

Art and the Riddle of Being

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Art Matters is a book that came to life from a series of seminars held by Karsten Harries dedicated to Heidegger's essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art". The book partially follows the structure of the German philosopher's essay. In the beginning, the author added four other chapters: one that discusses the opposition between Heidegger's approach and an aesthetic one, regarding art; another one that links the analysis of authenticity from *Being and Time* (where it remains dangerously incomplete, because of its too formal character) to the demand for art; the third that tries to show how the incomplete analysis of authenticity became dangerous and made possible the dangerous path in Heidegger's life (the option for National Socialism); the fourth that underlines the need for art in our modern world led by metaphysics (which forgot its roots) that culminates in technology.

What is Heidegger trying to get through his questions regarding "the origin of art" (or, better said: regarding "art as an origin")? Should we not give our consent to Hegel's words that art, in its highest sense, is a "thing of the past", that in art, truth does not happen, that art is no more than a way through which truth comes into the world? Does this mean that art came to an end? Or maybe it means that all we can expect from the work of art is to give us a break from reality through the experience of beauty in it? And then we can argue that the beauty of art has little to do with truth and reality (it is art for art's sake). It is all about enjoyment. It is something that belongs to the subject.

The latter way of seeing art is called the *aesthetic approach*. What Heidegger tried to do was to reveal an ontological conception of art. So, this new understanding of art implies a new understanding of reality and criticizing the old one should disclose the way our modern world made it possible, in order not to determine a new theory of art, but the question about Being - how Heidegger would put it - is in fact what matters. We need to challenge our current understanding of Being which made our ability to comprehend reality the measure of what is (i.e. of being) and, therefore, changed the face of metaphysics.

Unlike Hegel, Heidegger continues to see art as having a great task: to reveal "the mode of the ruling way of relating to the world". It moulds our being-in-the-world: how we encounter ourselves, other entities and other human beings (p. 3-4). Confronting him with the aesthetic approach, we are facing two kinds of art, as Karsten Harries says: "art in which the truth happens that is decisive for human beings and art that lacks such significance" (p. 6).

But what does Hegel mean by art coming to an end? It is not like he does not acknowledge that art should have a higher meaning, but he speaks of an impossibility to conceive it now in that manner, with the progress of truth. Nowadays, thought and reflection are the ways through which truth is gained. Harries argues that art is for Hegel something that "transcends our conceptual grasp". So, when you see truth as demanding transparency, when "only what can be comprehended is thought to be real", you cannot consider art a legitimate way to establish truth. The locus of truth is beside concepts and in thought. Truth must be objective. Therefore, from now on, art would be under the aegis of aesthetic approach.

According to Heidegger's analysis, human beings in our modern world forgot their roots. Metaphysics and science play a very important role in the making and understanding of our world, wanting to comprehend the being of all that is. Their way of seeing reality uprooted the human being. But their way of understanding beings is indebted to a certain understanding of Being (as we specified earlier). That is their origin which they forgot. Science looks for answers that allow us to take nature into possession. Heidegger says that what matters for us

is *the* and *to* questions. “Questioning becomes a way of opening oneself to and thus getting to know the rift that separates reason and reality [which transcends our understanding]” (p. 43). Through questioning, we can recover the ground in which sciences are rooted, we can open them to their earth (how Heidegger calls it). Through science, Earth is seen now as something to be used and exploited by us as we see fit. The earth lost its holiness and it cannot sustain the spiritual world of a people; it cannot give the origins to human beings. We are living in the age of the world picture which refers to a theoretical view of the external world. A picture implies the fact that all we can do with it is to look at it, observe it, but we cannot live or dwell in it. Seeing the world like that means we have lost our place in it, we have become displaced (the world is not a home for us anymore). Metaphysics requires that we become more like an observer or a disembodied thinker. “The scientist wants to arrive at the true picture of the world; he wants to understand what is as it is, bracketing for the sake of such objectivity himself and his place in the world” (p. 57). By this, metaphysics tends to divide reality into simple elements, because this is the only way it can comprehend something. “We could say that we understand something only to the extent that we can make it. Understanding means know-how” (p. 59). Following the consequences of this conclusion, Heidegger would claim that *metaphysics culminates in technology* and in this moment of Western culture, we should look at artistic creation as a savior (and not as reason).

We need to recover the origin of metaphysics; according to the German scholar, we need to return to the Greeks if we want to overcome it. Philosophy and the metaphor of the tree described by Descartes raise the following question: “in what soil do roots receive the nourishing juices and strength?” Heidegger claims that the ground in which metaphysics has its roots is the *truth of Being*. What would that mean for him? In knowing and determining the being of beings, metaphysics forgot a very important aspect: how these beings present themselves. That is always presupposed and remains unthought-of – it is something given. Yet its investigations and understanding of the world can start only from something that is disclosed to a conscience. “Being is understood here as an entry into the light of consciousness. Metaphysics presupposes such an entry. It is

in Being's obscure entry into light that we must seek the ground in which the tree of philosophy has its roots" (p. 61).

Can art be an origin (*Ursprung*) – in the sense of a primordial leap? Does art bring beings into light? How is that possible? Heidegger wants to challenge Hegel's point of view and show that art is "the highest manner in which truth obtains existence for itself". But do they both understand the same thing by "truth"?

Heidegger challenges the understanding of truth as the correspondence of our propositions or thoughts to facts is dominant in Western thought. And for that, he returns to the Greek word *aletheia*. Truth means unconcealedness of beings in their being. Truth as correspondence implies that things have shown themselves as they really are (in truth). This truth of beings is the unconcealedness of beings (i.e. Being). The truth of some thought implies that something presented itself to us in some way, i.e. something that was hidden became unconcealed. This implies a stage, a realm where entities take their place and present themselves. For Heidegger, this stage is the *Lichtung* or clearing.

We can now ask ourselves how we can understand the happening of truth in the work of art. Heidegger affirms that "the art work opens in its own way the Being of beings". Let us take his example with the peasant shoes in Van Gogh's painting. Here, the issue is not a faithful representation of the shoes as they really are. On the contrary, the painting communicates the being of the shoes, their reliability in the world of the peasant woman. So, they appear in a world of meanings. The work of art opens a world, the world of the peasant woman that wears the shoes. Furthermore, the work of art establishes the world. "World here names a space of intelligibility or significance that determines the way human beings encounter person and things" (p. 101). Let us take another example given by Heidegger: the Greek temple. The Greek temple establishes the Greek world, gathers the Greek people into a community by opening their spiritual world. Following Heidegger, Harries sustains that "all great art, lets us encounter things differently. It changes our way of being in the world and with it our sight. In this sense, the work of art places us in a different world, establishes a new world, places everything in a new light"

(p. 102). But, as Heidegger affirmed, the world opened by the Greek temple cannot be our world. That world closed with the Greek people, as with the world of the peasant woman.

But the work of art does not simply establish a world, it also presents (sets forth) the earth. The earth is something like the materiality of the work of art, different from the material of the equipment. The artist uses the material in a different manner than the craftsman. The latter presents the material not as what it is, but as equipment, as something to use. The artist reveals whatever material he is working with, in its materiality: he reveals the marble as marble, the granite as granite. Earth is called “material transcendence” by Harries, because it is something that cannot be adequately expressed in a clear and distinct discourse. “The work of art sets forth the earth is to say that the artist lets us understand in some sense what the earth is, but is an understanding more like tasting and smelling than like clearly seeing what is before one’s eyes” (p. 116). The material of the artist is not something opaque, a surface that does not hide anything, but it is mysterious and revealing (or holy). “Heidegger is unable to recognize in the so transformed world [by science and metaphysics] a world that has reduced the earth to mere material for human construction, a genuine home. And because he is convinced that we moderns have to learn once again to «let the earth be earth», something that neither technology nor science can teach us, but only art (...)” (p. 105).

Why is art so important for Heidegger? What is the task of art in our world? Karsten Harries comments that, for Heidegger, art has the power to reveal the riddle of things, the incomprehensible gift of an ordinary thing (a tree, a rock, etc.). “Art has the power to make this riddle conspicuous. It can thus be understood as a repetition of the riddle of Being” (p. 183). It is the mystery of Being itself, the primordial leap (*Ursprung*) that first lets beings be. The task of art is not to unriddle the riddle, but to present it to us as a riddle. A riddle always engages me, makes me think. So, the point of art is not to cause aesthetic pleasure, but to place us in our world in a different way. “Heidegger looks to art to put us in a different mood. (...) Heidegger dreams of art, strong enough to transform our world. To do so, it must replace the *Grundstimmung* [the fundamental mood ruling modern life] of boredom [who seeks entertainment]

with a mood that lets us experience not only work of art, but person and things as thought provoking riddles that demand our care and attention” (p. 186). Mood, as we know from *Being and Time*, is constitutive of our being in the world. We are always in some mood or other. This mood determines how things disclose themselves to us. And if art establishes truth, it is understood as the disclosure of the Being of things, it must transform the *Grundstimmung* of our being (something like a spiritual revolution, as Harries remarks).

Another thing upon which we should rest, when we speak about the importance of art, is the appeal that Heidegger makes to poets and poetry (as a first naming; as original poetry). As Harries sees it, Heidegger chooses “the dreaming poet who, convinced of its incommensurability and dreaming of the holy, lost his sanity”, instead of the philosopher (Hegel), convinced of the commensurability of reason and reality. Poets are the ones that have the task of taking us in the vicinity of the holy, of our origin. That is why Heidegger sees the essence of all art in poetry (*Dichtung*). Poetry opens up the earth in a specific way, which means a specific way in the being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, the earth is linked to a particular, historically situated people. According to the German philosopher, the nature of poetry is the founding of truth, of a new world. “Art should matter because authentic dwelling needs to be responsive to the manifold of the earth. At stake, he [Heidegger] is convinced, is finally nothing less than our own humanity” (p. 194-195). Art invites us to take a leave from the modern world picture. As Harries observes, this must not be understood in the sense that it establishes a world and wrests us from our own world, but rather in the sense that “we still need art in order not to allow this world to become a house without an outside” (p. 181), a house built by metaphysics and technology, that offers the only way of seeing things.

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