

Heidegger's Critique of Modern Aesthetics

Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds.

Barnet Newman (famous witticism)

The essence of art is not the expression of lived experience. . . . Nor does this essence consist in the artist depicting reality more accurately and precisely than others, or producing ([that is,] representing) something that gives pleasure to others, that provides enjoyment of a higher or lower type. . . . But in order to understand what the work of art and poetry are as such, philosophy must first break the habit of grasping the problem of art as one of aesthetics.

Heidegger (ET 47/GA34 63–4)

1. INTRODUCTION: HEIDEGGER – AGAINST AESTHETICS, FOR ART

Heidegger is against the modern tradition of philosophical “aesthetics” because he is for the true “work of art” which, he argues, the aesthetic approach to art eclipses.¹ Heidegger’s critique of aesthetics and his advocacy of art thus form a complementary whole, as I shall show in the next two chapters. Here in Chapter 2, section 1 orients the reader by providing a brief overview of Heidegger’s philosophical stand *against aesthetics, for art*. Sections 2 and 3 explain Heidegger’s philosophical critique of aesthetics, showing why he thinks aesthetics follows from modern “subjectivism” and leads to late-modern “enframing,” historical worldviews Heidegger

¹ As Bernasconi observes, “there has been relatively little scrutiny of Heidegger’s attempt to free the concept of art itself from its status as an aesthetic category” (see Bernasconi, “Heidegger’s Displacement of the Concept of Art,” 378); that is the gap this chapter seeks to fill. For illuminating discussions of the broader historical context of Heidegger’s hermeneutic and phenomenological understanding of art, see the insightful essays by Charles Guignon, “Meaning in the Work of Art: A Hermeneutic Perspective,” and Steven Crowell, “Phenomenology and Aesthetics; or, Why Art Matters.”

seeks to transcend from within – in large part by way of his phenomenological interpretations of art. In Chapter 3, sections 1 and 2 develop this attempt to transcend modern aesthetics from within, focusing on the way Heidegger seeks to build a phenomenological bridge from a particular (“ontic”) work of art by Vincent van Gogh to the ontological truth of art in general. Here we will see how exactly Heidegger thinks art can help lead us into a genuinely meaningful postmodernity. We will then conclude, in Section 3, by explaining how this phenomenological understanding of Heidegger’s project allows us to resolve the longstanding controversy surrounding Heidegger’s interpretation of Van Gogh.

1.1. “Heidegger’s Aesthetics”: Beyond the Oxymoron

Perhaps the first thing I should say about “Heidegger’s aesthetics” is that Heidegger himself would consider the very topic oxymoronic, a contradiction in terms like the idea of a “square circle,” “wooden iron,” or a “Christian philosopher” (Heidegger’s three favorite examples of oxymorons).² Treating Heidegger’s own thinking about art as “aesthetics” would strike him as incongruous and inappropriate because he consistently insisted that the “aesthetic” approach has led Western humanity to understand and experience the work of art in a way that occludes its true historical significance. Yet, Heidegger’s thinking cannot be sympathetically classified as “anti-aesthetic” either, because he suggests that any such anti-aesthetics would remain blindly entangled in aesthetics in the same way that, for example, atheism remains implicated in the logic of theism (both claiming to know something unknowable) – or indeed as, in his view, any merely oppositional movement remains trapped in the logic of what it opposes (QCT 61/GA5 217; CPC 33/GA77 51). For Heidegger, as we will see, the only way to get beyond aesthetics is to first understand how it shapes us and then seek to pass through and beyond that influence, thereby getting over it as one might “recover” from a serious illness (ID 37/101). Because the aesthetic approach continues to eclipse our access to the role artworks quietly play in forming and informing our historical worlds, Heidegger thinks that only such a post-aesthetic thinking about art can allow us to recognize art’s true significance, helping us understand the inconspicuous way in which art works to shape our basic sense of what is and what matters.

From a strictly Heideggerian perspective, then, any attempt to explain “Heidegger’s aesthetics” (or “anti-aesthetics”) will look either malicious

² In the early 1920s, Heidegger will repeatedly proclaim that genuine philosophy “is and remains atheism” (HCT 80/GA20 109–10) because true philosophical questioning must follow where the questions themselves lead and so cannot agree ahead of time to abide by any external limits imposed by the Church or other would-be authorities over matters of the mind or spirit. For precisely the same reason, of course, a “Nazi Philosopher” is also an oxymoron, a fact Heidegger unfortunately failed to grasp between 1933 and 1937.

or misconceived, like a deliberate flaunting or else an unwitting display of ignorance concerning the basic tenets of his views on art. Fortunately, our starting point is not really so misconceived.³ Once we understand why exactly Heidegger criticizes what we could call the *aestheticization* of art, we will thereby have put ourselves on the right track to understanding his own post-aesthetic thinking about the work of art. (We should not confuse the aestheticization Heidegger critiques with “aestheticism,” a term standardly taken to refer to the “art for art’s sake” movement. For Heidegger, any such attempt to disconnect art from politics, philosophy, and other history-shaping movements misses the full scope of the *work* of art, a misunderstanding made possible by the prior reduction of art to aesthetics.)⁴ So, what exactly is supposed to be wrong with the aestheticization of art? What leads Heidegger to critique the modern tradition that understands art in an “aesthetic” way, and why does he believe this aesthetic approach eclipses the true significance of the work of art?

1.2. Heidegger's Understanding of the True Work of Art

To understand Heidegger's critique of aesthetics, it will help first to sketch his positive view of art's true historical role. Heidegger's own understanding of the work of art is resolutely populist but with revolutionary aspirations.⁵ He believes that, at its greatest, art “grounds history” by “allowing truth to spring forth” (PLT 77/GA5 65).⁶ Building on Heraclitus's view of the pervasive tension of normative conceptual oppositions (good/bad,

³ I should mention that this chapter began when the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* commissioned me to write their entry on “Heidegger's Aesthetics.”

⁴ David Whewell defines “aestheticism” as: “The doctrine that art should be valued for itself alone and not for any purpose or function it may happen to serve,” thereby connecting aestheticism to the *l'art pour l'art* movement that emerged in mid-nineteenth century France. (See Whewell, “Aestheticism,” 6.) In the first version of “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger explicitly rejects such a view: “Does not the attempt at *separating* out the work from all relation to other things outside of it act precisely contrary to the essence of the *work itself*? To be sure, for the work wants to be disclosed *as a work*” (HR 133/UK1 8).

⁵ The revolutionary dimension is even more pronounced in the first version of the essay, in which Heidegger writes that: “Where an ‘audience’ exists, the work's only relation to that pre-existing audience is to destroy [*zerstört*] it. And the power for this destruction measures the greatness of an artwork.” (HR 134/UK1 8) Because the work sets “up *only* its own world” (HR 135, my emphasis/UK1 10), this newly disclosed world “moves into the common reality” of the status quo as its “shattering and refutation” (HR 142/UK1 15). Around the same time, Heidegger also uses this image of exploding from within (or “blasting open”) to explain the effect that thinking of the self as fundamentally an engaged being-in-the-world will have on our common conception of consciousness as a self-enclosed subjective sphere (LQ 129/GA38 156).

⁶ I have frequently consulted Julian Young's excellent translation of “The Origin of the Work of Art” (see OBT), often adopting the emendations he makes to the better known translation of the essay by Albert Hofstadter (in PLT).

worthy/worthless, noble/base, and the like) that undergird and implicitly structure our sense of ourselves and our worlds, Heidegger imagines the way an ancient Greek temple at Paestum once worked to help unify its historical world by tacitly disclosing a particular sense of what is and what matters:

It is the temple-work that first joins together and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline obtain the form of destiny for human being. . . . The temple first gives to things their look and to humanity their outlook on themselves. (PLT 42–3/GA5 27–9)

Great art works in the background of our historical worlds, in other words, by partially embodying and so selectively reinforcing an historical community's implicit sense of *what is and what matters*. In this way, great artworks both (1) “first give to things their look,” that is, they help establish an historical community's implicit sense of what things *are*, and they (2) give “to humanity their outlook on themselves,” that is, they also help shape an historical community's implicit sense of *what truly matters* in life (and so also what does not), which lives are most (or least) worth living, which actions are “noble” (or “base”), what in the community's traditions most deserves to be preserved (or forgotten), and so on. In this way, an artwork can first open up the historical sense for what is and what matters that an ontotheology will subsequently disseminate.⁷

As this suggests (and as we saw last chapter), Heidegger subscribes to a doctrine of *ontological historicity*. Refining a view first developed by Hegel, Heidegger thinks that humanity's fundamental sense of reality changes over time (sometimes dramatically), and he suggests that the work of art helps explain the emergence of such historical transformations of intelligibility at the most primordial level.⁸ Because great art *works* inconspicuously to establish, maintain, and transform humanity's historically variable sense of what is and what matters, Heidegger emphasizes that “*art is the becoming and happening of truth*” (PLT 71/GA5 59). In other words, great artworks first open up the implicit (or “background”) ontology and ethics

⁷ Heidegger describes his understanding of the relation between art and metaphysics in 1946, writing: “the destiny of world is heralded in poetry, without yet becoming manifest as the history of being” (P 258/GA9 339). In other words, art – the essence of which is poetry, i.e., disclosive bringing-into-being (as we will see next chapter) – opens up and so inaugurates an historical sense of what-is and what matters. Such an historico-cultural sense can then subsequently take the firm conceptual shape of a dual, ontotheological understanding of the being of entities and thereby enter into the “history of being” (i.e., the history of epochal understandings of the being of entities, as we saw in Chapter 1).

⁸ For Heidegger, the historical transformation of intelligibility (or “history of being”) proceeds – *via* what we would now call a “punctuated equilibrium” – through five different Western “epochs” or historical constellations of intelligibility: the pre-Socratic, Platonic, medieval, modern, and late-modern epochs.

through which an historical community comes to understand itself and its world.⁹ In keeping with this understanding of art (as what first opens and focuses the historical world that an ontotheology later universalizes and secures), Heidegger rethinks “truth” ontologically as the historically dynamic disclosure of intelligibility in time. As we will see next chapter, this historical unfolding of truth takes place – to use Heidegger’s preferred philosophical terms of art – as an “*a-lêtheiac*” struggle to “dis-close” (*a-lêtheia*) that which conceals (*lêthê*) itself, an “essential strife” between two interconnected dimensions of intelligibility (namely, revealing and concealing) that Heidegger calls “world” and “earth” in his most famous essay on art.

In sum, great art *works* by selectively focusing an historical community’s tacit sense of what is and what matters and reflecting it back to that community, which thereby comes implicitly to understand itself in the light of this artwork. Artworks thus function as ontological *paradigms*, serving their communities both as “models of” and “models for” reality, which means (as Dreyfus nicely puts it) that artworks can variously “manifest,” “articulate,” or even “reconfigure” the historical ontologies undergirding their cultural worlds.¹⁰ Heidegger suggests, in other words, that art can accomplish its world-disclosing work on at least three different orders of magnitude: (1) micro-paradigms he will later call “things thinging,” which help us become aware of what matters most deeply to us; (2) paradigmatic artworks like Van Gogh’s painting and Hölderlin’s poetry, which disclose how art itself works; and (3) macro-paradigmatic “great” works of art like the Greek temple and tragic drama (works Heidegger also sometimes calls

⁹ Heidegger’s view of art applies to all great art, including great *poetic* works of art. Thus he writes that in a masterful Greek tragedy like Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, “the struggle of the new gods against the old is being fought. The work of language . . . does not speak about this struggle; rather, it transforms the saying of the people so that every essential word fights the battle and puts up for decision what is holy and unholy, what great and what small, what brave and what cowardly, what precious and what fleeting, what master and what slave (cf. Heraclitus, Fragment 53)” (PLT 43/GA5 29). We will return to Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* in Chapter 4. It would, however, be irresponsible not to mention the complex political subtext of the obliquely self-referential passages I have quoted, with their abundant use of such Nazi buzzwords as *Kampf* (struggle), derivatives of *führen* (leading), and the opposition of *Sieg* (victory) and *Schmach* (disgrace). As the passage itself suggests (and as I show in *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, ch. 3), Heidegger’s general rhetorical strategy is to try to appropriate such political buzzwords by radically reinterpreting them in terms of his own philosophy.

¹⁰ Hubert L. Dreyfus draws on Clifford Geertz (along with Thomas Kuhn and Charles Taylor) to help explain Heidegger in his illuminating essay, “Heidegger’s Ontology of Art,” 410. As Dreyfus nicely explains (412): “The temple draws the people who act in its light to clarify, unify, and extend the reach of its style, but being a material thing it resists rationalization. And since no interpretation can ever completely capture what the work means, the temple sets up a struggle between earth and world. The result is fruitful in that the conflict of interpretations that ensues generates a culture’s history.”

“gods”), which succeed in fundamentally transforming an historical community’s “understanding of being” (its most basic and ultimate understanding of what is and what matters, which ontotheologies can then work to universalize and secure for an epoch, as we saw last chapter).¹¹

It is with this ontologically revolutionary potential of great art in mind that Heidegger writes:

Whenever [great] art happens – that is, when there is a beginning – a push [or “jolt,” *Stoß*] enters history, and history either starts up or starts again. (PLT 77/GA5 65)

Great art is literally *revolutionary*, in other words, capable of overcoming the inertia of existing traditions by jolting the interconnected ontological and ethical wheels of history into motion. By beginning to open up a new sense of what is and what matters, great art either extends or transforms the ontotheology through which we make sense of the world and our place in it.¹² Given Heidegger’s view of the revolutionary role art can thus play in inconspicuously developing or transfiguring the sense of what is and what matters that governs an age, his occasionally ill-tempered critiques of the reduction of art to aesthetics become much easier to understand. In his view, the stakes of our understanding of and approach to art could not be any higher.

2. HEIDEGGER’S PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE OF AESTHETICS

Heidegger believes that the aestheticization of art has gotten us late moderns stuck in the rarefied and abstract view according to which “the enjoyment of art serves [primarily] to satisfy the refined taste of connoisseurs and aesthetes.” His complaint is not that we treat food as art but rather the reverse, that we treat art in categories meant to describe the enjoyment of

¹¹ This view was first sketched in my “The Silence of the Limbs: Critiquing Culture from a Heideggerian Understanding of the Work of Art.” Heidegger raises an important puzzle for this view, however, when he (implicitly but deliberately) includes Van Gogh’s painting as a “great” work of art in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” stating that “great art . . . is all we are talking about here” (PLT 40/GA5 26). The solution to this puzzle is that the way Van Gogh’s painting illuminates what art itself is, as we will see, is supposed to help us transcend modern aesthetics from within. I.e., our encounter with Van Gogh is supposed to exemplify – and so help us learn to understand – what it means to encounter being in a *postmodern* way. For Heidegger, then, Van Gogh’s painting is both a paradigmatic and a macroparadigmatic work; for, *it shows us what art is in a way that changes our understanding of what it means for anything to be.* (Although this postmodern understanding of being applies universally, it is not totalizing, thanks to the inherently open-ended, pluralistic way in which it teaches us to understand and so encounter all that is as conceptually inexhaustible, as we will see in Chapter 3.)

¹² Young recognizes “the inseparability of ontology and ethics” as “a thesis fundamental to all phases of Heidegger’s thinking” in his seminal work, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, 24.

delicate sensory delights. Hence Heidegger's amusing but harsh judgment that: "For us today, ... art belongs in the domain of the pastry chef" (IM 140/GA40 140). We can all learn to appreciate the "finer" things in life (and so come to make increasingly "refined" discriminations of taste). But the fact that our culture blithely celebrates café baristas who compete over the "art" of pouring foamed milk into our cappuccinos suggests that we have lost sight of the role art can play in shaping history at the deepest level, an ontologically revolutionary role compared to which Heidegger finds even the most "artful" gestures of culinary expertise relatively empty.¹³

For the same reason, Heidegger is no more impressed by Kant's high-brow view that the disinterested contemplation of art works to "serve the moral elevation of the mind" (IM 140/GA40 140).¹⁴ Instead, Heidegger is clearly sympathetic to the "complaint" that, as he puts it:

innumerable aesthetic considerations of and investigations into art and the beautiful have achieved nothing, they have not helped anyone gain access to art, and they have contributed virtually nothing to artistic creativity or to a sound appreciation of art. (N1 79/GA43 92)

Heidegger would thus agree with the sentiment behind Barnett Newman's famous quip: "Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds."¹⁵ Still, for Heidegger such complaints, while "certainly right," are really only symptomatic of a much deeper philosophical problem, a problem that stems from the way modern aesthetics is rooted in the subject/object divide at the very core of the modern worldview. In order to reach the core of the problem, then, let us first to take a step back and ask: How exactly does Heidegger understand *aesthetics*?¹⁶

¹³ It is telling that in Neill and Ridley's collection, *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, the two chapters the editors present as a debate of the question, "Is our experience of food and drink ever correctly thought of as an aesthetic experience?" (9), in fact both agree that food can be "art." This agreement is not surprising, viewed in the light of Heidegger's critique of the reduction of art to "aesthetic experience," a reduction typically presupposed in contemporary "aesthetics." In "Food as Art," e.g., Tefler offers a partial "definition" of art that fits Heidegger's critical understanding of the aesthetic approach: "if something is a work of art, then its maker or exhibitor intended it to be looked at or listened to with intensity, for its own sake" (14).

¹⁴ Even if this rather esoteric view represents the romantic kernel in Kant's aesthetic thought, it nevertheless presupposes the same subject/object divide that, we will see, Heidegger believes has led the modern aesthetic tradition off track.

¹⁵ See also T. S. Eliot's well-crafted lines (from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"): "And I have known the eyes already, known them all – / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, / And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wrigling on the wall, / Then how should I begin..." (*The Wasteland and Other Poems*, 5).

¹⁶ In the scholarly literature, the answer to this question is often drawn from Heidegger's "Six Basic Developments in the History of Aesthetics" (section 13 from the first of Heidegger's famous *Nietzsche* lectures, *The Will to Power as Art*, delivered between 1936 and 1937). The history of aesthetics Heidegger presents here is typically taken as Heidegger's own view,

2.1. How Heidegger Understands Aesthetics

As Heidegger points out, the term “aesthetics” is a modern creation. It was coined by Alexander Baumgarten in the 1750s and then critically appropriated by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (published in 1790).¹⁷ Baumgarten formed the term “aesthetics” from the Greek word for “sensation” or “feeling,” *aisthêsis* (N1 83/GA43 98). As this indicates, modern “aesthetics” was originally conceived as the science of *aisthêta*, matters perceptible by the senses, as opposed to *noêma*, matters accessible to thought alone, like the truths dealt with in mathematical logic. In fact, modern aesthetics is borne of the aspiration to be “in the field of sensuousness what logic is in the domain of thinking” (N1 83/GA43 98). That is, just as logic (conceived as the science of thought) seeks to understand our relation to the true, so aesthetics (conceived as the science of sensation or feeling) seeks to understand our relation to the beautiful.¹⁸

To recognize that the central focus of modern aesthetics is beauty is not to deny its traditional interest in the sublime or its late-modern preoccupations with the abject, the obscene, kitsch, and so on. Heidegger's point, rather, is that

aesthetics is that kind of meditation on art in which humanity's state of feeling in relation to the beautiful represented in art is the point of departure and the goal that sets the standard for all its definitions and explanations. (N1 78/GA43 91)

despite the fact that this assumption leads to unresolved puzzles about why Heidegger would then have presented drastically different views in essays written at almost the same time. It is not always easy to separate Heidegger's own view from the Nietzschean position he claims to be explicating (especially in the first of his *Nietzsche* lectures – this becomes much less of a problem by the end of the second lecture series, as Heidegger becomes increasingly disillusioned with Nazism and so more careful to distinguish Nietzsche's views from his own). Nevertheless, Heidegger clearly claims that the history of aesthetics he presents here is in fact drawn *from Nietzsche*, and should be understood as “an attempt to simplify Nietzsche's presentations concerning art to what is essential” (N1 122/GA43 143). Recognizing this makes it less surprising that Heidegger contradicts some of these views when speaking in his own voice elsewhere (as in the lecture delivered the following year, “The Age of the World Picture, explicated below).

¹⁷ In 1937, Heidegger suggests that modern aesthetics stays within the traditional philosophical approach to art. “The name ‘aesthetics’ for a meditation on art and the beautiful is young and stems from the eighteenth century. But the matter itself so aptly named by this name – that is, the way of inquiring into art and the beautiful on the basis of the state of feeling in enjoyers and producers – is old, just as old as mediation on art and the beautiful in Western thought. *The philosophical meditation on the essence of art and the beautiful already begins as aesthetics.*” (N1 79/GA43 92) Heidegger's more careful view is that aesthetics proper presupposes the modern subject/object divide, but because he holds Plato responsible for inaugurating this divide, he can loosely trace the “aesthetic” way of conceiving art all the way back to Plato and Aristotle, as he does here.

¹⁸ As Heidegger puts it: “What determines thinking, that is, logic, and what thinking comports itself toward, is the true.” Analogously: “What determines human feeling, that is, aesthetics, and what feeling comports itself toward, is the beautiful” (N1 78/GA43 90).

In its paradigmatic form (the form “that sets the standard” for all its other “definitions and explanations”), modern “aesthetics is the consideration of humanity’s state of feeling in relation to the beautiful” (N1 78/GA43 90). Nor is Heidegger denying that there are numerous disagreements within the modern aesthetic tradition (between Kant and Baumgarten, just to begin with). Instead, his thesis is that even the disagreements in the modern aesthetic tradition take place within the framework of a common approach. It is this shared framework that Heidegger designates when he refers to the “aesthetic” approach to art.

As we would expect, this basic framework undergirds the paradigmatic inquiry of modern aesthetics, the study of beauty through a “consideration of humanity’s state of feeling in relation to the beautiful.” In all the aesthetic investigations that take their cues from this one, Heidegger observes:

The artwork is posited as the “object” for a “subject,” and this subject-object relation, specifically as a relation of feeling, is definitive for aesthetic consideration. (N1 78/GA43 91)

In other words, modern aesthetics frames its understanding of art by presupposing the subject/object dichotomy: Aesthetics presupposes a fundamental divide between the art “object” and the experiencing “subject,” a divide that is subsequently crossed by the commerce of sensation or feeling. Of course, the subject/object dichotomy forms the very basis of the modern worldview, so we would be surprised if modern aesthetics did not presuppose it. So, what specifically does Heidegger object to about the way the aesthetic approach to art presupposes a viewing subject, standing before some art object, enjoying (or not enjoying) his or her sensory experience of this artwork? What is supposed to be the problem with this aesthetic picture of art?

2.2. Heidegger’s Critique of the Aesthetic Approach

In a provocatively titled essay delivered in 1938, “The Age of the World Picture,” Heidegger provides a succinct formulation of what it means to approach art aesthetically that helps us reach the core of his objection to aesthetics. When “art gets pushed into the horizon of aesthetics,” he writes, this

means [1] that the artwork becomes an object of lived experience [*Gegenstand des Erlebens*], and [2] in this way art comes to count as an expression of human life [*Lebens*]. (QCT 116/GA5 75)

Heidegger is making two connected points here (which I have numbered accordingly). The first is that when art is understood and approached “aesthetically,” artworks become *objects* for human subjects to experience in an especially intense, vital, or meaningful way. We can see this if we

unpack his typically dense language: As Heidegger frequently points out, in the modern, post-Cartesian world, an “object,” *Gegenstand*, is something that “stands opposite” a human subject, something *external* to subjectivity. In order to experience an object, the modern subject must supposedly first get outside the immanent sphere of its own subjectivity so as to encounter this “external” object, and then return back to its subjective sphere bearing the fruits of this encounter. Given the modern subject/object dichotomy, such an adventure beyond subjectivity and back again is required for the experience of any object. But in the case of the art object, Heidegger is pointing out, the adventure beyond subjectivity and back again is a particularly intense, meaningful, or enlivening one: A “lived experience” is an experience that makes us feel “more alive,” as Heidegger suggests by emphasizing the etymological connection between *Erleben* and *Lebens*, “lived experience” and “life.”

The second point Heidegger is trying to make is that when artworks become objects for subjects to have particularly meaningful experiences of, these artworks themselves also get understood thereby as meaningful expressions of an artistic subject's own life experiences. Heidegger does not ever develop any argument for this point; the thought simply seems to be that once aesthetics understands artworks as objects of which we can have meaningful experiences, it is only logical to conceive of these art objects themselves in an isomorphic way, as meaningful expressions of the lives of the artists who created them. Still, this alleged isomorphism of aesthetic “expression and impression” is not immediately obvious.¹⁹ Think, for example, about the seriously playful “found art” tradition in Surrealism, dada, Fluxus, and their heirs, a tradition in which ordinary objects get seditiously appropriated as “art.” (The continuing influence of Marcel Duchamp's “readymade” remains visible in everything from Andy Warhol's meticulously reconstructed *Brillo Boxes* [1964] to Ruben Ochoa's large-scale installations of industrial detritus like broken concrete, rebar, and chain-link fencing, in works such as *Ideal Disjuncture* (2008). Gianni Vattimo therefore suggests that Duchamp's *Fountain* illustrates the way an artwork can disclose a new world, a world in which the fine art tradition comes to celebrate not only the trivial and ordinary but also the vulgar and even the obscene.)²⁰ This “found art” tradition initially seems like a series

¹⁹ Heidegger presupposes the same point again in *What Is Called Thinking* (1951–52). Here he glosses “seeing art aesthetically” by adding: “that is, from the point of view of expression and impression – the work as expression and the impression as experience” (WCT 128/GA8 132).

²⁰ See Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, xv–xvi, 45–7, 105, and 159. Here Santiago Zabala even suggests that Duchamp's *Fountain* is a better illustration of art's revolutionary potential than Heidegger's own example of the Greek temple (xv). Yet, for Heidegger there are clearly different orders of magnitude here. In this regard, Wright nicely captures

of deliberate counter examples to the aesthetic assumption that artworks are meaningful expressions of an artist's own subjectivity.

Even in this tradition, however, the artists' appropriations are never truly random, but invariably require some selection, presentation, and the like, and thus inevitably reopen interpretive questions about the significance these art objects have for the artistic subject who chose them. (Why this particular object? Why present it in just this way?) It is thus not surprising that the founding work of found "anti-art," Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) – his deliciously seditious installation of a deliberately inverted, humorously signed (by "R. Mutt"), and brilliantly retitled urinal in an art gallery – is typically treated in contemporary aesthetics as an extreme expression of Duchamp's own artistic subjectivity, not as its absence.²¹ Here one could also point to the failure of Robert Rauschenberg's attempt to deconstruct the found art ideal of unique and spontaneous artistic invention in his incredible "combines," *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957), works that, despite Rauschenberg's painstaking efforts to make them identical, instead suggest the stubborn uniqueness of any given artwork.²² So, even the found art tradition of Duchamp's ready-made and its heirs reinforces Heidegger's point that, *in the basic aesthetic approach to art, art objects are implicitly understood as meaningful expressions*

Heidegger's larger point when she writes that: "The temple celebrates the extraordinary event of Greece's emergence as a history-making force that gives direction to the next two thousand years of Western history." (See Wright, "Heidegger and Hölderlin," 385.) Or, as Dreyfus puts it: "The [Greek] temple and the Presocratic thinkers had to take the style that was already in the language and, for the first time, focus it and hold it up to the people. According to Heidegger, this is the origin (*Ur-sprung*) of our Western culture." (See Dreyfus, "Heidegger's Ontology of Art," 419 note 4.) For a picture of Ochoa's *Ideal Disjuncture*, see <http://www.artslant.com/userimages/3/Ideal_Disjuncture1.jpg> (accessed 18 August 2010).

²¹ In his treatment of Schapiro's critique of Heidegger, Michael Kelly raises the same objection to Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh, suggesting that Heidegger sets himself a difficult challenge in his "attempt to desubjectivize aesthetics while discussing Van Gogh," an artist who placed his work under the bold signature, "Vincent," and is often taken as "the paradigm case of subjective art." Kelly's interpretation of "the subjectivization of aesthetics" as the tendency "to understand and judge art in terms of the viewer's subjective experience or judgment of it" allows Kelly to bring Heidegger into a productive dialogue with central issues in contemporary aesthetics, but this interpretation overlooks what Heidegger most fundamentally objects to about aesthetics, viz., its relation to "subjectivism." Heidegger's deepest objection to aesthetics is not that our understanding of art is overly constrained by idiosyncratic, "subjective" biases but, as we will see, that aesthetics follows from (and feeds back into) the modern subject's "subjectivistic" compulsion to control the entire objective world – a compulsion that Heidegger argues derives from modern metaphysics and thus from the "history of being," and so requires a response at this deeper level. (See Michael Kelly, *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*, 49–50.)

²² For Robert Rauschenberg, "Factum I" and "Factum II" (1957), see <<http://www.portlandart.net/archives/Rauschenberg%20Factum%20I%20and%20Factum%20II%201957.bmp>> (accessed 12 April 2010).

of artists' lives that are capable of eliciting particularly intense or meaningful experiences in viewing subjects.

In this aesthetic approach, to put it succinctly, *art objects express and intensify subjects' experiences of life.* What Heidegger thus characterizes as the aesthetic approach to art will probably seem so obvious to most people that it can be hard to see what he could possibly find objectionable about it. Art objects express and intensify human subjects' experiences of life; to most people, it might not even be clear what it could mean to understand art in any other way. How should we understand and approach art, if not in terms of the meaningful experiences that a subject might have of some art object, an art object that is itself a meaningful expression of the life of the artist (or artists) who created it? What exactly does Heidegger think is wrong with this "picture" of art?

Despite what one might expect from a phenomenologist like Heidegger, his objection is not that the aesthetic view mischaracterizes the way we late moderns ordinarily experience "art." On the contrary, Heidegger clearly suggests that what he characterizes as "the increasingly aesthetic fundamental position taken toward art as a whole" (N1 88/GA43 103) does accurately describe the experiences of art that take place – when they do take place – in museums, art galleries, and installations; in performance spaces, theaters, and movie houses; in cathedrals, coliseums, and other ruins; in cityscapes as well as landscapes; in concert halls, music clubs, and comic books; even when we listen to our speakers, headphones, ear-buds; and, sometimes (who could credibly deny it?), when we sit in front of our television screens, computer monitors, iPods and iPads, car stereos, and so on. The experiences we have of what rises to the level of "art" in all such settings are typically "aesthetic" experiences, that is, particularly intense or meaningful experiences that make us feel more alive; and, if we think about it, we do tend to approach these art objects as expressions of the lives of the artists who created them. The aesthetic view correctly characterizes our typical experience of "art" in the contemporary world – and for Heidegger that is part of the problem.²³

2.3. Symptoms of Subjectivism

This returns us to the bigger question we have been pursuing, and which we are now prepared to answer: Why exactly does Heidegger object to our contemporary tendency to understand and approach art in this aesthetic way? In the revealingly titled essay we have been drawing on ("The Age

²³ As Heidegger begins to extend his critique of aesthetic subjectivism so as to connect it to "enframing" (i.e., our reductive way of understanding the being of entities in terms of Nietzsche's ontotheology of eternally recurring will-to-power), he will go so far as to claim that "The aesthetic state is the lucidity through which we constantly see." (N1 139/GA43 170)

of the World Picture”), Heidegger explains that “the process by which art gets pushed into the horizon of aesthetics” is neither conceptually neutral nor historically unimportant. On the contrary, the historical process by which Western humanity came to understand art as “aesthetics” is so freighted with significance that it needs to be recognized as “one of the essential phenomena of the contemporary age” (QCT 116/GA₅ 75). Strikingly, Heidegger goes so far as to assert that our tendency to treat art as aesthetics is just as significant for and revealing of our current historical self-understanding as are the increasing dominance of science and technology, the tendency to conceive of all meaningful human activity in terms of “culture,” and the growing absence of any god or gods in our Western world (QCT 116–7/GA₅ 75–6). This is a surprising and deliberately provocative claim, one apparently meant to provoke us into noticing and thinking through something we ordinarily overlook. For, how can our understanding of art as aesthetics be just as essential to our current historical self-understanding as are the dominance of science, the growing influence of technology, the ubiquitous discussions of culture, and the withdrawal of gods from our history – four seemingly much larger and more momentous historical developments?

These five “essential phenomena” – the historical ascendance of science, technology, aesthetics, and culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, that historical decline of the divine that Heidegger, echoing Schiller, calls the “ungodding” or “degodification” (*Entgötterung*) of the world – these all are “equally essential” (*gleichwesentliche*), Heidegger explains, because these five interlocking phenomena express and so reveal the underlying direction in which the contemporary world is moving historically.²⁴ In other words, science, technology, aesthetics, culture, and degodification are “equally essential” as five major historical developments that feed into and disclose (what we could think of as) *the current*, that is, the underlying historical direction or *Zeitgeist* of our contemporary world. In the late 1930s, Heidegger’s name for the underlying direction in which the age is moving is “subjectivism,” a movement that he defines as humanity’s ongoing attempt to establish “mastery over the totality of what-is” (QCT 132/GA₅ 92). *Subjectivism* thus designates humanity’s increasingly global quest to achieve complete control over every aspect of our objective reality, to establish ourselves as the being “who gives the measure and provides the guidelines for everything that is” (QCT 134/GA₅ 94). Heidegger’s fundamental objection to the aesthetic approach to art, then, is that this approach follows from and feeds back into *subjectivism*, contemporary humanity’s ongoing effort to

²⁴ Schiller’s famous poem, “The Gods of Greece,” mournfully contrasts the experience of the ancient Greeks, in which “Everything to the initiate’s eye / Showed the trace of a God,” with our modern experience of “A Nature shorn of the divine [or, less poetically, “a de-godified nature,” *die entgötterte Natur*]” (quoted by Taylor, *The Secular Age*, 316–17).

establish “our unlimited power for calculating, planning, and molding [or “breeding,” *Züchtung*] all things” (QCT 135/GA5 94).

3. HOW AESTHETICS REFLECTS AND REINFORCES SUBJECTIVISM

In order to understand why Heidegger thinks the aesthetic approach to art reflects and reinforces subjectivism, we need to know why Heidegger characterizes humanity’s ongoing attempt to master every aspect of our objective reality as “subjectivism” in the first place.²⁵ We saw earlier that in the modern, post-Cartesian world, an “object” (*Gegenstand*) is something that “stands opposite” a human *subject*, something that is “external” to the subjective sphere. This subject/object dichotomy seems obvious when one is theorizing from within the modern tradition, in which it has functioned as an axiom since Descartes famously argued that the subject’s access to its own thinking possesses an indubitable immediacy not shared by objects, which must thus be conceived of as external to subjectivity.

Yet, as Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* (1927), taking this modern subject/object dichotomy as our point of departure leads us to fundamentally mischaracterize the way we actually encounter the everyday world in which we are usually unreflectively immersed, the world of our practical engagements. By failing to recognize and do justice to the integral entwinement of self and world that is basic to our experiential navigation of our lived environments, modern philosophy effectively splits the subject off from objects and from other subjects. In this way, modern philosophy lays the conceptual groundwork for *subjectivism*, the “worldview” in which an intrinsically meaningless objective realm (“nature”) is separated epistemically from isolated, value-bestowing, self-certain subjects, and so needs to be mastered through the relentless epistemological, normative, and practical activities of these subjects. Heidegger suggests that this problem is not merely theoretical, because the subjectivism of the modern worldview functions historically like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Its progressive historical realization generates not only the political freedoms and scientific advances we cherish, but also unwanted downstream consequences such as our escalating environmental crisis and less predictable side-effects like the aestheticization of art.²⁶

²⁵ In his broader “history of being,” Heidegger traces “subjectivism” back to Plato, whose doctrine of the ideas begins a movement whereby truth is no longer understood solely in terms of the manifestation of entities themselves but, instead, becomes a feature of our own “representational” capacities. In this way, truth becomes primarily a matter of the way we secure our knowledge of entities rather than of the prior way entities disclose themselves to us. (On this “displacement of the locus of truth” from being to human subjectivity, see also *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 160.)

²⁶ The modern prejudice that (to put it simply) *all meaning comes from the human subject* reaches its most powerful apotheosis in Nietzsche and Freud. From Heidegger’s perspective,

3.1. Undermining the Subject/Object Dichotomy Phenomenologically

So, how does the aestheticization of art follow from subjectivism? (This is easier to see than Heidegger's converse claim – that the aestheticization of art feeds back into and reinforces subjectivism – so we will address it first.) *Being and Time* does not undermine the subject/object dichotomy by trying to advance the incredible thesis that the self really exists in a continuous and unbroken unity with its world. Instead, Heidegger seeks to account for the fact that our fundamental, practical engagement with our worlds can easily break down in ways that generate the perspective the subject/object dichotomy describes. Most of the time, we encounter ourselves as immediately and unreflectively immersed in the world of our concerns rather than as standing over against an “external” world of objects. Just think, for example, of the way you ordinarily encounter a hammer when you are hammering with it, or a pen while you are writing with it, a bike while riding it, a car while driving it, or even, say, a freeway interchange as you drive over it for the umpteenth time.

This all changes, however, when our practical engagement with the world of our concerns breaks down. When the head flies off the hammer and will not go back on (and no other hammering implement is available to complete the task at hand); when the pen we are writing with runs out of ink (and we have no other); when our bike tire goes flat or our car breaks down in the middle of a trip; when we find ourselves standing before an artwork that we cannot make sense of; or, in general, when we are still learning how to do something and encounter some unexpected difficulty that stops us in our tracks – in all such cases what Heidegger calls our ordinary, immediate “hands-on” (*zuhanden*) way of coping with the world of our practical concerns undergoes a “transformation” (*Umschlag*) in which we come to experience ourselves as isolated subjects standing reflectively before a world of external objects, which we thereby come to experience as standing over against us in the mode of something objectively “on hand” (*vorhanden*) (BT 408–9/SZ 357–8).

In other words, Heidegger does not deny the reality of the subject/object relation but, instead, points out that our experience of this subject/object relation *derives from* and so *presupposes* a more fundamental level of experience, a primordial modality of engaged existence in which self and world are united rather than divided. Heidegger believes that modern

however, this phenomenologically mistaken view misses (and subsequently obscures) the fact that meaning emerges at the prior, practical intersection of human beings with their worlds (as well as in our engaged negotiations with one another). In other words, Heidegger is an *ethical realist*, one whose phenomenological investigations led him to recognize that the world is no mute partner but, rather, actively contributes to our most profound sense of what matters. (On this point, see my “Ontology and Ethics at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy.”)

philosophy's failure to solve the problem of skepticism about the external world shows that those who begin with a subject/object dichotomy will never be able to bridge that divide subsequently (BT 249–50/SZ 205–6). He thus insists that this more primordial level of practically engaged, “hands-on” existence – in which self and world are unified – must be the starting point of any description of ordinary human experience that seeks to do justice to what such experience is really like, a phenomenological dictum Heidegger insists should also govern our attempts to describe our meaningful encounters with works of art.

3.2. Phenomenology Against Aesthetic Subjectivism

Following the phenomenological dictum that we should describe our experience of art in a way that is not distorted by the presuppositions we have inherited from the metaphysical tradition is easier said than done, however, for at least two reasons. First, the subject/object dichotomy is so deeply entrenched in our self-understanding that it has come to implicitly structure the fundamental aesthetic approach (as we have seen). Second, it is not immediately clear where (let alone how) we should look to discover art in a nonaesthetic way. Indeed, it now seems natural for us to think that what makes our experience of art objects significant is that such experiences allow us temporarily to transcend the sphere of our own subjectivity by getting in touch with art objects outside ourselves, because these transcendent experiences can profoundly enrich our subjective experience.

In Heidegger's view, however, this aesthetic perspective gets the story backward. We do not begin confined to our subjective spheres, temporarily leave those spheres behind in order to experience art objects, only to return back to subjectivity once again, enriched by the “booty” we have captured during our adventure in the external world of art objects (BT 89/SZ 62). The reverse is true: Human *existence* originally “stands outside” (*ek-sistere*) itself, integrally involved with the world in terms of which we ordinarily make sense of ourselves.²⁷ We do occasionally experience ourselves as subjects confronting objects (for example, when we first learn to draw or paint realistically, or when we find ourselves standing befuddled before an art object), but the experience of ourselves as subjects confronting objects is comparatively infrequent and takes place on the background of a more basic experience of ourselves as integrally involved with the

²⁷ In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger again presents his phenomenological conception of “existence” as the way to undercut and transcend the modern subject/object dichotomy: “In existence, however, humanity does not first move out of something ‘interior’ to something ‘exterior’; rather, the essence of existence is the out-standing standing within the essential separation [i.e., the essential strife that joins “earth and world”] belonging to the clearing of beings.” (PLT 67/GA5 55)

world of our practical concerns, an experience of fundamental self/world intertwinement to which we always return subsequently.²⁸

“Proximally and for the most part [or “initially and usually,” *zunächst und zumeist*],” as Heidegger likes to say, we do not stand apart from the entities that populate our world, observing them dispassionately – or even passionately, hoping to transcend an isolated subjective sphere that in fact we are usually already beyond. Why, then, should we privilege the detached, subject/object framework that emerges from a breakdown of our engaged experience when we try to approach art philosophically? We should not; trying to approach art while staying within the aesthetic approach is like trying to learn what it is like to ride a bike by staring at a broken bicycle. It is so to privilege the detached perspective of the observer that the participatory perspective gets eclipsed and forgotten. In Heidegger’s view, the phenomenologically faulty presuppositions of modern philosophy have misled aesthetics into looking for the work of art in the wrong place, at a derived rather than fundamental level of human interaction with the world, and thus into mistaking an intense subjective experience of an external object for an encounter with the true work of art.

Modern aesthetics presupposes the subject/object dichotomy and then problematically tries to describe the subsequent interaction between two allegedly heterogeneous domains, instead of recognizing and seeking to describe the prior role works of art play in the background of our everyday worldly engagement, in which no such dichotomy can yet be found. Heidegger’s post-aesthetic thinking about the work of art instead seeks to describe the usually unnoticed way in which artworks can form and inform our basic historical sense of what is and what matters (as we saw in section 1.2). Heidegger’s thinking about the formative role art can play in the background of our self-understanding is “post-aesthetic” in that it seeks to get past the constitutive mistakes of aesthetics, but it might also be characterized as “pre-aesthetic” insofar as the way he tries to go beyond aesthetics is by getting back behind the aesthetic starting point in order to do justice to that more primordial level of existence modern aesthetics overlooks. Indeed, although this initially sounds paradoxical, Heidegger suggests that *the best way to get beyond aesthetic experience is to transcend it from within* (that is, to encounter the way a subject’s experience of an aesthetic object can lead beyond or beneath itself), as we will see when we turn to his phenomenological analysis of Van Gogh’s painting next chapter.

To sum up, then, because aesthetics tries to describe artworks from the perspective of a subject confronting an external art object, the aesthetic approach begins always-already “too late” (BT 249/SZ 207). Aesthetics looks for art in the wrong place (at a derivative rather than primordial level

²⁸ This is to assume, of course, that we do not suffer a nervous breakdown or else demise first. (See my “Death and Demise in *Being and Time*.”)

of human interaction with the world), and what it finds there is not the true work of art. Misled by the presuppositions of modern philosophy, aesthetics overlooks that more ordinary level of human existence where, Heidegger will argue, great art inconspicuously accomplishes its ontologically revolutionary work.

3.3. From Modern Subjectivism to Late-Modern Enframing in Aesthetics

Before turning our attention to Heidegger's post-aesthetic thinking, the last thing we need to do is to clarify his more difficult claim that aesthetics not only follows from but also *feeds back into* subjectivism. What makes this claim difficult to grasp is the specific twist Heidegger gives to it: Put simply, aesthetics feeds back into subjectivism in a way that leads subjectivism beyond itself – and into something even worse than subjectivism. In aesthetics, Heidegger suggests, subjectivism “somersaults beyond itself [*selbst überschlägt*]” into enframing (N1 77/GA43 90). We can see how subjectivism somersaults beyond itself into enframing if we return to Heidegger's definition of subjectivism in “The Age of the World Picture,” according to which modern *subjectivism* names our modern attempt to secure “our unlimited power for calculating, planning, and molding [or “breeding,” *Züchtung*] all things” (QCT 135/GA5 94). It is not difficult to detect a (lamentably) subtle resistance to the National Socialist worldview and what Heidegger came to understand as its Nietzschean roots in Heidegger's 1938 critique of Western humanity's drive toward the total mastery of the world through “calculating, planning, and breeding.” More importantly for our purposes, however, such descriptions of humanity's drive to master the world completely through the coldly rational application of *calculative* reasoning also show that what Heidegger calls “subjectivism” is a conceptual and historical precursor to what he will soon call “enframing” (or *Gestell*).

As we saw in Chapter 1, “enframing” is Heidegger's famous name for the technological understanding of being that underlies and shapes our contemporary age. Just as Descartes inaugurates *modern subjectivism*, so Nietzsche inaugurates *late-modern enframing* by understanding being – the “totality of entities as such” – as “eternally recurring will to power.” Heidegger thinks that Nietzsche's “ontotheology” (his way of conceptually grasping the being of what-is from both the inside-out and the outside-in) lays the conceptual groundwork for our own late-modern view that reality is nothing but forces coming-together and breaking-apart with no end other than the self-perpetuation of force itself. By tacitly approaching reality through the lenses of this Nietzschean ontotheology, we increasingly come to understand and so to treat all entities as intrinsically meaningless “resources” (*Bestand*) standing by for efficient and flexible optimization. It is, we have seen, this nihilistic *technologization* of reality that Heidegger's

later thinking is dedicated to finding a path beyond.²⁹ For Heidegger, great art opens just such a path, one that can help guide us beyond enframing's ontological "commandeering of everything into assured availability" (PLT 84/GA5 72), as we will see next chapter.

First, however, we need to understand how subjectivism leads beyond itself into enframing. Put simply, subjectivism becomes enframing when the subject objectifies *itself* – that is, when the human subject, seeking to master and control all aspects of its objective reality, turns that modern impulse to control the world of objects back on itself. If we remember that modern *subjectivism* designates the human subject's quest to achieve total control over all objective aspects of reality, then we can see that late-modern *enframing* emerges historically out of subjectivism as subjectivism increasingly transforms the human subject itself into just another object to be controlled. *Enframing*, we could say, is *subjectivism squared* (or subjectivism applied back to the subject). For, the subjectivist impulse to master reality redoubles itself in enframing, even as enframing's objectification of the subject dissolves the very subject/object division that initially drove the subject's relentless efforts to master the objective world standing over against it.³⁰

Subjectivism "somersaults beyond itself" in our late-modern age of "enframing," then, because the impulse to control everything intensifies and accelerates even as it breaks free of its modern moorings and circles back on the subject itself, turning the human subject into just one more object to be mastered and controlled. In this way, the modern subject increasingly becomes just another late-modern "resource" to be efficiently optimized along with everything else. We are thus moving from modern subjectivism to the late-modern enframing of reality insofar as we understand and relate to all things, *ourselves included*, as nothing but intrinsically meaningless resources standing by for endless optimization. Interestingly, Heidegger saw this technological understanding of being embodied in contemporary works of art such as the butterfly interchange on a freeway, which, functioning in the background of our experience like a late-modern temple, quietly reinforces the technological understanding of all reality as "a network of long-distance traffic, spaced in a way calculated for maximum speed" (PLT 152/GA7 155).³¹ Of course, this empty optimization

²⁹ As this suggests, Heidegger's later work is dedicated to detecting, resisting, and, ultimately, transcending what he took to be the core of the Nazi ideology. (For a justification of this admittedly provocative claim, see *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, ch. 3 and ch. 7.)

³⁰ For a detailed explanation of this strange fact, see my *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, ch. 1.

³¹ Dreyfus calls the freeway interchange a "debased work of art" because he thinks it "imposes such an efficient order on nature that earth is no longer able to resist." Although Heidegger says as much in his middle period (see M 23/GA66 30), I suggest in *Heidegger on Ontotheology* (70–1) that this is too one-sidedly bleak to be Heidegger's mature view, which instead hews more faithfully to the Janus-faced Hölderlinian dictum: "Where the

function is now served even more efficiently and pervasively by the Internet, to which we find ourselves connected by millions of little technological shrines, increasingly comprehensive computational devices made ever faster, more efficient, and portable, devices we already find ourselves almost unable to live without. In the late 1930s, Heidegger understood such technological optimization as an all-encompassing attempt to derive the maximal output from the minimal input, a quantification of quality that threatens to replace quality in the same way that the objectification of the subject threatens to displace subjectivity. Heidegger seems first to have recognized this objectification of the subject in the Nazis' coldly calculating eugenics programs for "breeding" a master race, but (as he predicted) that underlying impulse to objectively master and then optimize the human subject continues unabated in more scientifically plausible and less overtly horrifying forms of contemporary genetic engineering.³²

Most important for us here, Heidegger also recognized this ongoing objectification of the subject in the seemingly innocuous way that aesthetics "somersaults beyond itself" into neuroscientific attempts to understand and control the material substrate of the mind. For, once aesthetics reduces art to intense subjective experience, such experiences can be studied objectively through the use of EEGs, fMRIs, MEGs, and PET scans (and the like), and in fact aesthetic experiences are increasingly being studied in this way. At the University of New Mexico's prestigious MIND Institute, to mention just one telling example, subjects were given "beautiful" images to look at and the resulting neuronal activity in their brains was studied empirically using one of the world's most powerful functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging machines. In this way, as Heidegger predicted in 1937:

Aesthetics becomes a psychology that proceeds in the manner of the natural sciences; that is, states of feeling become self-evident facts to be subjected to experiments, observation, and measurement. (N1 89/GA43 106)

"Here," Heidegger writes, "the final consequences of the aesthetic inquiry into art are thought through to the end" (N1 91/GA43 108). Modern aesthetics reaches its logical conclusion – the "fulfillment or consummation" (*Vollendung*) which completes it and so brings it to its end – when it thus "somersaults beyond itself" into late-modern enframing.³³

danger is, however, there grows / that which saves as well [*Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch*]." (See Dreyfus, "Heidegger's Ontology of Art," 413; David Brodsky, *L.A. Freeway: An Appreciative Essay*; and Hubert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet*.)

³² On Heidegger's prediction, see Chapter 7. For an insightful neo-Heideggerian critique of our ongoing attempts to optimize ourselves technologically, see Michael J. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*.

³³ As Heidegger writes in 1937–8: "Art becomes a means for machination's fulfillment in the pervasive construction of entities into the unconditioned, secure availability of the organized." (M 23/GA66 30)

Heidegger's objection to such aesthetic enframing, then, is not just that the work of art is increasingly falling under the influence of enframing – that artworks too are becoming mere resources for the art industry, standing reserves piled in storerooms “like potatoes in a cellar” to be quickly and efficiently “shipped like coal ... or logs ... from one exhibition to another” (PLT 19/GA₅ 3). He is even more troubled by the way art, reduced to aesthetics, does not just get enframed but participates in the enframing – for example, when the feeling of beauty is reduced to a purportedly objective brain state to be precisely measured and controlled through cognitive neuroscience – as well as computer science.³⁴ In another example of this aesthetic “enframing” by which the subject objectifies itself and so seeks to optimize its aesthetic experiences, computer scientists at Penn State now claim to have developed “the first publicly available tool for automatically determining the aesthetic value of an image.” Ironically, according to this “Aesthetic Quality Inference Engine (AQUINE),” Van Gogh's treasured painting of *A Pair of Shoes* (1886), so important for Heidegger (for reasons we will explain next chapter), only receives an “aesthetic value” rating of 5.5 out of 100!³⁵

This almost comically faulty “aesthetic evaluation” suggests the incredible hubris of such attempts to quantify the qualitative by programming genuine artistic judgment – an impossibly ambitious project that will surely fail, in this instance at least, because of the fatal flaws inherent in the doubly problematic concept of an “aesthetic value” on which the project relies. For Heidegger, such “thinking in terms of values is radical killing,” literally a “murdering that kills at the roots” (QCT 108/GA₅ 263), because he is convinced that only the *invaluable* – only that which we would never exchange for anything else, that is, only nonquantifiable qualities – can truly *matter* to us or give genuine *worth* to our lives. Heidegger does not deny that values exist (or that invaluable goods can come into conflict); instead, he denies that what most matters to us can ever be satisfyingly reduced to (or understood in terms of) the “value” that a subject determines for an object (let alone for another human being).³⁶

As human “subjects” turn the subjectivist impulse to control the objective world back on ourselves in such neuroscientific and computer science experimentation, aesthetics increasingly becomes just one more approach

³⁴ In the early 1950s, e.g., Heidegger again asks, “while science records the brain currents, what becomes of the tree in bloom? ... [W]e shall forfeit everything before we know it, once the sciences of physics, physiology, and psychology, not to forget scientific philosophy, display the panoply of their documents and proofs, to explain to us that what we see and accept is properly not a tree but in reality a void, thinly sprinkled with electric charges here and there that race hither and yon at enormous speeds” (WCT 42–3/GA8 45–6).

³⁵ See ACQUINE <<http://live.psu.edu/story/39575/email>> (accessed and tested 15 May 2009).

³⁶ I develop the argument for these claims further in “Ontology and Ethics.”

reinforcing the technological “enframing” of all reality. Heidegger thus reaches a harsh verdict: Aesthetic “experience is the element in which art dies. This dying goes on for so long that it takes several centuries” (PLT 79/GA5 67).³⁷ Fortunately, Heidegger’s prognosis is not as bleak as this apparent death sentence suggests. That art is slowly dying as aesthetics, he later clarifies,

does not mean that art is utterly at an end. That will be the case only if [aesthetic] experience remains the sole element for art. Everything depends on getting out of [aesthetic] experience and into being-here [*Da-sein*], which means reaching an entirely different “element” for the “becoming” of art. (P 50 note b/GA5 67 note b)³⁸

In other words, art is dying only as aesthetics, and the death of art as aesthetics makes possible the transformative rebirth of art as something other than a subject’s experience of an object.

Indeed, just as modern subjectivism led beyond itself historically into late-modern enframing, so Heidegger believes enframing, in turn, can lead beyond itself into a genuine postmodernity, an age that transcends our late-modern epoch’s ongoing technologization of reality and its nihilistic

³⁷ Heidegger acknowledges that many great “works themselves [still] stand and hang in museums and exhibitions,” but asks: “[A]re they here in themselves as the works they themselves are, or are they not rather here as objects of the art industry?” Heidegger’s point is that “placing artworks in a collection has withdrawn them from their own world” (PLT 40/GA5 26); i.e., many “great works of art” have been uprooted from the worlds of meaning they once focused and preserved in a way that kept the future of those worlds open. Although it might initially sound counterintuitive, then, Heidegger is suggesting that most of the great works we find collected in museums no longer keep their worlds open, and thus no longer *work* as art. As he puts it: “As soon as the thrust into the extraordinary is parried and captured by the sphere of familiarity and connoisseurship,” the work of art has ended and “the art business has begun” (PLT 68/GA5 56). In Heidegger’s rather polemical and one-sided view: “The whole art industry, even if carried to the extreme and exercised in every way for the sake of the works themselves, extends only to the object-being of the works. But this object-being [of artworks] does not constitute their work-being” (PLT 41/GA5 27). Although (*pace* Heidegger) the art industry cannot thrive without devoting attention to the *work* of art, its typical reduction of artworks to art “objects” is, as we have seen, at the core of the aestheticization of art he opposes. The common objection that Heidegger’s own work on Van Gogh, e.g., cannot hope to be heard and still to escape making a contribution to aesthetics and the art industry, moreover, misses the fact that Heidegger seeks to transcend aesthetics from within – as we will see, by hermeneutically “preserving” what he takes to be the true phenomenological significance of Van Gogh’s painting. (PLT 68/GA5 55–6). Such hermeneutic preservation neither does nor should, I think, remain entirely heterogeneous to the “the sphere of familiarity and connoisseurship” (as Heidegger too cynically assumes). With respect to the entire world of aesthetics, then, Heidegger is better understood as employing the rhetorical strategy Derrida refers to as a “phoenix motif”: “One burns or buries what is *already dead* [or dying] so that life . . . will be reborn and regenerated from these ashes.” (See Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, 154.)

³⁸ On the translation of *Dasein* as “being-here” (rather than the more common “being-there”), I have been convinced by Daniel Dahlstrom, *Heidegger’s Concept of Truth*, xxiii–xxvi.

erosion of all intrinsic meaning (the very void that we try to fill with all our superficial talk about “values”). This hope for an historical turning toward a genuinely meaningful postmodernity is what motivates Heidegger’s phenomenological attempt to describe and so convey a post-aesthetic encounter with art. He expresses this task as follows:

For aesthetics, art is the display of the beautiful in the sense of the pleasant, the agreeable. [That is, modern aesthetics understands the beautiful as what produces the pleasant or agreeable sensations that bridge the gap between aesthetic subjects and art objects.] And yet, art is the opening [or revelation, *Eröffnung*] of the being of entities. On the basis of a fundamental orientation toward being that has been won back in an originary way, we must gain a new content for the word “art” and for what it attempts to name. (IM 140/GA40 140)

Let us thus turn to this attempt to understand art in a way that will help lead us beyond aesthetics by getting us back in touch phenomenologically with being (or, better, with what the word “being” itself attempts to name).

4. CONCLUSION AND TRANSITION: FROM HEGEL’S END OF ART TO HEIDEGGER’S OTHER BEGINNING

Because of the predicament in which modern aesthetics has left us, Heidegger provisionally accepts the truth of Hegel’s famous judgment that:

Art no longer counts for us as the highest manner in which truth obtains existence for itself... [I]n its highest determination, vocation, and purpose [*Bestimmung*], art is and remains for us ... a thing of the past. (PLT 80/GA5 68)

Still, Heidegger nurtures the hope that (*pace* Hegel) the distinctive truth manifest in art could once again attain the kind of history-transforming importance Hegel and Heidegger agree it had for the ancient Greeks but has lost in the modern world.

This “highest” truth of art for which Heidegger still hopes, however, is not Hegel’s “certainty of the absolute” (GA5 68 note a). That is, Heidegger does not hold out hope for some perfect correspondence between (1) the historically unfolding “concept” Hegel believes is implicit in the development of humanity’s intersubjective self-understanding and (2) an objective manifestation of that intersubjective self-understanding in art. Thus, in Hegel’s most famous example, the tragic conflict between Antigone and Creon in Sophocles’ *Antigone* perfectly embodied the fundamental but as of yet unresolved ethical conflicts – between conscience and law, the family and the state, and so on – which had arisen implicitly in the intersubjective self-understanding of fifth-century Athens. Hegel thinks it is no longer possible for an artwork to perfectly express the tensions implicit in the self-understanding of the age – and thereby call for an historical people to

envision a future age in which those tensions would be resolved – because this role was taken over by religion and then by philosophy as our historical self-understanding grew increasingly complex. Heidegger, however, continues to hope for even more, namely, an artwork that *already* embodies the transition between this age and the next and that is thus capable of helping to inaugurate that postmodern age, here and now.

In tacit opposition to Hegel, Heidegger thus suggests that art's highest “[t]ruth is [not “the certainty of the absolute” but] the unconcealedness of entities as entities. Truth is the truth of being” (PLT 81/GA5 69). Heidegger's defining hope for art, in other words, is that works of art could manifest and thereby help usher in a new understanding of the being of entities, a literally “postmodern” understanding of what it means for an entity to be, a new ontology that would no longer understand entities either as modern objects to be controlled or as late-modern resources to be optimized.³⁹ Heidegger expresses this hope that separates him from Hegel in the form of a question: “The truth of Hegel's judgment has not yet been decided,” he writes, because

the question remains: Is art still an essential and a necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence, or is art this no longer? (PLT 80/GA5 68)

Heidegger's point is that Hegel will no longer be right – the time of great art will no longer be at an end – if contemporary humanity needs an encounter with art in order to learn how to understand the being of entities in a genuinely postmodern way, and if we remain capable of such an encounter.⁴⁰

As this suggests, the ultimate goal of Heidegger's thinking about art is to show what it would mean to move from a modern aesthetic experience of an art object to a genuinely postmodern encounter with a work of art, so that we can thereby learn from art how to transcend modernity from within.⁴¹ Heidegger, moreover, clearly believes this is possible; hence his later claim that when we encounter a true work of art,

³⁹ Heidegger calls an artwork's manifestation of the truth of being “beauty” (PLT 81/GA5 69), and thus understands *beauty* in a post-aesthetic way, ultimately, as the revelation of a new understanding of being. As he puts it in the early 1950s: “Beauty is a fateful gift of the essence of truth, whereby truth means the unconcealment of the self-concealing. The beautiful is not what pleases, but what falls within that fateful gift of truth which comes into its own when that which is eternally unapparent [or inconspicuous, *Unscheinbare*] and therefore invisible attains its most radiantly apparent appearance.” (WCT 19/GA8 21) (On the distinctive sense of “postmodern” that can rightly be applied to Heidegger, see Chapter 4.)

⁴⁰ As Hammermeister shows, however, “Heidegger's claim for a fresh start glosses over his affinities for the idealist tradition, especially Schelling.” (See Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition*, 175.)

⁴¹ John Sallis follows a different path to similar conclusions in *Transfigurements: On the True Sense of Art*, 164.

the presencing [*Anwesen*] of that which appears to our look ... is different than the standing of what stands-opposite [us] in the sense of an object. (PLT 82/GA5 71)

But what exactly is the difference between an aesthetic experience of an art object and an encounter with the true “presencing” of a work of art? And how is the traversing of that difference in our engagement with a particular work of art supposed to teach us to understand being in a post-modern way? Chapter 3 explains Heidegger’s fairly complex answers to these difficult but momentous questions.