

Week 3

Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935-36)

[present-at-hand/ready-at-hand; art/work; world/earth; preservers; disclosure; unconcealment; poetry]

Present-at-hand/ready-at-hand: the two ways beings make sense of things: entities are present-at-hand when we see them only in terms of their bare facts (a rock or a tree); entities are ready-at-hand when we observe them in terms of their use-value (a broom or a hammer).

Art/work: art has features in common with both the present-at-hand and the ready-at-hand; like a broom and unlike a rock, it's made by humans; but like a rock and unlike a broom, it has no specific purpose. The work of art sets up a world in which choices can be made and tells us things about that world by illuminating both the world and the earth on which it rests. It lets happen the arrival of the 'truth' (a 'world'), and thematizes it 'environmentally' (for example, Heidegger asks, what is the 'world' to which Van Gogh's shoes or a Greek Temple belong?) The artwork does not create this world, however: - language creates world (see below on 'Poetry').

Things: everything lifeless or 'useful' is a thing (everything except God and humans and arguably other organic forms); art also has a 'thingly' element, which means there is some kind of 'stuff' that makes up an artwork, but art is not like things that have a use-value (cars, hammers, brooms) because art has no fixed 'purpose'. All 'things' share the following three 'interpretations' (1) they bear characteristics or traits; (2) are perceptible by means of sensations; (3) are 'formed matter': art things thus bring together their meaning as 'worlds' (i.e. networks of involvements) and their thinginess as rooted in and made up of 'earthly' stuff.

World: see the 'Temple' passage of the essay. 'World' is the 'all-governing . . . open relational context' of an historical culture, a kind of space. World is the background and unusually unnoticed understanding which determines for the members of an historical culture what, for them, fundamentally there *is*. Thus, world is the same as truth for Heidegger: truth means 'correspondence' or 'adequacy' to the facts – the artwork isn't 'truth' (as Hegel argues) but transports us into truth.

Earth: the artwork sets up a world, places it on display. But it *also* consecrates its world, invests it with 'dignity and splendour' and allows it to stand forth as 'holy'. That 'holiness' is a principle Heidegger calls 'earth'. In his later work, Heidegger loses the word 'earth' but keeps using the concept it expresses in phrases like 'the secret', 'the ungraspable', the 'other', 'divine radiance' and 'the holy'.

World/earth duality: world and earth are in conflict – the world needs to 'tame' the earth and its raw materials; and the earth overgrows and destroys our works if we don't tend and protect them. But the two also need each other – the earth is the background against which every meaningful world emerges. Both are necessary for the artwork – the artwork is an object of the 'world' (or is itself a miniature world, like Van Gogh's shoes), but the very nature of art appeals to 'earth' as its function is to highlight the natural materials used to create it.

Preservers: the work of art needs an audience or 'preservers' to bring out its meaning and to receive the light that it sheds on their lives; preservers 'protect/keep' the truth of a work of art, rather than simply perceiving or looking at it.

Disclosure: it is human nature to be world disclosers – what distinguishes us from other things is our ability to open up new worlds, new ways of being; disclosure means capturing something we're not used to thinking about (a 'new' idea) as well as new horizons of meaning (e.g. we might be familiar with 'music' but it's being constantly reinvented in different genres).

Unconcealment (or 'uncoveredness'): as western philosophy has ignored being, Heidegger advocated a return to a way of thinking our being in the world, one that allow it to 'reveal' or 'unconceal' itself as 'originary truth'. Heidegger rejected the idea that truth = correspondences between propositions and states of affairs. Instead, truth is what enables beings (us) to make an assertion through an awareness of a whole situation – truth is not the 'fact' of someone's phone number; truth involves wanting to phone someone, having something to say, knowing how to find their number, use a phone etc. We can't be 'certain' of truth because truth isn't a quest for what's already known but a quest for the disclosure or unconcealment of worlds.

Happening: the artwork is the 'happening of truth', or the 'opening up of the world'; artworks open up the world to which it belongs. Heidegger distinguishes three (Western) worlds: the Greek; the medieval; the modern. Worlds come and go – when the world of which an artwork is part decays, the artwork does too: since their 'worlds' have disappeared, the temple and the cathedral, for example, can't do the 'work' of 'opening up' their world anymore. They have passed over into the realm of tradition and conservation and are museum things, not art things. Artworks also lose their greatness if they are withdrawn from their worlds, for example, an African fertility symbol being removed from its site and placed in a New York living room.

Historical: history is not a matter of progress and development, but the movement from one paradigm of understanding to another. What had been central to the understanding of being in a culture was now, through the working of a poet or a great work of art, moved to the margins. Some things will seem to be, and maybe even are, better. But in general, the epochs are irreconcilable with one another: practices that earlier played a central organizing role in the culture are covered over and hidden now; a new range of practices organizes the culture. This means it's possible for a culture to lose touch with important and revealing practices from the past: artworks can put us back in touch with practices earlier cultures had but that we've lost (artists become prophets).

Poetry: truth happens, Heidegger says, 'through being poeticized' (OWA, 44); all art is poetry because it is the projection of truth, the 'letting happen' of truth or the creation of a world. Language creates worlds and beings because it poeticizes them: language is poetry means that language does not just 'acknowledge' world/beings but 'projects' them (like a system of maps projects a world). Poetry is 'projective saying'. It is not an abstract system of vocabulary and rules of syntax. Rather it is a conversation or integration of 'words and things and actions that slowly comes together and grows into a comprehensive way of life' (Julian Young, 2009).