Science and Studies department, and Chris Green, who was a fellow at the Humanities Center at the time and is a Chicago-based poet. They set out to put together a volume on the relationship between the city-space and nature, carried out at a number of different registers. So, in that volume there's everything from essays, to photography, to poetry, to drawings, all of which are simply trying to thematize the peculiar experience of nature from within the city. After I asked him to contribute to the Karklins nature drawings volume, as an environmental scientist and ethicist, Liam asked if he might include a few of Karklins's sketches and then asked if I could write something that specifically thematized the way in which nature presented itself in those drawings. That's the background of the project.

The piece I wrote for that volume was an attempt to find in Karklins's rendering of nature an alternative to the objectifying, oppositional way in which nature presents itself both to modern science and technology, but also, I think, even to environmental thinking when we fail to dig deeply enough into our implicated relationship with nature.

**A:** What I found interesting about the piece, in which you provide a brief sketch of the objectification of nature from Descartes to Freud, was the way in which you turn Freud on a swivel, so to speak: in one sense, he is one of the concluding chapters of modernity, and in another sense, there was this little tag-end of pre-objective nature that you were digging out of his thought as well. And I saw that as sort of an intimation of a way in which Freud could be used to perform this retrieval of pre-objective nature. In view of the old saying "You can't go home again," my question would be: since this retrieval would take Freud as a jumping off point (and I'm sure this could be done with other authors and thinkers), is this the predicament of this sort of retrieval, that we're always taking as a jumping off point some ledge of the modernist project?

**SK:** I think it's true that in order to think nature *otherwise* the only starting point we have is the way that nature is currently presenting itself to us in our ordinary, late modern experience of it—which is, I think, following Heidegger, a thoroughly technologized and objectified nature. A nature that appears as representable, intelligible, exhaustively knowable and masterable. And so if we're motivated to try to experience nature *otherwise*—and that comes from some sense of dissatisfaction with that common modern experience of nature, some vague feeling of unease in our normal experience of things—the only way that we can do so is through a *disruption* of this status quo appearing of nature. This can occur when we find moments in our inherited tradition of thinking nature (such as Freud's thinking of nature), which even as they participate in the objectification of nature nevertheless point beyond that objectification of nature to something that exceeds it. And I tend to find a lot of those moments in the originary phase of Western metaphysics with the Greeks, with the pre-Socratics, and also with Plato and Aristotle.

But I think there are moments like that throughout the tradition, where, as with Freud in that piece, there is an insight into—or maybe better: a record of—this nature that precedes and, in some way, subtends our usual mode of experiencing nature as an object, or sum of objects, presenting themselves to a subject. And that's that moment Freud recognizes, even as he dismisses it as a developmental failure if we remain there, in this primordial immersion in nature, a feeling of not being separated from nature, not being set over against it as a subject...

**A:** Yeah, your specific example [from the BN piece] was the infant, before he has his or her desire frustrated for the first time, has a very different relationship to nature than we have as adults.

**SK:** That's right, and it's something like that experience that we might bring ourselves to imaginatively so that we might try then to understand what kind of action is possible in that kind of relationship, what is required of us in that kind of relationship, what kind of responsibility do we have? It becomes very difficult to think of any of those standard ethical issues, of responsibility, of freedom, of taking action, of deciding to take action, if we are really placing ourselves in a de-subjectified, immersed, utterly immanent condition with respect to nature. What kind of action is possible, what kind of responsibility do we feel for something? All of those terms become almost incomprehensible once the subject/object relationship breaks down...

**A:** You can see how this sort of philosophy of agency [28:00] can decouple you from your responsibilities. For example, if I'm the subject, and I constitute my object, then, if I don't like

my responsibilities, I can just slot it out and slide in a new object that suits me better. So this alternative where it's not a subject opposed to an object... maybe you lose some of this agentive structure, but perhaps it ushers in other new possibilities for thinking?

**SK:** That was the hope in that piece. The idea was that, in particular works of art—and a particular series of drawings by Peter Karklins—those drawings seemed to me to have a quite extraordinary power to return us to that condition.

**A:** This is a good opportunity to ask more about your essay on Peter Karklins' drawings in the exhibition catalog. The title of that essay was "Nude Landscapes." I thought that was a great title—it immediately gives me a sense of what you're going after in terms of deconstituting nature as an object over against the subject. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

**SK:** I would want to begin with the first experience of Karklins's drawings, which was one of disorientation.

**A:** It's hard to find the center to these pieces because of the way they undermine the represented object that you're (typically) looking for, which you can always find the center of. These waves of flesh, these drippings [resist such targeting].

**SK:** That's exactly right. That initial feeling of disorientation I had, I started to reflect on it and realized that there was something potentially quite powerful, and maybe even beneficial, in that power to disorient that those drawings have. In part for the reasons you mention: on the one hand, they don't allow you to find a focal point. They tend to present you with a sort of strangely, disintegrating dynamic field of somewhat familiar, somewhat recognizable, somewhat distinguishable forms, but, at the same time, withholding that determination.

**A:** "Withholding," I think, is a very good word there because it's not as if he's avoiding representation. He's sort of running up to the cusp of it and holding back—withholding the completion of it to the viewer. Of course, there is a lot of art that is non-representation. These pieces are not non-representational in the standard sense.

**SK:** And I think there's a sense in which the works don't even allow you to determine whether you're looking in on a kind of movement of emergence into some organic form—it's full of body parts and somewhat identifiable organs, etc.—and is this the subtending, dynamic movement of emergence that will bring about a human form?

**A:** The "roiling and moiling" beneath the threshold layer, as you pointed out?

**SK:** Or is it the disintegration of human form? That movement is not even clear, which direction it's heading in. That's an important element too. Like you're saying, the holding itself between the presentation of a determinate, identifiable form and utter deformation, or lack of form: the way in which they very energetically inhabit that intermediate position is something that the viewer experiences quite powerfully. And it occurred to me after spending a lot of time looking at these things that their scale, as so diminutive in size, is partly complicit in the communication of that disturbance because you have to get so close to them to even begin to participate.

**A:** The act of attention, of focusing, which we're so used to bringing into view an object—you precisely don't get that in the picture.

**SK:** Right. No matter what kind concerted gaze you direct at it, it disrupts your desire to focus on some central feature, or form, and to identify that form. That fundamentally or essentially disruptive character, which I experienced in those drawings, was something I realized was potentially a really powerful and important—maybe even central—aspect of the work of art as such. If we're hoping to experience our world otherwise than as a collection of objects set over against a subject; if we're hoping to bring nature forth in a mode otherwise than as a collection of objects for our manipulation; then the work of art that upsets our tendency toward objectification can, in a way, train us to see differently, to experience the world differently. So that experience of the work of art can become paradigmatic for experiencing things in general, where now we can open ourselves to that process of emergence and disintegration according to which the world is always emerging forth and presenting itself to us, but which we usually can't attend to because it's eclipsed by the present objects it brings forth.

**Sean Kirkland**, Associate Professor at DePaul University. His primary interest is in ancient philosophy, but he also works in contemporary continental philosophy, specifically phenomenology. His monograph, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, appeared in 2012 with SUNY Press, and he is currently working on two other book-length projects. One, tentatively titled *Aristotle and the Ecstatic Present*, is near completion and undertakes a study of temporality (or the ontological structure of the present moment) as it appears in Aristotle's *Physics*, *De Anima*, *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Poetics*. The other, still at an early stage, is an interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy of history. He has co-edited two collections of essays. *The Returns of Antigone: Interdisciplinary Essays*, co-edited with Tina Chanter, will appear in November with SUNY Press. The other, co-edited with Eric Sanday, is entitled *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy* and is under review with Northwestern University Press. Sean's work has appeared in various collections, including "Heidegger and Greek Philosophy" in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger* with Bloomsbury Publishing (eds. E. Nelson and F. Raffoul) and "Speed and Tragedy in Cocteau and Sophocles" in *Interrogating Antigone* with Oxford University Press (eds. S. E. Wilmer and A. Zukauskaitė). And finally he has published in a number of journals including *Ancient Philosophy*, *Epoche*, *Research in Phenomenology*, *The Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, *Continental Philosophy Review*, the *Bochumer philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter*, and *The Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy*.