

The un-original Origin of Art has an un-essential Essence: The Heideggerian Issue

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Abstract

The paper discusses the possibility of applying Heidegger's considerations on art to the problematic and multifaceted field of contemporary art. The questions of origin and essence, which we are accustomed to refer to the metaphysical tradition, take on new significance by connecting art not to beauty, but to truth. In this epochal change of position, we can find the identity of contemporary art, which reveals itself not by offering edifying meanings, but by indicating a horizon of comprehensibility in which we are involved. Starting from the innovative status of the *Dasein* as a projecting being-in-the-world, the horizon of comprehensibility of contemporary art outlines a context in which there is no subjectivity using a work, but in which an encounter happens. In its intrinsic and sometimes complacent contradictoriness, contemporary art, especially installations and performances, always manifests its identity as a struggle between truth and untruth, as an *event* that has no steady ground, and no unique or ascertained origin or monolithic essence, and which is nevertheless expressive and meaningful. The quality of being an event implies that contemporary art is not something objectifiable, representable, or categorizable, but is something that *happens*. What happens cannot become a substantial foundation, because it remains perpetually a happening, which affects us with its different languages and perspectives. The poetic matrix of contemporary art indicates the uniqueness and unrepeatability of each work of art, which shows us how the un-originality and un-essentiality of art is the main pathway to arrive at an experience of the world that each time is like the first time.

Keywords: Heidegger, art, contemporary art, truth, origin/un-originality, essence/un-essentiality

Introduction

Contemporary art is quite simple in its complexity: provocation, asymmetry, unpredictability, and destructuring, and a taste for paradox are all intended. No strings attached,

except those of the sale and visibility. It is not about cynicism or pragmatism, or at least not only. The whole concept of art has changed. A body can be art, but so can even a touch, a smell, a glance. This revolution has profoundly modified not only how art is made, but even and above all the way it is intended and understood. Contemporary art is an art that has intentionally lost its sacredness, its privileges, and wishes to be ‘contaminated’ by the world. No longer content with merely describing the world, it wants to influence it, affect it, be fully a part of it. This kind of art is purposely evasive, proudly uncataloguable, and yet desirous of creating new trends and being imposed within the social context. At the same time, contemporary art rejects and involves, because it has no more edifying targets; it wants primarily to express itself.

And so? Can philosophy, this ancient and glorious yet irrevocably passé, have something to say before all this sometimes cheerful, sometimes cynical irreverence? Can philosophy, hardly in possession of edifying targets, understand that which is the opposite of every predetermined structure? Perhaps philosophy has still something to say – if anyone is still listening.

In the great philosophical debate about art, Heidegger’s work surely constitutes an eminent and still-interesting path. Heidegger is widely recognized for his ontology, regarded as the most abstract and theoreticistic of philosophy’s possibilities. Could Heideggerian philosophy – precisely that philosophy which spoke resoundingly of the necessity to look for the *origin* [*Ursprung*] of art (Heidegger 1971a)¹ – have something to say? Is not the search for origins an outdated paradigm, the exhausted legacy of a discipline unable to accept the loss of its centrality in a world where life dashes ahead quickly and almost unthinkingly? Yet according to Heidegger, the question of origin is worlds away from abstract theoreticism; in fact, it defines the identity of all of philosophy as it always remains the future, since the “origin [in this case *Herkunft*] always comes to meet us from the future” (Heidegger 1971d, 10). According to the German thinker, this question is not the heirloom of a bygone tradition, but a question able to revive even the question about art. Yet difficult as it is to make definitive

statements about contemporary art, we can surely assert that it is deeply *un-original*, if we consider the multiplicity of origins due to the impossibility of finding a mythological provenance by reducing it to a metaphysical fundament. The issue becomes more complicated if we take into account the epochal incipit of the essay on the origin of the work of art of 1935-1936, in which Heidegger clearly connects the question of origin with the question of essence: “*Origin here means that from and by which something is what it is and as it is. What something is, as it is, we call its essence [Wesen]*” (Heidegger 1971a, 17). So, we must deal with two very problematic issues, origin and essence, which we usually are given to referring to the metaphysical tradition, which indeed recognises them as “ground and foundation” (Heidegger 1968, 100). Paradoxically, however, when Heidegger speaks of the origin and essence of art, he means precisely the overcoming of metaphysics, i.e. a new way of thinking not only being, but even our relationship to the world. Therefore, we must return to his analysis if we wish to think philosophy and art together, innovatively.

1. The Challenge of Truth

It is known that in his essay of 1935-1936, Heidegger intends to effect a real revolution: for the first time, art no longer gravitates toward beauty, but definitely toward truth (Heidegger 1971a, 35ff.). This revolution has great potential for our understanding of contemporary art, as it is enough to go to any museum of contemporary art to see that the discrepancy between truth and beauty is quite pronounced. Could we say, for example, that a painting by George Grosz is beautiful? Or one by Francis Bacon? Could we use the term “beauty” to designate these works? Or are we accustomed to using other words to show our interest and underline our attention? Many would find it difficult to define these works as beautiful, at least in the traditional sense. Yet many of us like them, and feel something satisfactory and attractive when looking at them. This means it is still worth wondering about the connection between beauty and truth, and art and truth, as we find in the essay on the origin of the work of art.

Heidegger wrote this essay after the two major events characterizing his theoretical path: the conclusion of his first phase with the composition of his masterpiece *Being and Time*, and the gestation of the so-called *Kehre*², the “turn” from an ontic point of view toward a purely ontological perspective. The starting point is the rejection of the aesthetic tradition: art and aesthetics have nothing in common, since they are two different and incompatible dimensions. The essay on the origin of the work of art affirms precisely that philosophy of art needs to be defined in its identity by a new way of understanding art, not by aesthetic studies on art. Aesthetics standardizes and normalizes art, by confining artistic expression within an objectifying boundary. Along with logic and ethics, aesthetics is an articulation of metaphysics (Heidegger 1991, 77); in fact, aesthetics *is* metaphysics: it thinks art as an essent, something at its disposal, an object for thought and man. Aesthetics is metaphysics because the issue here is that of facing the metaphysical diktat:

This question is most intimately connected with the task of overcoming aesthetics and that means simultaneously with overcoming a certain conception of beings as what is objectively representable [*als das gegenständlich Vorstellbaren*]. Overcoming of aesthetics again results necessarily from the historical encounter with metaphysics as such (Heidegger 1999, 354).

What does Heidegger mean by “objectively representable”? Let us think for a moment of a “Heideggerian” artist, Eduard Chillida (Heidegger, Chillida 1969), and of his sculptures: we see forms and structures standing out in the world, impossible to be reduced to predetermined and prefixed forms and structures because of their capability to draw a horizon. This means to think as Heidegger does in opposition to the objectively representable. Aesthetics as philosophy of art demands isolating the work of art, making it one object among others. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer talks about the principle of “aesthetic differentiation”, i.e. the theoreticistic tendency to make the work of art a pure abstraction, detached from any context. He develops this argument wholeheartedly by analysing the paradigm of the isolated and entirely abstract work of art: “thus through “aesthetic differentiation” the work

loses its place and the world to which it belongs insofar as it belongs instead to aesthetic consciousness. Correlatively, the artist too loses his place in the world” (Gadamer 2004, 79). This allows one to represent [*Vorstellen*] the work of art, but art, and above all, contemporary art, cannot be represented. The ontology of art thinks the work of art, as we will see shortly, starting from the world around it, by making any representation impossible.

This quotation about the “objectively representable” comes from a paragraph of *Contributions to Philosophy* entitled “*Metaphysics and the Origin of the Work of Art*”, which represents a self-overcoming of Heidegger’s previous essay on the origin of the work of art. This self-overcoming is unavoidable, since in *Contributions* the critique against metaphysics is by now stable and unquestionable. It also occurs because the overcoming of aesthetics is played out above all as the overcoming of metaphysics, in the field of truth. For Heidegger, the truth as *Wahrheit* must be traced back not to the Latin *veritas*, but to the ancient Greek *aletheia*: the discrepancy between these two terms shows an epochal difference between two different basic concepts. *Veritas* is correctness, exactness, even consonance and correspondence (Heidegger 1998, 138), but not yet truth. In fact, truth is *aletheia*, *Unverborgenheit*, which means “unconcealedness” (Heidegger 1992, 11-12). This notion is one of the most relevant of the entire Heideggerian ontology, because it represents the inner matrix of the *Kehre*: the metaphysical tradition has thought truth as a logical *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, i.e. the adequation of things and intellect, the equation of the thing to the name which speaks it and to the thought which thematises it. Truth is not a logical, predicative dimension, but an ontological one. It speaks of being, not the correctness of a phrase. Heidegger derives the connection between truth and art from Nietzsche (Heidegger 1991, 74-75), but with meaningful modifications: truth is not a static dimension, but a dynamic one. Tradition says that truth reveals itself, expresses itself by making itself visible and intelligible; but it is not just an exposing, it is also a hiding, a retracting. Truth is an ontological conflict between clearing and concealing: this is *aletheia*. We live in a world in which we are connected, but our life cannot be

explained only by considering the net of relations of the world. This conflict is always present: the world as an open, exposed dimension always corresponds to a closed, retracting dimension, i.e. the earth. It is impossible to argue the wholeness of our existence if we consider only what opens itself; we must look also for what closes itself. The concept of world developed in *Sein und Zeit* is no longer applicable, because it indicates only what we see and perceive. Now the concept of unconcealedness becomes clearer: truth states the struggle of what is projecting with what is retracting – precisely that which we experience when we come into contact with art. Let us continue with the Chillida sculpture: the struggle between clearing and concealing is extraordinarily evident. Though strongly rooted to the ground, his pieces project themselves into the air: they exhibit the fundamental conflict between world and earth. They belong to the world, in which they seem to breathe, but only because they come from the earth, from which they seem to be born. Chillida's works are never isolated: they are always connected to the context to which they belong. With Heidegger, we can go further and argue: these works of art do not describe their context, do not fill their world, but they define their context, they create their world by coming from the earth. The materials do not simply occupy a space; they *are* all the space that must be seen. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger depicts the modus in which the subjectivity, the *Dasein* as *Being-in-The-World* [*In-der-Welt-sein*], lives immersed in the world: it does not live in an aseptic, neutral scenario, but is related to others in an already meaningful context (Heidegger 1996a, 71-83, 134-156). This revolutionary way of understanding the subjectivity, which intends to overcome every transcendental subjectivism, proposes a *Dasein* as an open and dynamic dimension, which is always connected in a net of relations. It is well known that after the *Turn* Heidegger would refuse every subjectivist subsidence, even his own. But this openness remains central to understanding even the question of the work of art, that is always a dimension open to others. Contemporary art starts to live as art only when it is seen, perceived, experienced as art. An isolated work of art is not a work of art, which is always connection, even if this does

not necessarily mean sharing the same point of view. In art, in fact, things shed their pragmatic anonymity and functionalistic utility to achieve a meaningfulness able to go beyond their ordinary use, by revealing their extraordinariness. This is one of the reasons why, after the *Turn* in the Heideggerian path, the analysis regarding the *Dasein* is replaced by the analysis of the work of art, and consequently, the *Dasein*'s connection with the world replaced by the work of art's connection with the world. This is not a question of the simple replacement of man by thing, because perhaps the philosopher can theoretically better handle a thing than a man. The antisubjectivism of the work of art can indicate the real possibility of overcoming the supremacy of objectification and the typical representation of the metaphysical tradition. Paradoxically, man can be an object of thought – and according to Heidegger, this is precisely what happened in modern philosophy – but philosophy can never possess the work of art without losing it. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger speaks of the risk of losing the real identity of things by reducing them only to a *presence-at-hand* [*Vorhandenheit*] (Heidegger 2001, 129), i.e. a “constant objective presence” (Heidegger 1996a, 89), something we have here, in front of us, always at our disposal, only because they can be perceived, and then categorized and judged. *Vorhandenes* is the thing as a mere object, but the world is full of things that cannot be considered only as objects. The concept of *readiness-to-hand* [*Zuhandenheit*] (Heidegger 2001, 98ff.) has been developed precisely to describe all those things that are primarily a tool to act, and consequently what we use to handle our life in common in the context of the world. The *Dasein* lives in a world where things do not appear primarily as separated objects of a subject who perceives and thematizes them by elevating them to categories in a pure speculative abstraction, but where things are capable of being used with a view to actions and tasks, of which *Dasein* takes care. However, this analysis regarding things finds a limit: the concept of *readiness-to-hand* cannot really overcome the metaphysics of presence of the *Vorhandenheit* by avoiding entification: both *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* remain metaphysical concepts. The *Zuhandenheit* indeed cannot demolish the subject-object

dichotomy: by being ready-to-hand, things risk being mere objects, neutral and indifferent outside a purely functionalistic vision. For this reason, after the *Turn*, Heidegger intends to overcome the concept of readiness-to-hand through the perspective according to which things can never be objects because they are always paradigmatic in their unicity and unrepeatability, i.e. art. The thingness of the thing (Heidegger 1971a, 20) is in fact a thingness that has much in common with the essence and origin, thus it is a thingness that can teach us what the authentic thing-being of the thing is. Starting from such an assumption, the thinker proposes reliability [*Verlässigkeit*] as the real essence of the thing. It is well known that, as a guide along this path, Heidegger uses Van Gogh's painting depicting a pair of peasant's shoes: "the equipmental quality of the equipment [*Zeugsein des Zeuges*] consists indeed of its usefulness. But this usefulness itself rests in the abundance of an essential being of the equipment. We call it reliability" (ibid., 33). In an audacious analysis, he argues that the thing is really a thing if we do not use it as an object we need, but only if we open ourselves to it as something we rely on, something we trust, by projecting our expectations on it and by pouring our hopes into it. "By virtue of this reliability", that links her to her shoes, "the peasant woman is made privy to the silent call of the earth; by virtue of the reliability of the equipment she is sure of her world. World and earth exist for her and for those who are with her in her mode of being, only thus—in the equipment" (ibid., 33-34), because things are precisely what allows us to relate authentically to the world. Only thanks to a painting it is possible to understand deeply, at the root, what things are and our relation to the world: "The art work lets us know what shoes are in truth" (ibid., 35).

The uniqueness and unrepeatability of the work of art show that the things populating the world are not there only as objects we need, helping us, but as something with which we establish relationships, with which we interact. It is the connection between subjectivity and world that has been defined and reformulated by the thingness of the thing of the *Kunstwerk*: in this way, the definitive overcoming of aesthetics is achieved because the work of art has been finally

investigated not by referring to the beautiful and the pleasant, but in its inescapable relation to the truth. This is the main reason art becomes necessary: by becoming the way for philosophy to overcome metaphysics. The work of art is the only way to destroy the supremacy of the *Subjekt-Objekt-Beziehung*, the relation between subject and object. The artist is not a subject, and the piece of art is not an object; in the struggle between clearing and concealment, this relation no longer has sense, because the struggle itself indicates the truth: “truth and untruth go together in every work of art” (Kockelmans 1986, 17). This does not mean the artist does not exist, or even that the piece of art is something real, yet the process is not derivative or exclusive. In the important paragraph 7a of *Being and Time*, in which Heidegger begins to construct his phenomenological-hermeneutical ontology, we find the mode in which this relation occurs ontologically: “*Phenomenon* - the self-showing in itself - means a distinctive way something can be encountered” (Heidegger 1996a, 27). Heidegger says it very clearly: *Dasein* is not the metaphysical subject that reduces the knowledge of the world to its own knowledge, but a subjectivity immersed into the world. How does the *Dasein* live in this world into which he has plunged? Without thinking it as an object, but by encountering the worldly phenomenon: in an encounter, there is a mutual belonging of the parts; subject and object are not separated from each other. This is exactly what happens with the work of art. The artist opens himself to art by creating a work; the viewer likewise opens himself to the same world in which the piece of art exists. This encounter is primarily a *context of sense*. In this case, we use “sense” to translate the Heideggerian term *Sinn*, usually translated with *meaning* (ibid., 151). However, *Sinn* should remain untranslated because the term “sense” refers to the empirical dimension of perceiving, while the term “meaning” refers to the linguistic dimension of understanding. In both cases, we lose a relevant part of what Heidegger means by *Sinn*, i.e. the temporality of *Dasein* living in the world. *Sinn* is a primary relation with time, which we can experience through art, especially contemporary art. When we look at an installation or experience a performance, we do not see only the piece, but the

world that opens itself starting from that piece, and this world is essentially temporal. And time is a being outside any stable and permanent fundament and substance, because we can always feel how much time is simultaneously filling and depriving us. Time is always both gain and loss, light and dark, world and earth.

For this reason, the analyses of the Greek temple in Heidegger's essay of 1935-36 are impressively relevant today. We have already underlined that the peculiarity of contemporary art is that of opening up the possibility of having an experience of the tension between clearing and concealing. In paintings, this tension is present but not paradigmatic. For this reason, Heidegger needs to focus his attention on a work of art such as a temple, and more specifically, the most celebrated architectonic element of the classical world: the Greek temple. When we visit a Greek temple, we are not simply standing before a monument; we are living in the context made up of this monument. Having an experience of the Greek temple means having an experience *in* the Greek temple: we live in the streets of those who frequented the temple, in the atmosphere created by the people who lived the temple before us, by looking at it not as an object, but as a living context that involves us. This experience is possible because in the work of art such as a Greek temple, there is not something that stands before a viewer, but *a world that opens itself*, with no caesura or distinction between viewer and object viewed. To describe what the ancient temple was and still is, Heidegger does not speak of artistic excellence, though he is obviously aware of this undeniable excellence; he talks about paths and gods: "It is the temple work that first structures 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 acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny" (Heidegger 1971a, 20-21). We walk in the streets near the temple and we taste the atmosphere of victory, we fear ancient disasters, we live in a world to which we do not belong. It is precisely because we do not belong to this previous life that we can understand it. We have experience even of the hidden earth, of all that is far and unreachable in this ancient world. The temple creates a world by gathering its secrets in the earth

from it rises up. The context of world and earth disclosed by the temple is not a utopia, a no-place, a fantastic duplicate of a dead framework that no longer exists, but the place where one can live the connection of relations that has made that world the work of art it truly is. We can live in the openness of meanings and significations that belongs to the Greek temple, even if the world of this temple is no longer present.

The transformation of the *Dasein* with the work of art overcomes the notion of world [*Welt*] in *Being and Time* as mere disclosure. Every true work of art establishes that there can be no disclosure without concealment; there is no manifesting world without a retracting earth. Every temple remains, in fact, bounded to the earth on which it stands, even if we can see only that which is in the world we live in. The temple can show the world only insofar as the earth hides. This is the tension that the Greek temple makes apparent: on the one hand, the visibility of a world offering itself to the sight of a viewer by exposing and manifesting itself in all its power and majestic charm, on the other hand, the concealment of an earth that keeps to itself by closing itself off from the others, that hides itself from sight and from the external attempts of viewers to find its essence. Every work of art is filled with an ineluctable contrast, a conflict between visible and invisible, between what can be touched and seen and what cannot even be approached under pain of losing its essentiality.

World and earth are opposite in a co-belonging, which finds its *Sinn* in the contention between exposition and keeping: “in its resting upon earth the world strives to surmount it. As the self-opening, it will tolerate nothing closed. As the sheltering and concealing, however, earth tends always to draw the world into itself and to keep it there” (ibid., 26). The *Sinn* of the work of art does not cease to address this conflict, this fracture; since the opposition of world and earth is intrinsically strife, this strife is the authentic *Sinn* of every work of art, with which we can try to reach the main *Sinn* of the space.

The Greek temple is not only the paradigm of beauty and majesty, it is also one of the places where the essentiality of contemporary art reveals itself: art is the struggle between

earth and world, and the truth that only art can indicate is the unconcealedness of the struggle between earth and world. The truth meant as *aletheia* makes the relation between subject and object impracticable, because the subject loses its ontic centrality and ontological primacy. Art cannot be measured or quantified, because it is nothing outside its own openness of *Sinn*. Contemporary art does not provide a *Sinn*, it opens a *Sinn*. This demonstrates why we can find a *Sinn* even when apparently, there is none. The extreme provocations of contemporary artists, who often humiliate the viewer by presenting nonsense or something unbearable, even pornography and profanity, intends to achieve this goal: art has no higher meaning to teach, it must only express itself, by expressing the contradictions and misery of the human condition. There is no superficiality in the flamboyant neon colors of the installations, nor abyss in the most obscure pieces we find in museums, because art simply discloses itself. It is highly probable that many of the perverse and provocative pieces crowding museums today would never be considered art by Heidegger, despite the capacity to fit this connection of art and *aletheia* with the meanings and functions of contemporary art. Though included in a theoretical framework, these analyses describe the innovative status of contemporary works of art that intends to overcome every merely functionalistic boundary. A horrible war scene presenting unbearable images of dead children can be awful to see, but can also reveal a truth, which has nothing to testify to but itself. It can allow us to see a message that exposes one *Sinn* by hiding another.

2. The Project of Meaning

In a seminar of 1969, Heidegger resumes this discourse on *Sinn* and retraces this argument throughout his works, starting from the existential analytic of *Being and Time*, in which he wants to “raise anew the question of the *Sinn* of being” (Heidegger1996a, XXIX). This question transforms itself by becoming first a question about the truth of being and finally a question about the placement of being. To explain the central passage of his entire work, the author writes deliberately in capitals: MEANING [SINN]—TRUTH—PLACE [*topos*]

(Heidegger 2012a, 47). Heidegger himself is aware of the relevance of this change for his philosophy, which corresponds perfectly to the meditation on art, even if nothing has been said about art here. The transition occurs from the question of sense as meaning to the question of sense as truth: the possibility of speaking cannot reach being outside of all entification, if we do not understand that meaning must always refer to what is exposed and what is hidden. Finally, the question becomes a question of place: truth cannot be only linguistic, nor only ontological, but must also be spatial. The famous analyses of the poetic dwelling³ have gone in this very direction. In this way, the relation between subject and object has been finally overcome, because subjectivity is no longer an entity dominating the world and worldly objects, but a dimension always open within a context of sense. The truth happens not only in words and in the struggle between clearing and concealing: the truth happens by opening a context that includes us. The subject-object relation is overcome: when we have an experience of truth, we encounter it in an event, which involves and transforms us, even if we do not become better, even if we are unaware of this involvement. This is exactly what happens when we experience a work of art.

Contemporary art fits this conception – even if the latter was conceived primarily to overcome traditional philosophy, and even if the former has nothing in common with this theoretical undertaking. In the 1930s, this task of overcoming metaphysics was achieved through concepts such as origin and essence; later, these concepts would no longer be used in this context. Indeed, to attempt to defeat the metaphysical diktat through this type of question seems odd. Heidegger intends to reformulate these two concepts, by depriving them of all their metaphysical connotations. However, will he manage to achieve this goal? Or will the considerations of the 1930s remain embroiled in the net of Western tradition? Surely he is convinced of the innovative and revolutionary paradigm of truth as *aletheia*, but is this enough to start a new and different thought, another beginning [*anderer Anfang*], as said in the *Contributions* (Heidegger 1999, 3)? These questions about essence and origin are indisputably metaphysical, even if the

answers attempt to exit tradition. Contemporary art is intrinsically *un-original* and *un-essential*. Heidegger can already say something important about art, by saying what it can no longer be. The un-originality of the origin of the work of art means that contemporary art has no privileged place in which to arise; it can arise everywhere because there is no external origin that, as a higher authority, preserves and gathers it. Art's place is where we can reach a *Sinn* without thinking a unique and normative meaning. Signification is what involves us linguistically; *Sinn* is what involves us temporally. We are time, and we live our temporality in a world of *Sinn*, which we currently contribute to and constitute. Significance is fundamental to our existence: it determines, detects, explains, explicates; but *Sinn* is necessary, because it opens us to being as time, i.e. being outside all entification. Despite directing his research toward the horizon of being, by focusing his attention on topics far from the existential analytic, Heidegger would always remain faithful to the famous definition of *Sinn* in *Being and Time*, according to which it is not the revelatory content of a fundament, but a "an existential of Da-sein" (Heidegger 1996a, 142). If we connect *Sinn* to the fundamental structure of *Dasein*, we include even the *Sinn* of the world in a temporal horizon, because it is not only what simply defines something, by attaching a comprehensible reality to a thing, but a "project" [*Entwurf*] (ibid., 136), an openness involving *Dasein* itself, attempting to comprehend. *Sinn* is not something fixed, completed, which can be established once and for all and codified by reducing it to a predefined meaning with no semantic fluctuations, but a "passage" challenging the one who exposes himself to the risk of interpreting it, a link with something that cannot be exhausted by scientific reasoning. This concept of *project* is central not only to *Sein und Zeit*, but to the whole path of the Heideggerian work on art:

Project is the existential constitution of being in the realm of factual potentiality of being. And, as thrown, Da-sein is thrown into the mode of being of projecting. Projecting has nothing to do with being related to a plan thought out, according to which Da-sein arranges its being, but, as Da-sein, it has always already projected itself and is, as long as it is, projecting. As long as it is, Da-sein always has

understood itself and will understand itself in terms of possibilities (ibid.).

In this passage, Heidegger establishes the projectuality not only of human efforts, but even and primarily of human identity, of the *Dasein* itself. *Dasein* as an openness is a project, because it stretches itself over its own existence, it breaks the isolation of the metaphysical subject and ‘dirtyes itself’ with the world. With this concept of project, Heidegger intends to overcome precisely this tendency to close the phenomenon within a theoreticistic framework, with no connection to life, and Gadamer shows that the new status of the subjectivity that can be found in *Being and Time* fits perfectly with an ontology of art. Therefore, the project means an openness, which we constitute and at the same time which constitutes us. This also means that the relation between subjectivity and world is always characterized by the primacy of possibility over reality. This perspective also holds great significance for the meditation on art: even contemporary art indicates the primacy of possibility because it always shows the absolute lack of fundament, of external authority, of a rigid reality justifying art itself.

3. The Event of Art

These reflections about the openness remain central to Heideggerian philosophy: starting from *Being and Time* and dealing with the relation between world and subjectivity, they pass through the essay on the origin of the work of art, dealing with the relation between world and earth, to reach the essays of the 1960s about art and space [*Raum*]⁴. These writings underline all the relevance of the question of art for the entire Heideggerian path, because they show this question is necessary to think a new concept of space. It is well known that, after the *Turn*, the centrality of space replaces the centrality of time in Heidegger’s philosophy, and this is possible only thanks to art. The metaphysical tradition has imposed a concept of space as a measurable quantity from that which contains it, from what it contains, from a body, from a movement, but never from itself. Now we must think the *Raum* starting from the fact that it is not a static dimension, but a dynamic one; not by

looking for its essence, but by looking for the fact that *der Raum räumt: the space spaces*. This means that space must define itself only by itself, only when it spaces. *Raum* must be thinkable only by its *räumen*, because space cannot be a mere quantity, but an essential *event*, it is not something measurable, but something primary that happens. The fundamental connection between art, space and event [*Ereignis*] is clearly present in the *Bemerkungen zu Kunst – Plastik – Raum* dating back to the 1964, in which we read: “Vielmehr braucht der Raum, um *als Raum* zu räumen, den Menschen. Dieses geheimnisvolle Verhältnis, das nicht nur den Bezug des Menschen zum Raum und zur Zeit betrifft, sondern den Bezug ‘des Seins zum’ Menschen (Ereignis)” (Heidegger 1996b, 15) is indeed an event. In this passage, Heidegger talks about two concepts he has always preferred not to use, i.e. the ‘mysterious’ and ‘man’. He defines the relation between man and space something mysterious, and at the same time, he introduces the concept of *Ereignis* to describe the relation between man, space and time. This is necessary precisely because these considerations derive from the question of art, indicating that space is thinkable only as what makes space, what happens. Man is involved in this context without any ontic repercussion or subjectivism: the event as *Ereignis* is the disappropriating appropriation [*das Ereignis ereignet*] (Heidegger 1997, 24), in which it is possible to overcome both the relation between man and being in the context of the world present in *Being and Time* and the struggle between world and earth present in the essay of 1935-1936. The *event* as co-belonging of *Ereignen* and *Enteignen*, of appropriation and disappropriation, becomes the final stage of the entire Heideggerian philosophical project about art, because already the struggle between earth and world, between truth and untruth, is “on the way to the *Ereignis*” (Harries 2009, 109ff.). Only art can outline the authentic dimension of the event outside any substantialistic metaphysics, because an event can never be a permanent fundament, a substantial foundation, it remains indeed always what “only” happens.

Conclusion

Given this, what is contemporary art? Now we can answer this question: it is an *event*. Nothing objectifiable, representable, categorizable, but something happening. Another relevant contemporary philosopher has connected art and event, and not by chance - he is a pupil of Heidegger: Hans-Georg Gadamer. In *Truth and Method*, as mentioned before, he constructs his ontological hermeneutics on aesthetics, precisely because it is possible to overcome the historical consciousness thanks to the overcoming of the aesthetic consciousness. To achieve this, art is thought as an event, and strictly connected to language: “*all encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event*” (Gadamer 2004: 90). In this way, we have placed the discussion in a new place that exceeds the mere artistic one: the place of language. And not by chance, because this intuition was already present in the essay on the origin of the work of art, in which at the end of the argumentation Heidegger makes a shocking proposition by arguing that *Dichtung*, i.e. poetry, poetizing, is the essence of art: “*all art (...) is, as such, essentially poetry [Alle Kunst ist (...) im Wesen Dichtung]*” (Heidegger 1971a, 44), because actually “*all art [...] is, in essence, poetry*” (Heidegger 2002, 44). What does this mean, that poetry is the essence of art? Was not Heidegger speaking of Van Gogh’s shoes and Greek temples? Why does he need now to introduce another term to the equation? Why does he even want to discuss poetry? Possibly because contemporary art is, above all, about language. This is clear even when Heidegger discusses the dwelling as the main topic of his last works, when he writes that the “*dwelling rests on the poetic*” (Heidegger 1971c, 212). When we approach a genuine work of art, we dwell in the context it creates around us. This dwelling is poetic because it confronts the extreme forces of existence by speaking them unhesitatingly. This happens because the dwelling is an intrinsic dimension of language, because this is what poetry always discusses: language. Even if in the essay of 1935-1936 poetry is meant as an ontological essence without a strong and clear reference to language, to understand the deep meaning of the thesis “*all art is essentially poetry*”, we must refer to poetic

language. We experience this every time we approach a contemporary piece of art. What we see first is indeed a language. When we look at an installation surprising us with its colored and exaggerated provocation, we are actually confronted with a code, with a language different from any seen before. This means art is poetry: we learn art by stealing its sense as we repeat a verse. We do not possess words, even if we currently use them like coins. We are in intimate contact with language, but we do not own it. Moreover, this is what happens with a contemporary work of art: we cannot possess it even if we approach it directly, because it always speaks a different language from ours.

Let us think of the different expressions of contemporary art: performances, visual, sound and luminous installations, videos, public art, street art. Are not these different languages in which to say the same thing? Moreover, it is precisely in this difference that we can find identity (Heidegger 1969, 64): “but the same is not the merely identical. In the merely identical, the difference disappears” (ibid., 45). However, what does the secular “Pity” of Ernest Pignon-Ernest, in which an extraordinary Pasolini, energetically earthly, concrete and fresh, holds in his arms a disfigured Pasolini, defeated and faded, have in common with the assembly of suspended grids of the *Flyng Carpets* of Nadia Kaabi-Linke? The first uses an iconographic code, well recognizable in the category of portraiture, albeit entirely originally transformed, the latter uses forms and materials anti-iconically. Despite this, we have an artistic experience in both cases, because we can understand the different languages spoken by the artists. The connection between art and language is of such paramount importance due to the status of the language itself. These artistic languages tell us what an authentic language is: a metamorphic dimension, a multiplicity of forms and not a set of fixed structures: new types of language are continuously being born, while others disappear, in an osmotic flow that is never completed. Language is always a process of changing, unpredictable and interactive, though it is even a stability in our common life, a certain warehouse on which we can always rely. Language is never a granitic monolith, but a material moulding itself

constantly and at the same time constantly moulded. For Heidegger, the poetic language is a very special one, because it can show, more than philosophy itself, the uniqueness and the unrepeatability of the human: “the poet always speaks as if beings were expressed and addressed for the first time. In the poetry of the poet and in the thinking of the thinker, there is always so much world-space to spare that each and every thing – a tree, a mountain, a house, the call of a bird – completely loses its indifference and familiarity (Heidegger 2000a, 28)”.

Therefore, in this “first time” we can find an “every time”, in this ordinary we can find an extra-ordinary, in this instability we can find stability, in this un-essence we can find an essence, in this un-origin we can find an origin. In this shout, we can find the necessary silence of art. And this is not only out of a taste for provocation, even if this latter element is always very important: contemporary art teaches us how to understand the world we live in, in which truth is no longer a transcendent paradigm, but a primary involvement, the possibility of seeing lights and colors through obscurity, of seeing lights and colors thanks to obscurity.

NOTES

¹ In the lecture notes for the 1939 seminar about Herder, Heidegger argues for six essential meanings for the term *Origin* [*Ursprung*]: 1. From where of the origination—as composition. 2. From where and manner of the development—unwrapping of the already present-at-hand. 3. From where and whereof the mere starting point—provenance (source). 4. Possibility of the essence—(essence as idea). 5. Ground of the essence as abysmal-ground. 6. The first leap into the essencing and this itself; see Heidegger 2004, 43.

² For the *Kehre* as the *Turn*, see Heidegger 2012b.

³ See the analyses contained in Heidegger, 1971b, 141-159; Heidegger 1971c, 209-227, and Heidegger, 2000b, 60ff.

⁴ See the conferences about art and space contained in Heidegger 1983, and Heidegger 1996b.

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