

HEIDEGGER

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is generally regarded as one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. Some say he is one of the three most important philosophers of the 20th century, along with Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher just recently passed away (October 13, 2004).

best known for his first book, *Being and Time* (1927)
this book was considered a major development of *Phenomenology*
Heidegger was a student of Husserl, founder of the movement of Phenomenology
the work also marked a significant development of *Hermeneutics*
and also taken as a landmark text in *Existentialism*

the “later” Heidegger is generally understood to commence with *A Letter on Humanism* (1947)
this work involved a radical reinterpretation of *Being and Time*
marking a clear departure from Existentialism, he regarded the existentialist interpretation of *Being and Time* to be a misinterpretation

this work, along with later essays, have had a profound influence on the development of later Continental European philosophy, influencing the development of hermeneutics, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism

“The Question of Technology” (1953)
“What are Poets For” ()
“Time and Being” (1962)

the philosophy of art, reflections on painting, poetry, and language, plays a major part in his later thinking
that *Being and Time* made only a passing reference to works of art suggest that the “turn” in Heidegger’s philosophy, from *Being and Time*, to the later works involved a turn toward art in his thinking
Simon Glendinning, in his chapter on Heidegger in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* suggest that this is misleading
and that we should not think of the shift from the early to later writings as involving a break or fundamental shift in Heidegger’s thinking
his view is that Heidegger’s philosophy of art does not overturn but enriches the earlier writings

Situated between *Being and Time* and the later writings,
the essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1936), in which Heidegger directly takes up the question of the work of art, is thus very significant

It is also worth noting that this essay was written during the same time as Heidegger was delivering a series of lectures on Nietzsche
these lectures were posthumously published in a monumental four volume work

Nietzsche. Volume One: The Will to Power as Art

Nietzsche. Volume Two: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same

Nietzsche. Volume Three: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics

Nietzsche. Volume Four: Nihilism

It should thus not be surprising that “The Origin of the Work of Art” is closely bound up with Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche

Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche focuses on the theme that becomes explicit in Nietzsche’s late notebooks—of art as the countermovement to nihilism

Heidegger’s question in reading Nietzsche is to think through whether or not Nietzsche’s thinking on art indeed succeeds in overcoming nihilism

Heidegger’s conclusion in these lectures is that it does not

why?— there is still *a raging discordance between art and truth* in Nietzsche’s thought from *The Birth of Tragedy* up to the very last unpublished notes

thus nihilism is not overcome

Nietzsche is thus considered the “last metaphysician”

it is left to Heidegger to thus chart a new path of thinking beyond that which has enframed Western thought since the time of Socrates and Plato

we see this new path in “The Origin of the Work of Art”

here Heidegger attempts to rethink the relationship between art and truth

he endeavors to rethink art and truth so that they are no longer in discordance

this rethinking has profound implications for both art and philosophy

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an important theme in the later work is the problem of technology

the problem of technology had become all too evident after 1945

with the dawning of the nuclear age

with the development of technology now clearly threatening the survival of humankind

many were raising serious questions about the development of technology

for Heidegger the problem was not the development of “a distinctive and dangerous new kind of thing” (Glendinning, p. 107)

the danger is rather with “a distinctive and dangerous new kind of ‘midst’ within which things show themselves” (Glendinning, p.108)

what he means by this is that the problem of technology was not with a particular thing that is a product of technology

but rather with a way of thinking about things, about what things are

‘how they show themselves’ *to us*

a way of revealing

yet this is not really a new kind of midst at all

as it is part of the very destiny of western thought

for Heidegger, the problem with technology has its origins in Greek philosophy

comes to dominance in modernity
—the notion of knowledge as power—
the problem of technology is the result of a way of revealing
a way of seeing things as ‘objects’ for a ‘subject’
a way of revealing that is the essence of modern technology

“which discloses everything everywhere as a measurable, calculable and orderable (under orders or at our command), as what Heidegger comes to call a “standing reserve” (Glendinning, p. 108)

through the use of technology man becomes ‘lord of the earth’
dominating the natural world

eventually even “man himself” becomes something “to be measured, controlled and ordered”
(Glendinning, p.108)

the later Heidegger sees a “decisive confrontation” with the essence of modern technology

in art

art is a “saving power”

an echo of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*
for Nietzsche and Heidegger both, a thinking about art
becomes the way out of the crisis of modernity

thus the key to the thought of both philosophers is their philosophy of art

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In “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger attempts to rethink the essence of art
counters the tendency of all modern aesthetics in his view
to see the work of art in terms of the object produced by an artist
and thus as objects of aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment

the work of art, for Heidegger, cannot be reduced to the presence of a mere thing

rejects the idea that the actuality of the work of art can be grasped on the basis of its thingly
character

and also rejects the more basic assumption that the work of art is to be thought of “on the basis of
the presence of something in the world at all” (Glendinning, p. 109)

Heidegger’s astonishing proposal is that the work of art is a happening of truth

“The Origin of the Work of Art”

I Seeking the origin of the work of art

In the opening section of the essay Heidegger begins, as the title should indicate, by asking about the origin of the work of art
“origin” here in German is *der Ursprung*
the source or spring of something
he is asking about where art originates from
from where does art spring forth?
the question is not as straightforward as it might seem at first glance

one might first answer that the artist is certainly the origin of the work of art
but the work is also the origin of the artist
“Neither is without the other” (OWA, 254)
both artist and work of art are artist and work of art only by virtue of a third thing—art

Thus Heidegger comes to the question
“Where and how does art occur?” (OWA, 254)

How should one even begin to answer this question?
Heidegger sets out by attempting to “discover the nature of art in the place where art prevails”
(OWA, 255)
this, of course, would be in the work of art
what art is should be inferable from the work, but the work of art can only be known by
understanding the nature of art

Heidegger’s questioning thus moves in a circle
this is an example of the *hermeneutic circle*
it is not a vicious circle
not a logical problem or an error on our part
“To enter upon this path is the strength of thought” (OWA, 255)
it is a circle within which all interpretation takes place
the question is not how to avoid or get around the circle
but rather how to break into it
must learn to think differently

Heidegger’s question about the origin of the work of art
is really a question about the origin of anything
it is a question about essence
the questioning of origin of anything cannot be asked in a straightforward sense

Heidegger suggests that we break into this circle by considering an actual work of art
and looking into the “thingly character of the work of art”, one of a work's more obvious features

II. Thing and Work

The first part of this section is not included in our excerpt from the essay included in *Art and Its Significance*

in this excluded section Heidegger examines three traditional ideas about what it means for something to be a "thing"

three attempts to answer the question: what is a thing?

1. A substance with properties or attributes.

going back to the Greeks, the concept of a thing as a substance to which various qualities are attached, e.g. a chair (substance) which is red, made of wood, has four legs, etc. (its qualities)

2. There is also the notion of a thing as the unity or bundle of sensations in the mind that provide us with a perception

a thing as an object of thought

3. Finally, there is a concept of a thing as matter that has a certain form imposed on it.

Our text then picks up as Heidegger connects this history with the history of Western metaphysics

“This history coincides with the destiny in accordance with which Western thought has hitherto thought the Being of beings” (OWA, 256)

all three of these approaches to the nature of a thing are misleading, according to Heidegger but the notion of formed matter provides a clue

sets Heidegger to examine the notion of a thing as a tool or a piece of equipment something that has a function

Heidegger proceeds to examine a common sort of equipment

and yet here his example will be with reference to a work of art

here is where he turns to a now famous analysis of a painting by Van Gogh of a pair of peasant shoes

Van Gogh’s painting shows us the shoes as a piece of equipment

in the painting of the shoes “the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. . . .

In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth. . . .”(OWA, 257)



Van Gogh, *Pair of Peasant Shoes*, 1886

for Heidegger, Van Gogh's painting reveals to us something of the 'equipmental being of equipment'—which is their 'reliability'

the owner of the shoes, for Heidegger, a peasant woman

simply wears the shoes

it is perhaps only in the painting, Heidegger suggests, that we really notice the shoes

Heidegger discovers in the painting the equipmental quality of equipment

But how did this discovery come about?

“Not by a description and explanation of a pair of shoes actually present; not by a report about the process of making shoes; and also not by the observations of the actual use of shoes occurring here and there....” (OWA, 258)

we discover this only in the painting

“only by bringing ourselves before Van Gogh's painting. This painting spoke. In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be” (OWA, 258-259)

the painting lets us understand "what shoes are in truth" (OWA, 259)

why only in the work? What is it about the work of art that lets us know what shoes are in truth?

What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being. The Greeks called the unconcealedness of beings *alētheia*. We say “truth” and think little enough in using the word. If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work.” (AWO, 259)

here Heidegger brings art and truth together

resolving the discordance between art and truth

as art is reconceived as the “happening of truth”

the nature of art is then disclosed as

"the truth of beings setting itself to work" (AWO, 259)

Heidegger here directly criticizes previous aesthetics that regarded art as having to do only with the beautiful and beauty and not with truth

truth belongs to logic and beauty to aesthetics

Heidegger questions this assumption

and then goes on to question the notion of art as imitation

“But then, is it our opinion that this painting by Van Gogh depicts a pair of actually existing peasant shoes, and is a work of art because it does so successfully? Is it our opinion that the painting draws a likeness from something actual and transposes it into a product of artistic-production?” (AWO, 259). For Heidegger the answer is clearly no. The painting is not a work of art because it is an imitation of something that happens to be present at the time.

The work is not the reproduction of an entity that happens to be present. It is "the reproduction of the thing's general essence".

But what is a thing's general essence?

Heidegger considers this question with regard to a Greek Temple, a hymn by Hölderlin, and a poem titled "Roman Fountain"

the poem is neither a poetic painting of a fountain actually present
nor a reproduction of the general essence of a Roman fountain

a work of art is not a piece of equipment with aesthetic quality

what happens in the poem, the hymn, the Temple, the painting of a pair of shoes?
truth happens

what does this mean?

how can truth happen at all, Heidegger questions

traditionally truth is considered something timeless and supertemporal, something eternal
and thus not something that takes place in time

not something that *happens*

Heidegger rethinks the notion of truth as radically historical, as something that occurs in time

what happens in a work of art?

The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this disconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of what is has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work. (AWO, 261)

III. *The Work and Truth*

Heidegger opens this section returning to the opening question:

the origin of the work of art is art

but what is art?

The first point he makes is that art works "universally display a thingly character"
[perhaps conceptual art today challenges this]

but an art work displays this thingly character in a distinct way

then he makes the point that we perhaps cannot even have access to the thingly character of a
work of art because we force the work into a "preconceived framework"

the framework Heidegger is here referring to is a certain way of thinking
to some extent imposed by language itself

but also a way of thinking that is characteristic of modern philosophy

a world of isolated subjects and objects

for example, we think of a work of art as an object created by the artist as subject
and viewed by a subject

for Heidegger, this framework obstructs our access to the “work-being of the work” then Heidegger wonders whether we can ever get access to the work “in itself” “To gain access to the work, it would be necessary to remove it from all relations to something other than itself in order to let it stand on its own for itself alone” (261).

There is something Kantian here in Heidegger’s thinking about the work of art an echo of Kant’s notion of disinterested contemplation one has to remove everything external to the work itself

he makes the point that in great art the artist remains inconsequential in comparison to the work

he goes on to question whether we ever really encounter the work of art in museums as objects of the art industry or artworld perhaps the work-being of the work is obstructed

he questions whether we really can encounter the work being of Aegina sculptures Greek masterpieces that are now in some museum in Munich or a tragedy like Sophocles’ *Antigone* perhaps we never really are able to encounter these works as they have been withdrawn from their own world the world of these works has perished

the art industry may preserve the “object-being” of these works but not their “work-being”

Now he asks a question that seems to conflict with what is cited at the top of this page: “But does the work still remain a work if it stands outside all relations? Is it not essential for the work to stand in relations? Yes, of course—except that it remains to ask in what relations it stands” (262).

How can we remove from the work “all relations to something other than itself” and yet still see the work standing in relations? There must be some relations to something that is not totally other. This thought seems perhaps obstructed by the framework of our normal thinking.

So where might we find the work, where does the work belong?

“The work belongs, as work, uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself” (262)

Heidegger returns then to the thesis:

the work of the work of art is the happening of truth

the first illustration of this point was Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of shoes

now he turns to another example—a Greek Temple

and he chooses this example because it is clearly a work that cannot be thought of as representational

all of page 263 is crucial—Heidegger’s analysis of the work of art that is the Temple two key notions:

1) the work opens up a *world*—here he is referring not to a world in an abstract sense the Greek temple opens up the *world* of the Greeks of the classical age a world of gods and sacred, holy places

2) at the same time that the work opens up a world it sets this world back again on *earth*
here Heidegger is not referring to the planet as an object of study for astronomical science
nor to the physical substance, the soil or ground, that the stones of the Temple are laid upon
Heidegger's language here is typically obscure:

“Earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation.
In the things that arise, earth is present as the sheltering agent” (263)

perhaps the gestalt notion of the figure-ground relationship may help explain Heidegger's
thinking

the *world* that is opened up appears like a figure against a background

[an echo of Nietzsche's notion of the Apollinian?]

earth is then the background against which any arising of a world takes place

the emerging of something from out of this background is what the Greeks, according to
Heidegger, referred to as *phusis*—this is the origin of our word *physics*

the Temple opens up the world of the Greeks

but it is not like the world was already there, with human beings and animals and plants
and then the Temple is added on later

Heidegger seems to be suggesting that it is through the temple, through the work of art, that the
world of the Greeks emerges at all

for Heidegger the temple “first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves”

Heidegger further discusses the two essential feature of the work of art

1) its setting up of a *world*

in the next pages Heidegger elaborates on what he means by *world*

“World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are
subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being. Wherever
those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go
unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds.” (264-265)

Heidegger's notion of world might better be understood when he says that plants and animals do
not have a world

[is this just an arrogant anthropocentrism?]

2) its setting forth the *earth*

in opening up a world against the background of earth

the work also sets forth the *earth*

we become aware of the background from which a world arose

we become aware of earth as a background

“*The work lets the earth be an earth*” (266).

[an echo of the Dionysian?]

But how does it set forth the *earth*? Certainly not as an object to be measured and controlled.

earth, for Heidegger, is simply the background against which all arising (*worlding*) takes place it is not as if we can bring forth the *earth* into the foreground, and make it all clear and present the *earth* is rather the background

“The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable” (266).

an interesting paragraph at the bottom of 266

notes how the sculptor uses stone in a different way than the mason

the painter uses pigment in a different way [from someone like the mason, a housepainter?]

the poet uses words in a different way than ordinary speakers and writers

and then he makes this startling statement:

“Nowhere in the work is there any trace of work-material” (266).

The “work-being” of the work of art is thus not the physical object at all
[this then moves into the direction of conceptual art]

what happens in a setting up of a *world* and setting forth of the *earth* in a work of art?

“The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing. World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated.” (267)

what’s he getting at here with this “an historical people”?

A people that have a sense of history? a sense of destiny? what?

[one could explore here the dark shadow of Heidegger’s politics]

the next notion Heidegger now introduces is *striving*

world and *earth* are opposing

[perhaps again an echo of the Apollinian and Dionysian opposition]

this opposition of *world* and *earth* Heidegger calls *striving*

“The work-being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth” (268)

this battle between *world* and *earth* is what happens when truth happens in the work of art

what, then, Heidegger asks, is truth that it happens through this opposition between world and earth?

Here Heidegger begins to examine different theories of truth

usually it is meant in the sense of a logical proposition

also truth in the sense of something genuine rather than fake (true vs sham gold)

truth as correspondence to the real

Heidegger begins then to question further
what is the essence of truth?

this questioning leads again in a circle

a curious tangle? an empty sophistry of a conceptual game?

or an abyss?

[with this mention of an abyss in relation to truth there is perhaps an echo of Nietzsche's
thought]

next Heidegger introduces the Greek word *alētheia* to help understand this notion of truth
truth as a revealing, as "the unconcealedness of beings"

Heidegger suggests that even the Greeks did not quite think this notion of truth as *alētheia*
as a result the history of western philosophy developed missing this realization

this is the "hidden history of philosophy" Heidegger refers to

western philosophy took a wrong turn, according to Heidegger, back with the Greeks

this wrong turn was the result of not quite getting this notion of truth as *alētheia*

why question the accepted notion of truth as agreement or conformity of knowledge with fact

Heidegger's argument here is that the notion of truth as unconcealedness underlies the
correspondence theory of truth

or what he refers to as the "outworn nature of truth in the sense of correctness" (269)

this notion of truth as unconcealedness of beings is already the way

"in which every being stands for us and from which it withdraws" (269)

the top of page 270 a paragraph that echoes Heraclitus—

the ancient pre-Socratic known as the "obscure"

Heidegger was quite preoccupied with the thought of Heraclitus

the paragraph begins with a Heideggerian basic statement

things, every particular thing, just is

and that which is, any particular being, stands in Being

this is the ontological difference between being and Being that was central to *Being and Time*

now the Heraclitean point: "There is much in being that man cannot master. There is but little
that comes to be known" (270)

the rest of the page is quite obscure

his main point is that when something is revealed or unconcealed

there is always at the same time something left concealed

think again of Nietzsche's line in the preface to the *Gay Science*:

"we no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn"

Heidegger's whole essay might be seen as a meditation on this thought

the traditional notion of truth as correctness implies this notion of the "naked truth"

we strip away appearances, all that is added by the knowing subject

and when we finally get to the truth it is there naked, fully present before us

Nietzsche's thought, and Heidegger follows him here, questions this notion of truth

the “unconcealedness of beings” which is, for Heidegger, the happening of truth is a happening, an event, with a double movement a movement of revealing and also of concealing and concealment is also doubled, as both refusal and dissembling thus:

At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny. The nature of truth, that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by a denial. Yet this denial is not a defect or a fault, as though truth were an unalloyed unconcealedness that has rid itself of everything concealed. If truth could accomplish this, it would no longer be itself. *This denial, in the form of a double concealment, belongs to the nature of truth as unconcealedness.* Truth, in its nature, is un-truth. (271)

truth thus happens in the striving or conflict between *world* and *earth*
 “truth thus happens as the primal conflict between clearing and concealing” (271)

Now Heidegger returns to the temple:

“Truth happens in th temple’s standing where it is. This does not mean that something is correctly represented and rendered here, but that what is as a whole is brought into unconcealedness and held therein” (271).

Similarly with the painting of shoes:

“Truth happens in Van Gogh’s painting. This does not mean that something is correctly portrayed, but rather that in the revelation of the equipmental being of the shoes, that which is as a whole—world and earth in their counterplay—attains to unconcealedness” (272).

At the end of the section Heidegger returns to the question of the work-being of the work of art he begins by noting that one obvious feature of works of art is that they are created....worked [here we might think of “ready-mades” like Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm*—what is created in this work? Would this work challenge Heidegger’s view of art or help elucidate it]

Heidegger wants then to turn to elucidate two points

1. What do being created and creation mean here in distinction frm making and being made?
2. What is the inmost nature of work itself, from which alone can be gauged how far createdness belongs to the work and how far it determines the work-being of the work. (272)

these questions lead to the more basic question which will be the focus of the last section of the essay :

What is truth, that it can happen as, or even must happen, as art? How is it that art exists at all? (273)

IV. *Truth and Art*

Heidegger begins this section by inquiring into the process of creation, the activity of the artist what is it that the artist does in bringing forth a work of art?

In examining this question he draws out the contrast between the “bringing forth” of something in art versus in handicraft—the difference between the making of some utilitarian object versus the work of art, a difference between a making and a creating

Heidegger thus makes the distinction between a craft object and a work of art
 the Greeks used the same word (*technē*) for art and craft
 they called both producers—the carpenter who makes this physical bed
 and the painter who paints the painting of the bed—*technitēs*

he gets at this difference by examining what lies hidden in the concept of *technē*
 for the Greeks, *technē* is not a mere making, neither of a craft object or work of art
 its more primary sense denotes a mode of knowing
 knowing consists in the uncovering of beings or *alētheia*

Heidegger notes that great artists prize craftsmanship most highly
 but he distinguishes the creating that goes on in bringing forth a work of art from mere craft
 thus what the artist does in creating a work of art is:

“to create is to cause something to emerge as a thing that has been brought forth. The work’s
 becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens” (274)

but what is truth that happens in the work?
 Heidegger again refers to this double-movement of revealing and concealing
 something emerges and something is hidden

the happening of truth is not unique to works of art
 Heidegger lists several other ways truth happens, for example in the political realm:
 “Another way in which truth occurs is the act that founds a political state” (275)
 [the implication here is that in an important sense the Constitution is like a work of art]

Another interesting point brought out here is that what emerges in the happening of truth is
 unique—it occurs once and once only:
 “The establishing of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before
 and will never come to be again” (276)

It might be interesting to compare this with this from Nietzsche:

Vita Femina. For seeing the ultimate beauties of a work, no knowledge or good will is sufficient; this requires the rarest of lucky accidents: The clouds that veil these peaks have to lift for once so that we see them glowing in the sun. Not only do we have to stand in precisely the right spot in order to see this, but the unveiling must have been accomplished by our own soul because it needed some external expression and parable [*Gleichnisse*], as if it were a matter of having something to hold on to and retain control of itself. But it is so rare for all of this to coincide that I am inclined to believe that the highest peaks of everything good, whether it be a work, a deed, humanity, or nature, have so far remained concealed and veiled from the great majority and even from the best human beings. But what does unveil itself for us, *unveils itself for us once only*.

The Greeks, to be sure, prayed: "Everything beautiful twice and even three times!" They implored the gods with good reason, for ungodly reality gives us the beautiful either not at all or once only. I mean to say that the world is overfull of beautiful things but nevertheless poor, very poor when it comes to beautiful moments and unveilings of these things. But perhaps this is the most powerful magic of life: it is covered by a veil interwoven with gold, a veil of beautiful possibilities, sparkling with promise, resistance, bashfulness, mockery, pity, and seduction. Yes, life is a woman. (*The Gay Science*, 339)

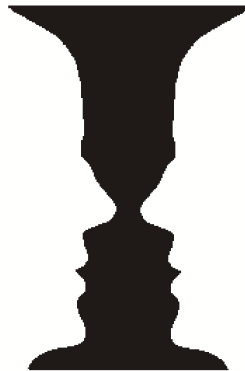
So, for Heidegger, in the work of art a unique happening of truth occurs
what the artist brings forth in her creative work is
a unique moment in the striving between *world* and *earth*
in the conflict between *world* and *earth* a rift (*Riss*) opens
not a rift that separates but a rift that is the unity of *world* and *earth*

what helps to make sense of this is the Gestalt image

The strife that is brought into the rift and thus set back into the earth and thus fixed in place is *figure, shape, Gestalt*. Createdness of the work means: truth's being fixed in place in the figure. Figure is the structure in whose shape the rift composes and submits itself. This composed rift is the fitting or joining of the shining of truth. What is here called figure, *Gestalt*, is always to be thought in terms of the particular placing (*Stellen*) and framing or framework (*Ge-stell*) as which the work occurs when it sets itself up and sets itself forth. (277)

[Gestalt: (Plural „Gestalten”) is German for “pattern”, “figure”, “shape”, or “form”]

Figure-ground is another Gestalt psychology principle. It was first introduced by the Danish phenomenologist Edgar Rubin (1886-1951). The classic example is this one...



is it an image of a vase?
Or two faces?

Thus, for Heidegger, the createdness of the work is truth being "fixed in place in the figure"
in the work's structure or Gestalt

this bringing forth happens in any making
but Heidegger draws out the difference between the making in handicraft or utilitarian objects
and the creating of a work of art

a tool is finished, complete or "made ready" when its design has been made concrete or material
there's nothing more to it
but a work of art is not "finished" when its structure is complete
the startling implication of this is that the work of art is not finished by the artist

Heidegger emphasizes that

“Art then is the becoming and happening of truth”

what is happening in the work of art?

consider Van Gogh’s painting of shoes

When Van Gogh's painting speaks to us the truth of the peasant woman's shoes, it puts us into touch with a truth not otherwise obtainable. It opens up a world to us, it allows something to come into presence. But more importantly, it allows something to remain in its concealedness. Representational thinking, as Heidegger understands it, attempts to crystalize a moment of this changing figure-ground. It attempts to fixate truth as pure presence. Heidegger's insight is that the work of art is an event that is never consummated. The meaning, then, that a work of art can have for those who are drawn into its vicinity and "suddenly somewhere else" can never be exhausted.

Heidegger closes the essay by suggesting that all art is essentially poetry

“All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry”
(278)

all arts—architecture, painting, sculpture, and music can be traced back to poesy

his concluding paragraph:

Art, as the setting-into-work of truth, is poetry. Not only the creation of the work is poetic, but equally poetic, though in its own way, is the preserving of the work; for a work is in actual effect as a work only when we remove ourselves from our commonplace routine and move into what is disclosed by the work, so as to bring our own nature itself to take a stand in the truth of what is. (280)