

The Dynamic Phenomenon of Art in Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art"

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an interpretation of Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" (hereinafter cited as "the OWA") that establishes the primacy of art as a dynamic phenomenon that provides the mode through which the Being of the world is revealed in its truth.¹ For readers unfamiliar with Heidegger's unusual methodology and usage of philosophic terminology, this sentence requires some preliminary unpacking. For this reason, I will first provide some definitional guidance about what Heidegger means by "art" and by "truth" in the OWA, although it is important to understand that for Heidegger, understanding involves not definition but "feeling one's way along."²

Second, I will discuss how art acts as the leading dynamic phenomenon as I critique the following two arguments: (1) John Bruin's argument that Heidegger considers Van Gogh's *Old Shoes* [link] painting to be merely high-quality rather than great art because it is representational;³ and (2) Abraham Mansbach's assertion that Heidegger's "turn" from *Being and Time* to the OWA involves a change in agency from the artist to the art work⁴ (rather than to the phenomenon of art).⁵ These two views will be evaluated and ultimately rejected because they do not adequately grasp that art is the originating agent. This interpretation is based on a close textual analysis of the OWA (with mention of other works that support this analysis) as if the OWA itself were a work of art standing entirely in the "open light of the truth."⁶ For this reason, no reference will be made to the historical or sociopolitical context of the OWA or to Heidegger's reprehensible involvement with the Nazi party.⁷ Let's begin by unpacking the term "art."

II. WHAT DOES HEIDEGGER MEAN BY "ART"?

When Heidegger uses the term "art" in the OWA, he means neither craft nor an object designed for aesthetic appreciation. "Art," for Heidegger, is neither the process nor product of an artist's intentional activity, since for Heidegger "art" is a moving force (a dynamic phenomenon) rather than merely the locus where such art takes place. For this reason "art" is not synonymous with "art work" or "work of art." This also means that the active role of the artist (creator of art works) is minimal here: Heidegger says that "the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge."⁸

The artist merely "let[s] an art work come into being"⁹ by using the materials of his or her craft (words, paint, etc.) in such a way that these materials "shine forth" in the truth of their being rather than as the "mere things" they would be without such a transformation.¹⁰ The art work then "sets up" or "opens up" the space into which art can bring truth, or reveal truth, or allow truth to happen within that space.¹¹

For Heidegger, letting the truth remain in the space of the art work, allowing the work to remain a work rather than revert to a mere thing, is “preserving the work.”¹² This preserving is done by human agents (artists/creators and preservers/viewers of the work), who are, in Heidegger’s words, “co-creators,” because without someone to “stand in the truth” of the work, the truth cannot be revealed.¹³

Human agents thus “create” a *work* of art (a structure into which art can move and reveal truth), but this action does not create *art*. The dynamism of art is independent of any particular artist or preserver, except to the extent that when an artist is a good one, art “leaps” to the truth in his or her art work.¹⁴ The phenomenon of art is thus necessary for human beings to see and preserve the truth in a work of art. In Heidegger’s words, art is the “setting-into-work” of truth and “the creative preserving of truth in the work. *Art then is the becoming and the happening of truth.*”¹⁵ This does not mean that art is identical with truth but rather that art “lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that *leaps* to the truth of what is, in the work” (emphasis added).¹⁶

Now that the relationship between “art” and “truth” has been established—art is the dynamic phenomenon that reveals truth—it is time to focus on what Heidegger means by “truth” in the OWA.

III. WHAT DOES HEIDEGGER MEAN BY “TRUTH” AS IT PERTAINS TO ART?

The kind of “truth” that is appropriate for art, in Heidegger’s view, “is ἀλήθεια [*aletheia*], *unhiddenness* [*Unverborgenheit*].”¹⁷ Heidegger does not deny that assertive or propositional truth exists; he just says that propositional truth is derivative from primordial truth, or *aletheia*. Truth’s *essence*, as it is revealed by art, relates to what human beings understand; here “essence” (*Wesen*) means an “occurrence” involving the “situatedness” of the active human being rather than “what-ness,” or essential nature.¹⁸ This essence is a *freedom* that can ground the possibility “of what is initially and generally admitted as known” —which is not the same thing as grounding knowledge.¹⁹ In short, then, the sort of truth revealed by art in the OWA is what makes it possible for human viewers to initially and generally admit what is known, but it does not correspond to any particular or fixed entity that is the referent for this knowledge.²⁰ This is one reason why “art,” as Heidegger refers to it in the OWA, cannot mean “representation.”

IV. BRUIN’S INTERPRETATION: *OLD SHOES* IS NOT GREAT ART, BECAUSE IT IS REPRESENTATIONAL

Bruin’s interpretation of the OWA highlights what he says is a “shift of gears” between the *Old Shoes* painting by Van Gogh and Heidegger’s example of a Greek temple.²¹ His explanation is that this shift represents Heidegger’s change in focus from one ontological kind of art (“representational art”) to another (“great art”).²² To the contrary, the present paper holds, Heidegger’s shift from his discussion of *Old Shoes* to the Greek temple is from great art that is easily mistaken for representational art (in what will here be called “the narrower sense” of depiction or copying of nature) to great art that is not. In what will here be called the “larger sense” of representation, in which even the Greek temple, Heidegger implies, represents the “Idea of Temple,”²³ there is no such distinction between *Old Shoes* and the Greek temple. Both works of art are great; art actively works within both of them to reveal the truth (or essence understood as the situatedness of human beings) of what is depicted.

Bruin’s claim that Heidegger is thinking of representational art (in the narrower sense) when he refers to the Van Gogh painting is based on two passages of the OWA: (1) the end of the section on “Thing and Work,” where Heidegger asks whether “this painting by Van Gogh depicts a pair of actually existing shoes, and is a work of art because it does so successfully”;²⁴ and (2) Heidegger’s announcement that the inquiry of the OWA is restricted to great art, which Heidegger mentions *after* he has discussed the *Old Shoes*.²⁵ Bruin finds it significant that this announcement takes place one page before Heidegger discusses the Greek temple; he thinks it means that Heidegger intended the “great art” to refer only to the Greek temple example that follows and not to the Van Gogh.²⁶

Regarding passage (1): Yes, Heidegger does ask the question whether the Van Gogh painting is representational art (in the narrower sense) and successful because of it. However, it is conceivable that Heidegger has raised this question only as a common one typically raised when real things are depicted in paintings. What matters here is not that Heidegger raises the question but that he answers it in the negative.²⁷ Heidegger goes on to say, “The work, therefore, is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be present at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the thing’s general essence.”²⁸ This characterization of the art work as “a reproduction” of the “general essence” of the peasant shoes indicates that Heidegger thinks *Old Shoes* is a work of representational art in the larger sense of “representation” that would allow a work that Heidegger says is “pregiven” to an artist to be “regiven” in a painting.²⁹ This larger sense of “representing” (perhaps better conceived as “representing”) has the symbolic strength of metaphor; art *reveals* essence by bringing together “something other” along with the thing that is made.³⁰

Indeed, Heidegger says that art is truth setting itself to work *in* the art work. “Truth happens in Van Gogh’s painting,” Heidegger says. “This does not mean that something is correctly portrayed, but rather that in the revelation of the equipmental being of the shoes, that which is as a whole—world [of the peasant woman] and earth [in the shoes as equipment] in their counterplay—attains to unconcealedness.”³¹ The truth/essence of the shoes is *in* the work, not in the shoes. Essence, for Heidegger, *goes to* artworks (which provide the locus where this truth is revealed) through art. Art’s metaphysics is that of action, dynamics, and motion, “thrusting” essence into art works.³² Art does not idle in a fixed location. Similarly, we experience the work of art *in* the “Open” (which for Heidegger means an area that has been cleared of obstruction by the truth-revealing function of art) of the work, not in our heads. “In the vicinity of the work,” Heidegger points out, “we were suddenly somewhere else than we tend usually to be.”³³

It is also the case that Van Gogh’s *Old Shoes* reveals more than just the essence of the shoes. It also reveals (and preserves) the *world* of the peasant.³⁴ This world, as Heidegger describes it, “is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people.”³⁵ It is also a world that, in truth, is in constant conflict with the earth. The world, for Heidegger, struggles to open and reveal, while the earth fights to shelter and conceal.³⁶ This struggle allows both the world and earth to be *what* they are and *that* they are.³⁷

A Heideggerian distinction might be made here between the Van Gogh and the Greek temple, but if so it is not between representational art and great art but between proper and improper “preserving” of two great works of art.³⁸ On Heidegger’s account, improper preserving of the Van Gogh is what might make it misperceived as “representational” in the narrower sense of copying. Such improper preserving, Heidegger holds, occurs “when works are offered for merely artistic enjoyment...”³⁹ There is no evidence in the OWA, however, that Heidegger finds *Old Shoes* to be preserved improperly. Instead, he discusses the essence of what *Old Shoes* shows—the struggle between the earthly, equipmental shoes and the world of the peasant woman—as if it were revealed plainly for all to see.⁴⁰

As to (2), the fact that Heidegger announces that the OWA refers to great art *after* his discussion of the Van Gogh is neither here nor there. Heidegger’s insertion of the term “great” when he discusses the Greek temple might have been an afterthought. Or Heidegger might have refrained from specifying that the Van Gogh is “great” in keeping with his hermeneutic method of looking at the object of the discussion first, seeing what it is, raising pertinent questions about it, and *then* revealing conclusions.⁴¹ In addition, it may be that for Heidegger the only art that matters enough to warrant a philosophical discussion is “great art”—so he can insert the word “great,” or not, without altering his overall intention. This idea is supported by the consideration that art in its true nature, for Heidegger, is art in its highest function; art’s nature or essence lies in its authenticity and unconcealedness.⁴² Most importantly, however, his statement that the OWA refers only to great art is nonsensical if Heidegger does not intend to restrict the entirety of the OWA’s inquiry to great art.

Our next task is to see whether it is “art” or the “work of art” that takes the primary position in Heidegger’s metaphysical system.

V. MANSBACH'S INTERPRETATION: THE WORK OF ART IS PRIMARY

Mansbach's interpretation of the OWA is that by making the work of art central and man "peripheral," Heidegger is attempting to control what Mansbach says is the "anthropocentrism" of *Being and Time*.⁴³ This may well be true. This paper's concern is not to deny this shift but to place it elsewhere. Where Mansbach characterizes the *work of art* as the new "hero" of the OWA,⁴⁴ the present paper holds that any new "hero" is the dynamic phenomenon of art itself. Not the artist, but also not the *work of art*.

Mansbach argues that Heidegger's shift of the concept of hero from man to work, in the OWA, is evidenced by Heidegger's invitation to "go to the actual work and ask the work what and how it is."⁴⁵ In Mansbach's view, this shifts the focus from "human existence" (through Dasein, the Being of human beings) as the conduit of meaning "to art and its product, the work of art."⁴⁶ So far, so good. Unfortunately, Mansbach goes on to conflate the agency of the phenomenon of art with the agency of the work of art. His mistake lies in supposing that for Heidegger the art work can "act" through the impetus of art in the same way that a human agent can "act" through his motivating Dasein. "Works of art," Mansbach tells us, "like other objects, are sources of reflection" and function "like a hero" because "the disclosure generated by the work of art is unique."⁴⁷ He further surmises that "the work of art acts like anxiety"⁴⁸ in its ability to counter inauthenticity.⁴⁹

Mansbach's view fails here because Heidegger's metaphysical shift ranks art above (by making it prior to) both the artist (the human agent) *and* the artwork. Heidegger says, "The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. Nevertheless, neither is the sole support of the other. In themselves and in their interrelations artist and work *are* each of them by virtue of a third thing which is prior to both, namely that which also gives artist and work of art their names—art."⁵⁰

Mansbach is correct to note that in the OWA Heidegger attributes "self-subsistence" to the art work and in doing so severs it from the agency of the human artist or creator.⁵¹ However, Mansbach then says, "Great works of art thus make the world, and this is the source of their power to reveal the truth,"⁵² thus confusing Heidegger's description of what works of art do with their function as the provider of the locus in which art can install the truth.⁵³ By providing this locus, there is a sense in which the work of art shows us the truth; but this is due not to its *own* power, this paper submits, but to the power of *art*. The art *work* is merely an intermediary joining of the agency of art (responsible for the work's artistic and truth-revealing nature) and the agency of the human artist as *technites* (responsible for the "workly character," or equipmental being, of the work);⁵⁴ it has no primary agency of its own. Indeed, Heidegger says that the nature of art *prevails* in the work,⁵⁵ and that it is this "artistic nature" of the work that is over and above the work's "thingly character."⁵⁶

Heidegger's attention is focused on the *art* that acts within works of art to reveal truth. "Thus in the work it is truth [through art]," Heidegger says, "not only something true, that is at work."⁵⁷ As the locus where "truth happens" through art, the art work "sets up" or "opens up" a world by "holding open the Open of that world" so that the truth is preserved.⁵⁸ What comes into the "Open" of this world is material that is not used up (as in equipment) but material in its authentic quality of being.⁵⁹

Heidegger describes the peasant shoes in Van Gogh's *Old Shoes* (not to be confused with the *actual* peasant shoes):

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by

uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.

But perhaps it is only in the picture that we notice all this about the shoes. The peasant woman, on the other hand, simply wears them.⁶⁰

To repeat, the claim here is not that Van Gogh's shoes depict the essence of the shoes or of the struggle between earth and world but that this essence *exists* (is actually reproduced) in the work. Art is "the spring that leaps to the truth of what is, in the work."⁶¹

Mansbach's conflation of the art work with the phenomenon of art is evidenced by his comment that "great works of art are analogous to heroes on placing the newly-generated world within the historical perspective of a nation giving birth to history: 'Wherever art happens ... a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts again.'"⁶² This "wherever," for Heidegger, is the artwork construction that houses the art. It is not the *art work* that happens, but the *art* that happens, according to Heidegger's definition of art as "*the becoming and the happening of truth*."⁶³ When *art* happens, "*in an art work*" (emphasis added), that is when "a thrust enters history."⁶⁴ The *art work* does no such thrusting, except in the sense that we experience this thrust by virtue of looking at an art work and therefore identify the happening within it with the work itself. The art work "does" something only by either acting as a tool of an artist or by acting as a scaffold "holding open the Open of that world" (the world revealed by art) so that the truth is preserved.⁶⁵

Mansbach is right, then, to note Heidegger's shift away from the human agency in *Being and Time* to a dynamic metaphysical phenomenon that results in the revelation of truth. The point here is that the shift is not to the work of art, which has a human-created, workly, nature, but to the phenomenon of art.

VI. CONCLUSION

The metaphysical world Heidegger reveals to us in the OWA, through a type of philosophy that resists definitional propositions, is one in which art is the primary mover. The artist, the preservers, and the work of art lay the groundwork and provide the necessary conditions under which art can work its magic in revealing the truth, the essence of which is in the free conditions under which Heidegger says human beings can make claims about what is known as it pertains to our situatedness in the world. On this account, then, all art that is successful in revealing truth is "great art"; the primary nature of art is to reveal the truth of a world; and the shift in the agency of Dasein from *Being and Time* goes not to the work of art but to the phenomenon of art itself. In the world of the OWA, art is revelatory; the human agents and the structures they create with the materials of the earth only assist in facilitating this revelation.

It would seem, then, that in the OWA, Heidegger has solved any problem of anthropocentrism in *Being and Time*. One wonders, however, if he may have gone too far in avoiding the possibility that an artist, as a particular imaginative, creative, and skilled being, might create not just a structure in which the truth of the struggle of world and earth can come forth but a work of art that captures the uniqueness of *her own* perspective in the world in which we all live. It may be that an art work, like death or like a child, is "mine" for an artist even though it exists in the world. Artistic legacy, then, would be not just one of "art" or of "truth" but would be, also, the contribution of a unique individual.

EMAIL: aili.bresnahan@temple.edu

1. The phrase “dynamic phenomenon of art” is a neologism of my own that is used to capture the unique sense of Heidegger’s meaning when he uses the term “art” alone rather than in “art work” or “work of art.”

2. See Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and “Theaetetus,”* trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2002), §6, 35 and §9, 48. This is a translation of *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit: zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet*, first published in 1988 as volume 34 of Martin Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe*. The text is based on a lecture course delivered at the University of Freiburg 1931–32. See also the “Translator’s Foreword” in the work, xi–xii.

3. See John Bruin, “Heidegger and Two Kinds of Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 447–57. Van Gogh painted at least five quite similar works with slightly different titles; the link available on the Web is to *A Pair of Shoes* (1885), but the preferred and more standard interpretation (which Derrida used) is that Heidegger was referring to *Old Shoes with Laces* (1886).

4. “Art work” is used throughout this paper, rather than “artwork” (ASAGE usage), to reflect Heidegger’s exact wording.

5. See Abraham Mansbach, “Overcoming Anthropocentrism: Heidegger on the Heroic Role of the Work of Art,” *Ratio* 10 (new series) (September 1997): 157–68.

6. See Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 18, where he says, “What art is should be inferable from the work.”

7. This is not to say that such information and analyses would not be useful; merely that it will not be engaged in here. One book that attempts to explain the sociopolitical context for the OWA is Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*, trans. Jeff Fort (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007). For an essay that demonstrates Heidegger’s sustained involvement with Daoist and Zen thought, see Véronique Fóti, “Heidegger and ‘The Way of Art’: The Empty Origin and Contemporary Abstraction,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 31 (1998): 337–51.

8. OWA, 40.

9. *Ibid.*, 67.

10. *Ibid.*, 29. See also 47 (“To be sure, the painter also uses pigment, but in such a way that color is not used up but rather only now comes to shine forth”); 48 (“Nowhere in the work is there any trace of a work-material”); and 59 (“Yet all this happens [the artist’s creation of the art work] happens in the midst of the being that grows out of its own accord, *phusis*.”)

11. *Ibid.*, 44, 45.

12. *Ibid.*, 66.

13. OWA, 67–68.

14. *Ibid.*, 77.

15. *Ibid.*, 39, 71, 72.

16. *Ibid.*, 77.

17. See Heidegger, *Essence of Truth*, §2, 7.

18. See Ted Sadler, “Translator’s Foreword,” in *ibid.*, xi–xii.

19. See Timothy J. Nulty, *Primitive Disclosive Alethism: Davidson, Heidegger, and the Nature of Truth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 129, quoting Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. D. F. Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1949), 123.

20. The example of art, Heidegger says, thus “reveals the inner power of human understanding of being, the illuminating view.” Heidegger, *Essence of Truth*, §8, 47.

21. Bruin, “Heidegger and Two Kinds of Art,” 447.

22. *Ibid.*, 447.

23. Here Heidegger’s inference is a bit oblique; he asks, “Who could maintain the impossible view that the Idea of Temple is represented in the building? And yet, truth is set to work in such a work, if it is a work” (OWA, 37). This “and yet” is here taken to mean here that yes, the Idea of Temple (the truth, essence, or form of the temple) is exactly what the Greek temple represents.

24. Bruin, “Heidegger and Two Kinds of Art,” 451, referring to OWA, 37.

25. Ibid., 453. See also OWA, 40 (“It is precisely in great art—and only such art is under consideration here—that the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work ...”).

26. Ibid.

27. What Heidegger says here is, “Is it our opinion that the painting [*Old Shoes*] draws a likeness from something actual and transposes it into a product of artistic—production? By no means.” Ibid., 37.

28. Ibid.

29. The analogy here is to Heidegger’s discussion of Hölderlin’s hymn, “The Rhine,” in which Heidegger asks the question, “What is pre-given to the poet, and how is it given, so that it can then be regiven in a poem?” Ibid.

30. Ibid., 19–20.

31. Ibid., 56. See also *ibid.*, 33–34, and 36 (where Heidegger discusses the Greek word *aletheia* a way of understanding this idea of the unconcealedness of beings).

32. See *ibid.*, 66 and 77.

33. Ibid., 35. See also 67, where Heidegger explains that preserving an art work means to “stand within” it. There may be a fruitful comparison to be made here with Heidegger’s theory of the “ecstatic existence” of Dasein that he discusses in *Being and Time*, but that is a subject for another paper.

34. Ibid., 33–34, and 56. See also George Stack, “The Being of the Work of Art in Heidegger,” *Philosophy Today* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1969): 164.

35. OWA, 48.

36. See *ibid.*, 47, and 49–50.

37. See *ibid.*, 64 (the creation of a work of art “sets it [the earth] free to be nothing but itself”) and 65 (referring to the “*that it is*” of a work’s createdness).

38. Preservers of an artwork let it be as it is. See OWA, 66. “Preserving the work means: standing within the openness of beings [the truth] that happens in the work,” which Heidegger also defines as a “knowing” (not mere information but knowing “what he wills to do in the midst of what is”). Ibid., 67.

39. Ibid., 68.

40. See *ibid.*, 56.

41. See *ibid.*, 18 (“In order to discover the nature that really prevails in the work, let us go to the actual work and ask the work what and how it is”).

42. See *ibid.*, 44–45.

43. Mansbach, “Overcoming Anthropocentrism,” 157 (abstract).

44. See *ibid.*, 161.

45. Ibid., 162, quoting OWA, 18.

46. Ibid., 162.

47. Ibid., 166.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 167.

50. OWA, 17. See also 57.

51. See Mansbach, “Overcoming Anthropocentrism,” 163 (“Works of art, especially great ones, stand by themselves, unrelated to other entities or even to the artist who created them”).

52. Ibid., 164.

53. See OWA, 39.

54. Ibid., 58.

55. Ibid., 18.

56. Ibid., 19.

57. Ibid., 56.

58. Ibid., 44–45. The world is the world (domain) of human beings where they interact with other beings.

59. Ibid. To wit: “The temple-work, in setting 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. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word.” Ibid., 46. See also *ibid.*, 35 (“The art work [Van Gogh’s *Old Shoes*] let us know what shoes are in truth”) and 66.

60. Ibid., 33–34.

61. Ibid., 77.

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62. Mansbach, "Overcoming Anthropocentrism," 167, quoting OWA, 77.
 63. OWA, 71.
 64. *Ibid.*, 77.
 65. *Ibid.*, 44 and 45.

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