

 aptara <small>The Content Transformation Company</small>	JAAC	jaac_1502	Dispatch: 11-28-2011	CE: n/a
	Journal	MSP No.	No. of pages: 13	PE: Erin

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The Question Concerning Photography

I. THE QUESTION CONCERNING PHOTOGRAPHY?

What do Martin Heidegger's writings on art and technology and recent debates in analytic philosophy of photography have in common? Prima facie, very little. Even the weaker suggestion that there might be some common ground against which to assess their competing claims about some shared object of enquiry seems implausible. Nonetheless, in this article I bring Heidegger's claims about art and technology into dialogue with Kendall Walton's work on photography. The impetus for doing so comes from noticing, their differences notwithstanding, some points of contact that may have gone unremarked for no better reason than that few philosophers are given to reading both. More specifically, I address the following three issues:

1. The extent to which the "mind-independence" thesis underwriting analytic philosophy of photography since Walton partakes of the antisubjectivism of Heidegger's philosophy of art more generally
2. Whether photography, as understood by analytic philosophers of art, is capable of meeting Heidegger's key criterion of authentic art, namely, that it provides a "decisive confrontation" with technology
3. Whether Heidegger and Walton's theories of art and photography are not equally contentious, insofar as they do agree, with regard to the role that artist and photographer play in their respective accounts.

Given Heidegger's conception of technology, on the one hand, as the "supreme danger," because it reduces the significance of all beings to their utility

(flexibility, availability, and so on) as a resource, and photography's tendency to reduce the world to an aesthetic resource, on the other, it seems unlikely that photography could embody the "saving power" of art. It seems much more likely that photography embodies precisely the problem that great art is supposed to contest on the Heideggerian story. But whether photography does, or at least could, fulfill such a role depends largely on what is involved in understanding photography as *an art*—as opposed to, say, a collection of prosthetic aids to vision. In Heideggerian terms, this is to ask: how might art resist technology when the art in question is photography? From a Heideggerian perspective, this would be *the* question concerning photography.

From the perspective of analytic philosophy of photography, by contrast, *the* question concerning photography would be whether the role of mind in the formation of photographic pictures is sufficiently distinctive to distinguish photographs in kind from other forms of depiction. Whatever resistance Walton's claim that photographs are "transparent" may have elicited, his more fundamental claim that photographic depiction is mind-independent in a way that distinguishes it from all nonmechanical forms of depiction has been widely accepted.¹ My goal is to show that these two questions, the Heideggerian one about how photography as an art might resist technology and the Waltonian one about the role of mind in photographic depiction, are mutually implicating.

One might have various worries about this project. I will mention only the three that strike me most forcefully. There are doubtless others.

The first worry is, when trying to bring such different bodies of thought together, how different their underlying assumptions are. Analytic

philosophy of art tends to be descriptive rather than normative: insofar as it takes existing practices of art as data for theory building, its claims need to be consistent with everything that informed critical practice takes to be in the relevant domain. Call this the “critical practice” constraint. As a result, analytic philosophy of art is not typically in the business of asking whether everything in the domain *should* be in the domain, or whether the artworld is justified in its practices: such practices are a presupposition of philosophical inquiry getting off the ground. As such, analytic philosophy of art tends to be resolutely nonnormative. To put it in a slogan: counterexamples matter.

Heidegger’s theory of art, by contrast, is normative all the way down. Where one counterexample would worry an analytic philosopher of art, Heidegger’s theory of art, if correct, is more at risk of *exemplification* than counter-exemplification. On Heidegger’s account, almost everything called ‘art’ today is wrongly so called; if he is right, one would expect his theory to be largely inapplicable to art in its recent forms. The worry for Heideggerians is thus the inverse of analytic philosophers’ fear of counter-exemplification. As a consequence, to most analytic philosophers of art, Heidegger’s claims about great art occasioning a “strife between world and earth” are likely to appear uninformative at best and grandiose at worst. Conversely, from a continental perspective, the significance Heidegger attributes to great art as a cultural and historical horizon is likely to make the definitional and taxonomic projects of analytic philosophy of art appear rather meager by comparison.²

The second worry about trying to bring Heidegger and analytic philosophy of photography into dialogue is largely a function of the first, namely, how different the literatures surrounding the later Heidegger and Walton are as a result. The former typically confines itself to explicating the internal structure of Heidegger’s thought; it seldom critically examines the justification for his claims in ways that would give skeptics reason to think they ought to engage seriously with it. One worry non-Heideggerians might have is how Heidegger could be in a position to *know* what he claims to know about various dispensations or “sendings” of Being, including the “supreme danger” represented by our own. Heideggerians, if they want to be taken seriously by non-Heideggerians on this score, cannot reply in a way that presup-

poses the truth of Heidegger’s premises, for it is precisely the truth of those premises that is in question.³

The literature on Walton could not be more different in tone, consisting of an almost scholastic exchange of arguments and counterarguments as to whether his claims about photographic depiction cohere with our intuitions. In one recent sequence of exchanges, the persuasiveness of Walton’s argument (that if we *are* willing to accept that we see objects with the mediation of mirrors, we have no reason *not* to accept that we see objects through photographs) was deemed to hang on the number and orientation of the mirrors involved. Beyond the point at which they cease to preserve information about the spatiotemporal location of the objects seen relative to their perceivers, it no longer cohered with his critics’ intuitions to say that we *see* those objects.⁴

For Heideggerians, such debates only serve to beg the important question: appealing to our *intuitions* about what we feel inclined to say about particular cases can hardly serve as the final arbiter if those intuitions are themselves a product of (to put it in Heideggerian terms) an impoverished conception of Being. That is, the reflection of a limited, historically and culturally circumscribed conception of what it is to relate to entities in general. If that is correct, appeals to our intuition are likely to entrench rather than resolve the problem. Analytic philosophers of art, if they want to be taken seriously by those who do not share their methodological assumptions on this score, cannot presuppose the force of appeals to intuition when it is precisely the force of such appeals that is in question.

The third, and potentially most damaging, worry for my project of trying to think the two together is also largely a function of the first: even if it could be shown that something fundamental about both accounts may be captured in similar formulations, given how different their respective starting points are, one may doubt that this sheds much light on their underlying commitments. Given how different their starting points are, similar sounding claims may have altogether different connotations.

But I am going set all such worries to one side here, if only to find out, in the spirit of approaching two philosophers outside the well-defined tracks of the standard debates on either, whether the project of bringing them into dialogue has wings.

Only the results will show whether any initial suspension of belief was warranted.

II. HEIDEGGER ON *TECHNE* AND *TECHNIK*

For Heidegger, “the question concerning technology” concerns its essence as a way of disclosing the nature of beings in general, and how we might achieve a “free relation” to technology so construed: that is, a relation that no longer so over-determines our understanding of beings as a whole, ourselves included, as to preclude all other ways of understanding them. Drawing on a Greek conception of *techne*, Heidegger suggests that, because both art and technology are at bottom ways of “unconcealing” beings, art may harbor the prospect of a “decisive confrontation” with the essence of technology from out of its essence:

Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it . . .

Such a realm is art [that] the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes.⁵

To assess this claim, it is necessary to know what Heidegger thinks art (*techne*) and technology (*Technik*) have in common, and within that commonality, what sets them apart. What they have in common, for Heidegger, is that both art and technology are “modes of disclosure” (*aletheuein*), ways in which beings in general are brought to light, together with the underlying assumptions as to what beings are, that such modes of disclosure reveal. What sets them apart, accordingly, is what differentiates them *as* modes of disclosure. On Heidegger’s account, this is the difference between “bringing forth” (*hervorbringen*) and “challenging forth” (*herausfordern*).

Both *techne* and *phusis* (nature) are forms of *poiesis*, or “bringing forth.” *Phusis* is the highest form of *poiesis* because it is the bringing forth of that which discloses itself from out of itself or, more simply, of what has its power of disclosure within itself. Think of a bud bursting into bloom.⁶ *Techne*, by contrast, is the bringing forth of that which has its power of disclosure in another; it is

an *assisted* form of disclosure. Think, for example, of a sculptor releasing the figure “slumbering” within the block, as Michelangelo is reputed to have claimed about his unfinished slaves. So understood, *techne* retains its connection to *phusis*: it enables what is coming into appearance to appear. Michelangelo does not simply impose his will on the block, he “releases,” to put it in Heideggerian terms, what is already “coming to presence” within it. By remaining responsive to the possibilities inherent within the stone, Michelangelo “completes” nature’s work. *Techne* remains handmaiden to *phusis*: it is nature’s self-emergence that comes to fruition in the artist’s work.⁷

Where *techne* respects nature’s reticence, with which it works in concert, *Technik* severs this relation to nature’s capacity for self-disclosure: it constitutes a “regulatory attack” forcing nature to surrender its latent power. Heidegger’s example of such “challenging revealing” is atomic power: in comparison to wind power—which harnesses the power of the wind, but only when it blows—atomic power forcibly extracts the atom’s latent power. In so doing it maximizes nature’s yield, albeit at the cost of transforming nature itself from the highest form of “bringing forth” to a mere quantum of resource. Heidegger’s term is *Bestand* (standing reserve), indicating something made to stand by, on call for use or further transformation. His example is the hydroelectric plant that transforms the nature of a river into an energy source that henceforth derives its Being, determining the ways in which it is able to show up for us, from the power plant it now serves.⁸ Treating nature as a resource in this way refuses to allow nature’s “self-refusal,” its recalcitrant materiality, to show up *as* self-refusal. Heidegger’s way of expressing this is fittingly opaque: technology is, in its essence, a mode of unconcealing that covers over its own concealing of all other possible modes of unconcealing. It refuses to allow anything to show up *as* concealed, as unintelligible, as resistant to human ends. In the terms of “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Technik*—unlike *techne*—refuses “to let the earth be an earth.”⁹

It is crucial to grasp that, on Heidegger’s account of technology, man is not in any straightforward sense the agent of such disclosure, though he retains a privileged relation to it as that being within whose nature it resides to disclose a world.¹⁰ Even so, like everything else that shows up for man, man appears to himself in a certain

light, depending on what “destining of Being” holds sway: technological man, qua utility-maximizer, understands his relation to everything that exists in ways that are incommensurable to those in which medieval man understands his relation to everything that exists, qua *ens creatum*. This is why Heidegger holds that human beings are themselves challenged by technology, rather than simply wielding it. What distinguishes the technological understanding of Being is that man appears to himself primarily as a resource for the first time: that is, man finds himself installed within an all-encompassing framework (*Gestell*) that he does not control, and in which human beings show up, like beings in general, first and foremost as resource.¹¹ What alarms Heidegger about such a relation to beings, what he calls the “supreme danger,” is that it will become so pervasive as to eclipse all other possible modes of disclosure, including all forms of *poiesis*. Should technology become absolute in this sense, it would threaten to cover over all trace of itself as a destining of Being, that is, *one* possible way of relating to beings in general, such that man henceforth would take the way in which entities show up under its sway for the final truth about beings, including himself. At that point man would risk becoming *nothing but* a resource in his own eyes, all other ways of understanding and interacting with beings being foreclosed.

It is because Heidegger understands art as a rival mode of disclosure, capable of confronting technology on the ground of what they have in common, that it holds such significance for him. Against the “supreme danger” presaged by the final triumph of a technological understanding of Being, art holds out a “saving power”: the promise of a different, nondomineering relation to beings. As with technology, however, so too with art as a mode of disclosure: man is not in any straightforward sense its agent, even if the artist is, like the craftsman, “co-responsible” for what he “brings forth.” Indeed, in the very first paragraph of “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger rules out appeal to the artist as an explanation of how works of art come into being:

On the usual view, the work arises out of and by means of the activity of the artist. But by what and whence is the artist what he is? By the work; for to say that the work does credit to the master means that it is the work that first lets the artist emerge as master of his art. 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.¹²

Given that Heidegger rejects a modern view of art at the outset, he cannot go on to infer the nature of art from its commonly accepted instances without presupposing the very conception he wants to contest. The problem he faces is thus a classically hermeneutic one of how to begin: his solution is to appeal instead to what he calls the “work being of the work” (*Werksein des Werkes*). On Heidegger’s account, the “work being” of the work resides in the “strife” (*Streit*) it initiates between its “world,” or what I shall gloss as the background horizon of intelligibility that it sets up (*aufstellend*), and its “earth,” or what I shall gloss as whatever resists illumination from within that horizon of intelligibility, but is set forth (*herstellend*) as unilluminated within it. Accordingly, what makes something a work of art is that it enables whatever it illuminates to show up in the light of some underlying conception of Being, while disclosing that not everything can be understood in terms of that conception, by setting it forward as unmastered (and hence obscure) within it. That art retains this capacity “to let the earth be an earth” is ultimately what distinguishes *techne* from *Technik*.¹³

Truly epochal or ground-laying works of art make manifest the implicit understanding of Being of a particular historical culture and, in so doing, reflect it back to that culture as its understanding of Being for the first time. Heidegger’s account of the Greek temple does this; by gathering and focusing those practices that are decisive for its culture, it articulates that culture’s implicit self-understanding. In Heidegger’s words: “The temple . . . first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves.”¹⁴

Given Heidegger’s opening move, such disclosure cannot be a product of artistic agency in any straightforward sense; artists are not granted any privileged insight into the nature of their age. Rather, it is a product of “truth setting itself to work” in and through the work of art. This is an aspect of Heidegger’s thought that I cannot hope to do justice to here. But in brief, the conception of truth Heidegger has in mind is not that of

correspondence between a proposition and a state of affairs in the world (and hence not one that could reduce works of art to utterances with propositional contents that correctly or incorrectly represent how things stand in the world) but what Heidegger takes to be the more primordial sense of truth as *aletheia*. So understood, truth draws attention to the “unconcealment” presupposed before any proposition can pick out, or fail to pick out, some state of affairs in the world. Entities must already be disclosed—and not neutrally, but in the light of some unthematized understanding of Being—before statements can correspond or fail to correspond to how things are.

I do not intend this thumbnail sketch to satisfy Heideggerians, much less to persuade non-Heideggerians, but to show how marginally, by modern standards, the artist figures in Heidegger’s understanding of both how works of art come about and what they disclose. That said, Heidegger acknowledges that the “work-being” of the work cannot be grasped in isolation from the fact of its having been created. But he is at pains to distinguish *being created*, which is to be understood in terms of the “work-being” of the work (and not, say, the artist’s intentions), from *being made*. So understood, “createdness” is not the work’s generative *ground*, but a *product* of truth setting itself to work: it “fixes” truth (the strife between world and earth, intelligibility and opacity) in place as some particular configuration, that is, as a particular work of art.

III. WALTON ON TRANSPARENCY AND MIND-INDEPENDENCE

Clearly, a good deal more would be required to justify Heidegger’s claims, but it is not my goal to provide a justification here. Instead I want to use Heidegger’s claims regarding art and technology to motivate a question that could not arise from within Heidegger studies itself: could photography, as understood by analytic philosophers of art, hold out the prospect for a “decisive confrontation” with technology of the kind that Heidegger sought from authentic art? This would imply that analytic philosophy of photography partakes of something like the antisubjectivism of Heidegger’s philosophy of art more generally. This is the counterintuitive proposition I now want to explore.

For this purpose I will rely on Walton’s account of photographic depiction in “Transparent Pictures” (1984), despite the fact that several aspects of his article have proved highly controversial.¹⁵ This is because, for all the controversy that Walton’s claim that photographs are “transparent” has generated, the more foundational claim (concerning the mind-independent nature of the photographic process) with which he underwrites it has been widely accepted, at least by other analytic philosophers of photography. According to Walton, it is a necessary condition of seeing that one’s perceptual experience depend causally and counterfactually on what is seen: we “see through” photographs because had, contrary to fact, what was before the camera at the moment of exposure been different, what one sees in the resulting photograph would have differed accordingly. Given, however, that analogous claims can be made about many realist paintings, Walton needs to rule out such cases. To wit: only photographs are *naturally* counterfactually dependent on what they depict; had, contrary to fact, what was before the camera at the moment of exposure been different, its photograph would have differed accordingly, *irrespective* of whether the photographer had noticed the difference and intended to record it. A painting, by contrast, would only have differed if the painter noticed the difference and intended to depict it. This is because painting is, and photography is not, dependent on the mental states of the artist. Setting aside the further claim that, other conditions being met, this warrants claiming that we “see through” photographs, the underlying mind-independence thesis is widely accepted.

The question I want to pose is this: is the mind-independence thesis as plausible as it is generally taken to be and, if not, what makes it seem so plausible nonetheless? According to the mind-independence thesis, the way in which our visual experience of flower paintings, say, is dependent on the flowers depicted is different in kind from the way in which our visual experience of flower photographs is dependent on the flowers photographed. Only the latter is naturally counterfactually dependent upon what it is of. In effect, the flower paintings are a form of visual testimony and are correspondingly defeasible: they tell us what the painter believed was there. This is not to say that the painter *cannot* be correct in his beliefs, of course, but rather, the argument runs, that the photographer *need not* be. Whatever controversy

Walton's claim that photographs are transparent may have elicited, this claim is generally taken to be persuasive. By contrast, Heidegger's claim that the artist is not the "origin" of the work of art would, I take it, generally be thought counterintuitive, at least by non-Heideggerians. But is this difference in intuitions well founded?

It is notable that the mind-independence thesis strikes philosophers as much more intuitive than it does photographers, photo-theorists, and critics. Is this because the latter do not appreciate the philosophical point at issue, or because philosophers are insufficiently informed about how photography works, or both? Here I think it is worth insisting on the importance of something that should be better marked: namely, that what one takes as one's paradigm case of photography will have enormous, if often unwitting, repercussions on the philosophical theory one goes on to elaborate on its basis. Walton acknowledges that the paradigm case for his own account is the snapshot rather than the work of art; I believe that a more apposite paradigm case for his account would in fact be some kind of automatic recording mechanism. Think of time-lapse nature photography or speed cameras, of which it is literally true that the mechanism fires off automatically, irrespective of what anyone believes to be in front of the camera at the moment of exposure. Were one to begin from the kind of authorial control exercised by photographic artists, one would expect the account that emerges to be correspondingly different.

But am I simply begging the question by insisting on artistic agency in this context? The fact that photographers have it in their gift to set all manner of variables, as critics of mechanical conceptions of photography maintain, is typically taken to fall foul of Walton's point in just this way. To take only the pre-digital case: photographers, such critics maintain, make innumerable decisions about camera hardware and camera settings, film and paper stock, darkroom variables and techniques, and the like.¹⁶ All this may be granted, the default philosophical response runs, and it still hold that from the moment of exposure to resulting print, at least in a fully automated process, the information channel from input to output is impermeable to the photographer's mental states.¹⁷ Granted, such "encapsulation" can be weakened in various ways when the full range of darkroom techniques is employed, but, at least in theory, what was in front of the lens at the moment of exposure, as opposed

to what the photographer *believed* was in front on the lens at the moment of exposure, should be retrievable from the resulting photograph, assuming one knows enough about how the variables relevant to processing the latent image were set. I am skeptical, but before I say why, I want to consider the relation between Walton's conception of photography and Heidegger's conception of art more closely.

IV. THE ART IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Recall Heidegger's distinction between bringing forth and challenging forth. The former, Heidegger claims, is the hallmark of authentic art, that is, art that does not seek to impose the subjective will of the artist on the material from which it is made, but works in concert with nature's own capacity of self-disclosure. In such art *techne* remains handmaiden to *physis*: it is nature's self-emergence that comes to fruition in, and is completed by, the artist's work. There are notable parallels with the most basic theme in theoretical reflection on photography here. But to grasp their significance it is necessary to realize that Walton's mind-independence thesis is only the most recent manifestation of a broader tradition of thought that can be traced all the way back to the way in which photography was presented by its original inventors and pioneers, notably Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, and Henry Fox Talbot. Niépce, credited with fixing the photographic image for the first time in 1826, called his process heliography (or "sun writing") and described it as "spontaneous reproduction by the action of light." Daguerre characterized his own process as "not an instrument that serves to draw nature, but a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself." When the two joined forces, they contracted to "fix the images which nature offers, without the assistance of a draughtsman." Fox Talbot meanwhile described his rival calotype process, forerunner to modern negative-positive processes, as a "photogenic drawing" that depicts "by optical and chemical means alone" an image "impressed by nature's hand."¹⁸

What all these formulations share is the conceit that photography is at root a natural process through which nature "reproduces herself" (or rather her appearance) by means of light alone.



FIGURE 1. Lee Friedlander, *Stems* (1999). © Lee Friedlander, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, USA.

So construed, photography—literally, writing with light—though dependent on the natural processes of optics and chemistry, remains free of *human* mediation in the respect that counts: the generation of the image itself. This constellation of ideas, departing from various metaphors concerning the “agency of light,” has permeated theoretical reflection on photography ever since; the mind-independence thesis is just one of its more formally refined recent variations.¹⁹ What the underlying notion has in common with Heidegger’s theory of art is twofold, pertaining both to *how* works of art and photographs come into being and *what* they show as a result of how they come into being.

On both fronts, both accounts diminish the significance of their object’s ostensible creator. Like authentic art on Heidegger’s account, photography is here conceived as an *assisted self-disclosure of nature*: “not an instrument that serves to draw nature,” as Daguerre puts it, “but a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself.”²⁰ As a corollary of this stress

on self-generation, both accounts are required to downplay their object’s *prima facie* creator with respect to what appears. On neither account can what the work or photograph shows be reduced to a function of its creator’s will. On Heidegger’s account authentic works of art are those that facilitate the appearing of what is already coming into appearance, rather than those that express an individual artist’s vision. On Walton’s account what appears in any photograph can only be what was in front of the lens at the moment of exposure, irrespective of what the photographer believed to be there or intended to depict.

How what appears appears, by contrast, is a result of the way in which a given artist or photographer harnesses, to put it in Heideggerian terms, nature’s interplay of self-disclosure and self-concealment. Even Walton, whose account is designed to hold for photography in general, is willing to grant talk of (some) photographs showing us the world “through the photographer’s eyes.”²¹ But if Walton is right about the underlying mind-independence of the photographic



FIGURE 2. Édouard Manet, *Moss Roses in a Vase* (1882). Oil on canvas, 22 × 13 5/8 in. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA. Image © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute (photo by Michael Agee).

process, this ability of some photographs to show us the world from a particular point of view notwithstanding, there will be an important difference of scope to their respective accounts and hence of any affinities between them. Where Heidegger's conception of *techne* as handmaiden to *phusis* pertains exclusively to great art, Walton's conception of mind-independence pertains to the

products of the photographic process in general. But is Walton right?

I have already suggested that Walton's account (and as a consequence much subsequent theorizing in the philosophy of photography) implicitly takes the snapshot or some more or less automatic recording mechanism as its paradigm case and that one would expect standard philosophical

2
3 accounts to come out differently were this not so.
4 So how do such theories fare in the face of serious
5 photographic art?

6 I shall take Lee Friedlander's series of late
7 flower photographs, made between 1994 and 1999,
8 as a test case. *What* they show, the standard argu-
9 ment runs, can only be what was there to be seen.
10 But what about *how* they show it? Here one finds
11 a narrow set of parameters consistently mined for
12 their aesthetic potential. The works are all black
13 and white, of a domestic scale, photographed on
14 35 mm or square medium format film, often close
15 up. Each image depicts the stems of cut flowers
16 stood in clear glass vases of various shapes filled
17 with water. There is little background detail, and
18 the subject is framed in such a way that either
19 the top or the bottom of the vase, and sometimes
20 both, is cropped out. In none are all the heads
21 of the flowers visible, though occasionally one or
22 two tulip heads curve back into the shot. At first
23 glance the subject appears to be the stems them-
24 selves, but on closer inspection it is as much if
25 not more the effects that glass and water have on
26 refracting and focusing light as the stems them-
27 selves that are foregrounded. It may even be that
28 photography itself is being playfully allegorized
29 here.

30 This is not some (bare) recording of flowers in
31 water, then, but a making present, through the
32 medium of photography, of a persistently mined
33 and limited set of features. Some of these, such
34 as the play of light and shadow, or the tiny oxy-
35 gen bubbles that cling to the stems in several of
36 the images, would not even be visible to every-
37 day human attention, or at least not salient, ab-
38 sent the photographs that make them present. The
39 photographs clearly depend on *what* was there,
40 but *how* what was there becomes salient equally
41 clearly depends on the photographer's exploita-
42 tion of precision optics and the capacities of var-
43 ious films, papers, filters, and developing agents
44 to enhance tonal contrasts and the like. In Hei-
45 deggerian terms, the finished prints "allow what
46 is coming into appearance to appear"; they make
47 it salient, make it show up as worthy of atten-
48 tion for the first time. Contra Heidegger, how-
49 ever, they do so in a highly *individual* manner.
50 One need only compare Friedlander's *Stems* to
51 the taxonomic and naturalist ambition of Karl
52 Blossfeldt's plant and flower photographs or
53 the erotic, fetishistic quality of Robert Map-
54 plethorpe's images of orchids and cally lillies to

be struck by the fact that this is anything but an
impersonal disclosure of being.

So what? Walton goes out of his way to ac-
knowledge that some photographs show us the
world from a particular point of view, without this
denting the fact that they show us the world itself
from that point of view and not merely its depic-
tion. Suppose, then, that Walton were to grant all
this, while insisting on the distinction between nat-
ural and intentional counterfactual dependence
nonetheless.

Take Édouard Manet's series of late flower
paintings, made between 1881 and 1883, as a com-
parison class. Are there differences of kind of
the sort that Walton's account requires? Con-
sider the counterfactuals. Suppose that, contrary
to fact, Manet breaks for lunch while painting
Roses Mousseuses dans un Vase and unknown
to him several small but visible petals towards
the rear of his still life fall off. Further suppose
that Manet's housekeeper, distressed by her em-
ployer's rapid decline, disposes of them before he
resumes. Should Manet fail to attend to that as-
pect of the scene again, this change will pass un-
marked in the finished painting. Walton's account
goes through: what we see in the finished painting
is *intentionally* dependent on the mental states of
the artist; whatever the painter fails to notice—or
notices, but decides not to depict—does not make
the finished work. Are there the right kind of dif-
ferences between this case and Friedlander?

Again, consider the counterfactuals. Suppose
that, contrary to fact, having set up this still life
(Figure 3), placed the camera on a tripod, and
opened up the diaphragm of his lens to its maxi-
mum in order to reduce depth of field to a mini-
mum, Friedlander leaves the room to take a call.
Returning to his camera, and careful not to jolt the
tripod, Friedlander takes one last look through the
viewfinder and, finding everything to his satisfac-
tion, trips the shutter, having failed to notice that
an in-shot, non-occluded, but out of focus stem
toward the rear of his still life has been removed
by an irresponsible house guest with a weakness
for romantic gestures. Does Walton's account go
through? Contrary to philosophical expectations,
the answer is "no." Unless the photographer no-
tices the difference and intends to record it, by
adjusting his camera settings accordingly, it will
not show up in the final image. What one sees in
the final image will be the same—half a dozen or
so stems pressed up against the near side of the



FIGURE 3. Lee Friedlander *Stems* (1999). © Lee Friedlander, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, USA.

vase in sharp relief against a murky, out of focus background—irrespective of whether that particular stem is present or not. In technical terms, this is a product of how camera optics (specifically, the inverse relation between aperture and depth of field) function, but in this context it is more pertinently a product of Friedlander's intentions, as embodied by the way he deploys such camera capabilities in the service of his creative ends.

These photographs, in other words, are *relevantly* mind-dependent: they are governed by Friedlander's use of his medium to realize his intentions. Because the missing stem made no difference to Friedlander achieving the result he wanted, it did not figure in the decisions determining the final image. As a result, Friedlander's camera, functioning normally and free from outside interference, fails to record a perceptible difference in the world—the removal of an in-shot, non-occluded stem—that it needs to record for the standard counterfactual story to go through. Friedlander's results fail to track this perceptible change because the photographer failed to notice

it, and he failed to notice it because it made no difference to realizing his intentions. So *what* appears in the photograph generated from the perceptual manifold recorded by Friedlander's camera, and not just *how* what appears appears, turns out to be intentionally dependent on the mental states (beliefs, intentions, and so on) of its maker after all, and the same is no doubt true of many other photographic works of art.²² Where is the difference in kind to Manet?

What Walton and, I shall argue, Heidegger both miss, albeit for quite different reasons, is the artist's presence in her work. They miss the *depth of decision* that pervades every aspect of a convincing work of art, photographic or otherwise. Walton's account may work for snapshots, but it does not adequately capture large swathes of photography beyond this. Like analytic theories of photography more generally, Walton's account remains too close to folk psychological conceptions of the medium, themselves premised on "point and shoot" technology. Perhaps as a result, his account is insufficiently sensitive to the

ways in which photographs *can* be relevantly dependent on the mental states of the photographer in such a way as to undermine any hard and fast difference between photographs and other forms of depictive art.²³

V. MIND-DEPENDENCE AND ARTISTIC CHARACTER

But what of Heidegger's account? Setting to one side the example of the Greek temple, is it a plausible account of *individually authored* works of art?²⁴ Heidegger's account of Vincent van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes is the obvious test case here. Van Gogh's painting is the pretext for a rather florid paean to the world and earth of the female peasant that Heidegger claims the painting discloses. The account is well known, and I do not intend to go over it here.²⁵ Instead I want to focus on the debate with the art historian Meyer Schapiro that it occasioned.²⁶ Schapiro has two broad objections to Heidegger's interpretation. The first, which he secures through empirical research, is that Heidegger is wrong at the level of the work's iconography: these are van Gogh's (not a female peasant's) shoes and van Gogh was a town dweller at the time these works were painted. Schapiro is much more likely to be right about this than Heidegger. But right or wrong, it is beside the point: Heidegger is only concerned with what the shoes as painted *disclose* of the peasant world, not with what is *represented* by the painting, and nothing in principle precludes disclosing *x* by representing *y*.²⁷

Schapiro's second criticism is connected in his own mind to the first. It is that, as a result of getting the painting's iconography wrong, Heidegger fails to recognize "the artist's presence in the work."²⁸ In effect, the shoes are a kind of self-portrait: it is van Gogh who looks back at us from these shoes' worn physiognomy. I believe that Schapiro is essentially right about this, if not for quite the reasons that he gives. The painting is not a self-portrait because these are van Gogh's *shoes*, but because this is van Gogh's *painting*. It is a self-portrait in this sense simply by virtue of its being a painting by van Gogh. If this is right, Schapiro's second criticism stands independently of the irrelevance of his first.

Philosophers sympathetic to Heidegger routinely fail to grasp the depth of this point as a point about painting. Van Gogh's oeuvre, like

that of any other artist, is marked by a distinctive artistic vision: it embodies a *particular* set of convictions and conceptions of salience and value in the world. This is sometimes called "artistic style," though "artistic character" would come closer to what I have in mind, unless, that is, artistic style is understood as something that only fully manifests itself across an artist's oeuvre (or some significant stretch thereof) in ways analogous to those in which character only manifests itself across an individual's commitments taken over the long haul, rather than the intentions animating particular acts.²⁹ Artistic character, so construed, is what artists *cannot not* express; it permeates their oeuvre in ways analogous to those in which character in the everyday sense manifests itself over the course of a life lived. It would be hard to fully understand why we return to the works of some artists repeatedly and those of others not at all if they did not exude something like artistic character in this sense. What we are responding to in doing so is that particular conception of salience and value, call it a world, that an individual artist's work, and only her work, in all its peculiarities affords.

This is what sets individually authored modern works of art apart from both collectively produced works (such as the Greek temple) and individually produced images not made under modern conditions for autonomous art (medieval crucifixions or Orthodox icons, for example). But it is something that Heidegger's middle period view of art as an *impersonal* form of ontological disclosure indexed to a particular historical culture, taken together with his antipathy for the subjectivism of aesthetics, leaves no room to acknowledge, despite the fact that he is arguably trading on it himself when he appropriates van Gogh's romantic peasant pathos for his own ends. If this is right, Heidegger, not unlike Walton, if for rather different reasons, does not so much miss the artist's presence in his work as disavow his own reliance on it.

But what is the broader upshot of this? I said at the outset that my project was to take photography as theorized by analytic philosophers as a test case for Heidegger's claims about the relation between art and technology. On the account that has emerged, art stages a "decisive confrontation with technology" not *solely* by virtue of remaining responsive to nature's interplay of self-disclosure and self-concealment, but also, contra Heidegger,

inssofar as it preserves a space for what I have called “artistic character.” Preserving such a space is how art internally resists the reduction of human being to a faceless, interchangeable, quantum of resource: we value the work of particular artists, analogously to the ways in which we value other persons, in large part for what cannot be found elsewhere.

This is no less true of photography than it is of any other work of art, which is why Heidegger and Walton’s respective ways of formulating what I have called “the question concerning photography” are mutually implicating. From a Heideggerian perspective, the question would be how art could resist technology when the art is photography. From Walton’s perspective, the question is whether the nature of the photographic process suffices to distinguish photographic pictures from all others. My response to Heidegger has been that works of art, photography included, resist a technological understanding of the Being of beings in part for reasons that Heidegger gives and in part by preserving a space for artistic character that his middle period view of art as impersonal form of ontological disclosure leaves insufficient room to acknowledge. My response to Walton has been that, to the extent that photographs succeed in preserving such a space, to the extent, that is, that they are marked by the depth of decision that is its corollary and in so doing qualify as art, they cannot be robustly mind-independent in the sense that Walton’s account requires. These two responses are mutually implicating: photographic art resists technology to the extent that it is mind-dependent.³⁰

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1. The locus classicus is Kendall L. Walton, “Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 246–276. But see also: Walton, “Looking Again through Photographs: A Response to Edwin Martin” *Critical Inquiry* 12:4 (1986): 801–808; Walton, “On Pictures and Photographs: Objections Answered” in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, eds. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 60–75; and Walton, “Postscripts

to ‘Transparent Pictures:’ Clarifications and To Do’s” in Walton, *Marvelous Images: On Values and the Arts* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 117–132.

2. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 17–87.

3. See also Dana S. Belu and Andrew Feenberg, “Heidegger’s Aporetic Ontology of Technology,” *Inquiry* 53 (2010): 1–19. On Belu and Feenberg’s account, if Heidegger’s claims about the totalizing nature of “Enframing” are correct, he could not occupy the position he needs to occupy in order to make them; conversely, if he is in a position to make them, his claims cannot be correct.

4. See Nigel Warburton, “Seeing Through ‘Seeing Through Photographs’” *Ratio* 1 (1988): 62–74; Gregory Currie, “Photography, Painting and Perception,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49 (1991): 23–29; and Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Oxford University Press, 1996), among others.

5. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 35.

6. See Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” pp. 10–11, and Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche* (New York: Harper Collins, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 80–83. On the relation between *techne* and *phusis* see Bruce Foltz, *Inhabiting the Earth: Heidegger, Environmental Ethics and the Metaphysics of Nature* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1995), chap. 1, and Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Later Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), chap. 3.

7. Compare Heidegger’s description of the cabinet-maker in Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 14–15.

8. All these examples are taken from Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology.”

9. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 46.

10. In fact this relation is more complex than I can do justice to here. See, in this regard, Heidegger’s critique of instrumental conceptions of technology in his “The Question Concerning Technology,” pp. 5–11. Against such conceptions, Heidegger appeals to Aristotle’s conception of fourfold causality for a richer, noninstrumental conception of causality in terms of mutually implicating modes of being responsible, as in the silversmith’s “co-responsibility” for the chalice he brings forth.

11. On *Gestell*, see Miguel de Beistegui, *The New Heidegger* (London: Continuum, 2005), chaps. 4 and 5, and Julian Young, “The Essence of Technology,” in *Heidegger’s Later Philosophy*.

12. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” p. 17.

13. There are at least three senses of “earth” at play in the essay that Heidegger does not clearly distinguish: earth as native soil (with reference to the world of the peasant disclosed by van Gogh’s painting); earth as the materiality of material (with reference to the “stoniness of stone” as foregrounded in the Greek temple); and earth as what is rendered opaque by a given mode of disclosure (with reference to the epochal history of Being).

14. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” p. 43. See Hubert Dreyfus, “Heidegger’s Ontology of Art” on

works of art as “manifesting,” “articulating,” or “reconfiguring” what is decisive for a historical culture, in *A Companion to Heidegger*, eds. Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 407–419.

15. Kendall L. Walton, “Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 246–276. For an overview of these controversies see: Diarmuid Costello and Dawn M. Phillips, “Automatism, Causality and Realism: Foundational Problems in the Philosophy of Photography,” *Philosophy Compass* 4 (2009): 1–21.

16. See, for example, Neil Walsh Allen and Joel Snyder, “Photography, Vision and Representation,” *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1975): 143–169, and Joel Snyder, “Picturing Vision,” *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1980): 499–526. For an exception, see Dominic McIver Lopes, “Jetzt Sind Wir Alle Künstler,” in *Kunst: Philosophie*, ed. Julian Nida-Rümelin and Jacob Steinbrenner (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), pp. 103–121.

17. This case is typically made by appeal to Fred Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (MIT Press, 1981). See Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin, “On the Epistemic Value of Photographs,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004): 197–210, at pp. 200 ff., and Scott Walden, “Objectivity in Photography,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005): 258–272, at pp. 263 ff.

18. All these citations from Niépce, Daguerre, and Talbot are taken from Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Lawrence King, 2002), p. 23.

19. The view persists in the most nuanced recent accounts of photography as a multistage process originating in a light exposure. See Dawn M. Phillips, “Photography and Causation: Responding to Scruton’s Skepticism,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 (2004): 327–340. Such accounts can be used to define photography independently of claims about mind-independence. See Lopes, “Nun Sind Wir Alle Künstler.”

20. Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Lawrence King, 2002), p. 23.

21. Walton, “Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism,” pp. 261–262.

22. This is not an anomalous case. Imagine taking a long exposure of a yacht marina on a dead calm night using a slow film and the camera’s smallest aperture for maximum detail. Half a dozen boats come and go, but none of this makes the

final print, a richly detailed image of a marina populated by only those boats that remained at mooring throughout. Similarly, imagine images of dance performances that show no dancers or marching armies that show no soldiers. The number of qualifications and caveats to the standard account required to rule out such cases only serves to undermine the hard and fast distinction between painting and photography that it was supposed to capture.

23. Tracings, rubbings, and other more or less automatic transcription processes provide interesting test cases for this claim from the opposite direction.

24. Heidegger’s account of the Greek temple is much more plausible for his purposes, arguably because it cannot be understood as a work of art in the modern sense of that term. See Diarmuid Costello, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Ausstellbarkeit,” in *Die Ausstellung: Politik Eines Rituals*, eds. Dorothea von Hantelmann and Carolin Meister (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2010), pp. 161–189.

25. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” pp. 33–34.

26. Meyer Schapiro, “The Still Life as Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh,” and “Further Notes on Heidegger and van Gogh,” both in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society* (New York: George Brazillier, 1994), pp. 135–142, 143–151.

27. On this point, and the debate between Heidegger and Schapiro more generally, see Jacques Derrida, “Restitutions” in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago University Press, 1987), pp. 255–382.

28. Meyer Schapiro, “The Still Life as Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh,” in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society* (New York: George Brazillier, 1994), p. 139.

29. For a “deep” conception of artistic style, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 67. For a more analytic take on these issues see Jenefer Robinson, “Style and Personality in the Literary Work,” *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 227–247.

30. I would like to thank Miguel de Beistegui, Eileen John, Wayne Martin, Dawn Phillips, and especially Dom Lopes for their feedback on this article in draft.