**“The Origin of the Work of Art” by Martin Heidegger**

“The Origin of the Work of Art” is a public lecture Heidegger gave in Freiburg in 1935, Zurich in 1936, and again in the same year in Frankfurt, this time expanded and delivered over three sessions.

In this lecture, Heidegger analyses art as the origin of both the artist and the work of art. He also determines that the essence of the work of art (its “work-being”) is the unconcealment of truth. Works of art essentially serve to create a clearing in which beings can appear before us in a presencing.

What is a Thing?

Heidegger begins by saying that the artist is the origin of the work (of art) but the work is also the origin of the artist, for it is only by the work that the artist is what he or she is. However, both find their origin in a third thing, art. So we need to investigate art itself but the only way to do this is to investigate artwork and so we have come full circle in a way. Artwork is a thing and that is where Heidegger begins.

In talking of things, Heidegger is specifically referencing “mere things” as distinguished from other things, like human beings, who are sometimes also mistakenly thought of as things. He works through three definitions, each of which will be rejected. The first is a Roman (mis)interpretation from Greek of a thing as a substance with accidents (qualities). This fails to distinguish between higher (e.g. humans) and lesser things. The second treats the thing as a collection of sensations. The problem here is that this is not the way we actually perceive things; i.e. we don’t hear individual phonemes when someone is talking, instead we hear whole words and sentences. Additionally, rather than describing the thing, this description causes it to disappear. The third definition is the thing as formed matter (Aristotle’s *hyle* and *morphe*). Like the first interpretation, this fails to capture the essence of the mere thing we are looking for.

Heidegger notes that since “equipment” lies halfway between the mere thing and the work (of art), we may be able to gain some insight into both of them through considering it. Equipment is characterised by *usefulness* and this means that it is only in the use of it that its character is revealed. Usefulness in turn is characterised by *reliability*.

Heidegger uses the example of Vah Gogh’s painting of a pair of peasant’s shoes to elucidate all the above. This means that we were able to discern the Being of the shoes, as reliability, through the painting; “The artwork lets us know what shoes are in truth.” Since truth is unconcealment, not agreement with some state of affairs, the essence of art is to let beings emerge into the unconcealment of their Being, or to reproduce the “general essence” of things.

This “general essence” of things, as in the shoes represented in Van Gogh’s painting, is the “Being of beings”. It is also the way we must approach the work itself so that we can come to an understanding of “what is workly in the work, equipmental in equipment, and thingly in the thing…”

The Work of Art and Truth

So, we are looking for the “work-being” of the work of art but this cannot be discovered by looking to the art industry because this only treats works in their object-being. To get to the work-being of a work we must ask where the work belongs. The answer is that it belongs “uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself… To be a work means to set up a world.”

Now a *world* is not just a collection of stuff at hand nor is it an “imagined representation” we add to that stuff. It is a meaningful and significant reality within which historical subjects live and make decisions. This means that stones, plants and animals cannot have a world. This is a privilege reserved for humans.

So, the work *sets up a world* but it also *sets forth the earth*. By “earth” Heidegger means the material out of which the art is composed and this includes metal, rock, colour, tones, words, etc. In equipment, material disappears into usefulness. Indeed, the more useful, i.e. the more equipmental, a piece of equipment is, the more the material fades from our awareness. The work, on the other hand, explicitly brings the earth before us. However, it does so in a way which is fundamentally undisclosed and unexplained. Consider colour. A painting throws colour before us but as soon as we analyse it into wavelengths, it disappears. Earth is essentially “self-secluding”. Setting forth the earth brings it into an open region but in such a way that it is self-secluding.

In the work, earth (as a sheltering and concealing) and world (as a self-opening) are opposites and they co-exist as *strife*. But this strife isn’t discord. Rather, each aspect raises the other beyond itself. This culminates in the work-being of the work of art which is defined as “the instigation of strife between world and earth.”

Heidegger now turns to truth, which he has already analysed as unconcealment, and asks how it is that truth happens in this way.

In the midst of beings as a whole a *clearing* appears. This clearing is where beings appear to us and it is only through the clearing that beings can be unconcealed and brought before us in a *presencing*. However, unconcealment always occurs within a *double concealment*. Beings *refuse* us (when we can say no more of them that they are) and they *dissemble* (as in when beings obstruct each other and appear as other than they are). The long and short of this is that concealment (untruth) lies at the heart of unconcealment (truth). This is not something we need to remedy – it is a necessary feature of truth.

The clearing is the open region where world and earth meet in strife. But it isn’t the case that world is unconcealment and earth is concealment. Rather, the two are inextricably bound up together. The world can open only if some things are concealed at the same time and vice versa; “Earth juts through the world and world grounds itself on the earth only in so far as truth happens as the primal strife between clearing and concealing.”

One of the ways this happens (i.e. the clearing appears) is in the work.

Art as Creation

Art is the origin of the artwork and the artist so we must eventually ask the question, what is art? We have defined the work-being of the work as the happening of truth but this can’t be all there is to the story. We must also include in this the fact that the work is created. To create means to “let something emerge as a thing that has been brought forth.” But this applies to equipment just as readily as it does to work. The difference is that in the latter what is brought forth is the “openness of beings, or truth”. Indeed, Heidegger describes the impulse toward the work as “one of truth’s distinctive possibilities... [specifically, that] by which it can itself occur as being in the midst of beings.”

Createdness consists of two features. First, truth (as strife) establishes itself in the work in the *figure*. Second, the work is “created so that its createdness is part of the created work.” The fact *that* it is and that this *thatness* is prominent in the work distinguishes it from equipment, in which we have already seen its *thatness* disappears.

This leads us into another aspect without which artwork cannot be; those who preserve it. “Preserving the work means standing within the openness of beings that happens in the work.” It is a knowing which is also a willing. This knowing is not intellectual and the willing is not psychological. Rather, they reflect a *resolute* way of being (which is nothing to do with deliberateness) which “exposes itself to the openness of beings” apparent in the work.

Regarding the work as mere thing, that by which it is actual, which we began this essay investigating, we can now affirm is meaningless. Treating the work as a thing reduces it to an object simply at hand “that is supposed to produce this or that state of mind in us.” Rather than a thingly element, the work as object has an *earthly* character. This earthly element appears because the work brings forth truth and truth can only unfold in a particular being.

Given all we have covered thus far, we can now conclude that the essence of art is the “setting-into-work of truth” which happens in creation (as the “fixing in place of self-establishing truth in the figure”) and preservation (which brings the work-being of the work out though movement and happening). “*Art then is a becoming and happening of truth*… Truth is never gathered from things at hand, never from the ordinary… Truth, as the clearing and concealing of beings, happens in being composed. *All art*… is as such, *in essence, poetry*.” For Heidegger then, poetry is the highest art form. This highlights the importance of language for Heidegger which is not just a means of communication, but which, in naming beings, actually projects the *clearing* in which the Being of beings can be brought forth.

Art is the *origin* of creators and preservers of the work of art and in this it is the origin of a people’s historical existence, not as a sequence in time of events, but as that which brings people before truth. All art is therefore a beginning or restarting of history.