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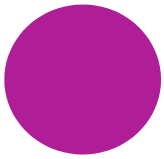

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Affirming Art: Heidegger and the Sense of a Beginning

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This essay offers a philosophical perspective that, in breaking with both the open and surreptitious dialectical method still so prominent in academic discourse, follows Heidegger in trying to conceive of a radically non-dialectical manner of approaching affirmation, negation, and neutrality. As with Heidegger, this is attempted through a turn towards art and the "emancipated contingency" that characterizes much creative production. In contrast to action and production within the knowledge economy, the creation of the artwork concerns a knowing of unknowingness (described by Maurice Blanchot as the neutral) that demands a rethink of action in relation to truth and errancy. Indeed, the very working of the work of art is conceived here as a truth that is precisely "set to work" (Heidegger) by errancy. Through a consideration of the essential difference between choice and decision and the different "beginning" of art that this suggests, the essay concludes with some reflections of the theme of art's fascination and the and the affirmation of the unknown.

Keywords: yes, no, don't know, contingency, beginning, erasure, choice, decision, fascination

1. The Power of No

I am the one who has to decide what they should ultimately look like (the making of pictures consists of a large number of yes and no decisions and a yes decision at the end) (Gerhard Richter 1992, 1047).

But we know the beginning, the other one, we know it by questioning, we stay in the leap ahead of any yes or no (Heidegger 2006, 5).

There is a virility attached to the negative: "the *power* of no." Because it is hard to say "no," hardness itself, a certain musculation of the mind, becomes associated with the ability to resist, deny, and negate the affirmatory trajectory of another: And the life of mind, in its very remoteness from the physical, is one constantly on the lookout for equivalents to the physicality it so singularly lacks.

The "*power* of no" is double, not only does it stop the "yes" in its tracks but at the same time it surreptitiously creates the very desire that fuels the affirmative spirit it is so keen to derail. In other words, the "no" itself creates the "yes" that it must say "no" to, thereby augmenting its negative potency in a dialectical escalation that forever ties the affirmative to its own denial.

Of course, this negative dialectics can *itself* be negated by the affirmation of affirmation seen at work in the numerous guises of post-structuralist thinking, the classic example being Deleuze's famous anti-Hegelian version of Nietzsche. But, to say "no" to no (even in the name of affirmation) is still to say "no," is still to play (or be played by) the Hegelian game. This undoubtedly gives affirmation a certain physicality too, but at what

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price? The gross misappropriation of Nietzsche's *Ubermensch* would be just one example, as would the confusion of his will-to-power with power itself and the virility that would supposedly come with that. Deleuze

(1994) recognizes this when he writes: “those whom Nietzsche calls masters are certainly powerful men, but not men of power, since power is in the gift of the values of the day” (54).

Would it be possible to prise affirmation away from the values of the day, not only from the virility of the negative, but also, by implication, from the reflected virility of the positive too? The truly affirmative power necessary to “re-evaluate all values” cannot *itself* be valued as a positive or negative force within the existing value system without collapsing back into the very dialectic it seeks to overcome. For this reason we must be constantly wary of collapsing the affirmative and the positive: they are different. Just as Nietzsche’s task is to think the will-to-power outside of existing power relations, so the challenge here is to try and say “yes” not only to “yes,” and not only to “no,” but also to “yes,” “no,” and “don’t know” as well; a triple affirmation that unlike the speculative substantiation that is associated with the Hegelian negation of negation, constantly throws us back to a beginning or origin that is “ahead of” the secondary “yes/no” of dialectics.

2. The Power of Yes

When the artist Gerhard Richter describes the production of the artwork as “a large number of yes and no decisions and a yes decision at the end,” he is neither confirming, agreeing nor accepting, and he is certainly not expressing anything. The final “yes” simply says, following the farmer in the movie *Babe*: “That’ll do pig;” “There you are;” “So be it;” and “*Voila!*”

Richter’s final affirmation—the artist’s “yes”—is not about the placing of an aesthetic object in space, but, rather, the enactment of what Derrida describes as a process of “*espacement*” (Derrida 1978, 237) the opening of, or spacing of space. The final “yes” does not negate all the “nos” that preceded it, on the contrary they are all held in abeyance, present as the prior work of erasure that marks the space that is affirmed. But this does not constitute an ultimate affirmation of negation because erasure and negation are not synonymous terms. As brute negativity, negation produces absence; as speculative dialectics, negation produces presence; erasure produces neither absence nor presence, but, rather, the presence of absence.

Like deletion on a computer where, prior to defragmentation (a fascistic act), discarded information remains present as an absence that interrupts, opens up and slows down the closed uninterrupted space that processors crave, so erasure *articulates* rather than negates spaces, forms, structures, and articulation is neither negative nor positive, it is neutral. Indeed, it is the affirmation of neutrality, a “yes” beyond the “yes-no” of positivism and dialectics respectively. It is for this reason that the aesthetic chiasmus Richter (1992) describes, the criss-crossing between “yes” and “no,” is in reality a double affirmation—a “yes”—that brings the work into being. That is to say, the “no” of aesthetic judgement as it is exercised within the creative process is really a “yes” in that each mark erased, every possibility rejected, is not thereby destroyed but put to one side for future reference, ready to tempt the artist again. And there *is* temptation here, not least because so much of what is rejected is, in truth, extraordinarily attractive to the artist, often to the detriment of the artwork if the all important “no” cannot be uttered. As such then, the “no” of aesthetic judgement should not be understood in terms of negation but, rather as the necessary *renunciation* required to produce a work. Indeed, and this is the predicament, so much of what the artist *wants* has to be renounced before the artwork can be produced, and it is this desire for and attraction to the very things that would damage the work that should remind us that for every “no” there exists a prior “yes” that needs to be cast aside before it is too late. Notwithstanding his famous

critique, it was this, the power of renunciation that Adorno (1973) considered to be Stravinsky’s great artistic strength. “Stravinsky’s imitators remained far behind their model, because they did not possess his power of renunciation, that perverse joy in self-denial” (Adorno 1973, 153).

Every act of renunciation leaves a space in the work that, to repeat, takes on presence as an absence that continues to have force both as the trace of aesthetic judgement and creative erring, and as an intensity associated with the severity necessary to delete that which is so desirable. Referring to Valéry, Derrida describes this present absence as a “crinkling” of the page. He writes in *Margins of Philosophy*:

> But—I mark(s) the division—by taking a different turn, by observing from an excentric place the logic of Valéry’s aversion, why not ask ourselves about another outside, about the *sources set aside*, the sources that Valéry could get a glimpse of only on the bias, as in a brief, or rather foreshortened, mirroring, just the time to recognise or reflect himself and

> immediately to turn away—quickly, decidedly, furtively too, like an about-face to be described according to the gesture of Narcissus. We will analyse this turning away only where it has left marks *within* Valéry's textual system, as a regular crinkling of every page. (Derrida 1982, 275)

In truth, the artist's "nos" are secretly "yeses" because the errancy of the creative process (the false paths, the wrong turns, the dead ends) is neither false nor wrong, and it is certainly not dead. Indeed, the very lifeblood of the artwork flows through the detours and diversions that, even though they are erased, nevertheless remain responsible for making the work become what it becomes.

Niklas Luhmann (2000) observes that "rejection 'potentializes' by reproducing the rejected as possibility" (33), and it is the fact that every "no" is potentially a "yes" which allows possibility to incessantly interrupt the premature foreclosure of the artwork. But this is more than just an aesthetic version of "versioning," to stay with the language of computers and hypertext; it is not a question of simply retaining earlier iterations of the same work in a virtual archive of variations where the theme remains intact, but of acknowledging that the artwork always has the *potential* to be other than it is. In other words, possibility here refers not to the versions but the archive *itself* and the (neutral) space between one potential archive and another. Nor is it a question of going back to all those "nos" in order to re-read them as potential "yeses" so as to endlessly augment and enrich the artist's oeuvre through a feverish obsession with every preliminary sketch, every discarded fragment, every erased inscription, all of which are forced to speak of a lost origin, a beckoning têlos, and the overpowering desire for absolute knowledge. On the contrary, as Kafka's *Diaries* illustrate so eloquently, every "yes" and subsequent "no," all of the beginnings and endings that mark out this fragmentary space of the work, are nothing but detours; not versions but *diversions* that could never offer a meaningful contextualisation for a "final" work (the last "yes"). Instead one is witness to a process of infinite re-textualisation where, Deleuzian-fashion, it is precisely the repetition of the "yes"/"no" infinite that produces difference, not different versions of the same work (mere "diversity") (Deleuze 1994, 222). But the same difference that is irreducible to one work or another.

But, to be clear, while art (perhaps uniquely) allows the emancipation of contingency and the consequent affirmation of errancy, erring itself is not accorded any positive or negative value. In art, erring is completely neutral as is the desire for the errancy and the act of erasure that removes its trace, if only temporarily. It is the affirmation of this neutrality that positions the "yes" of productive aesthetic judgement outside of the "yes-no" nexus to be found in the twin (and entwined) hegemonies of the knowledge economy and the politico-ethical community; something that the almost all-pervasive attempt within critical theory to politicise the aesthetic fights hard against, not necessarily without reason: the neutrality of art is dubious.

3. The Neutral

Neutrality refuses all affiliation. If, as one might say with Walter Benjamin, friendship does not reduce distance but, rather, brings that distance *to life* (Josopovici 1987, 62); then the neutral—friend to none—offers no such easy access to the spaces between one point and another. In a world of entrenchments, of positions, camps, beliefs, and conviction, where even the most unfriendly acts still assume and contribute to the live-liness of an unrealised filiation, neutrality occupies an outside that—neither friendly nor unfriendly—is easy to eye with suspicion. A-filiation (to coin a term) rather than non-affiliation (which still assumes a dialectic of resistance) is, perhaps, one way of describing this alterity. Without attraction or revulsion, such neutrality introduces into the production of an artwork the exigency that at each and every moment the expanding or contracting possibilities that present themselves are each given full and equal attention regardless of the consequences for the swift and smooth integration necessary for achievement of a "work." It is this, the radical equality of neutrality, which is responsible for errancy, the introduction of a logic or method of erasure and, as with the fragmentation of a computer hard drive, the slowing down of the *work* of the work of art. Maurice Blanchot (1982) identifies this delay at the heart of Kafka's work, where the very desire for continuity creates endless discontinuity and eternal transformation.

> For if patience, exactitude, and cold mastery are qualities indispensible for not getting lost when nothing subsists that one could hold onto, patience, exactitude, and cold mastery are also faults which, dividing difficulties and stretching them out indefinitely, may well retard the shipwreck, but surely retard deliverance, by ceaselessly transforming the infinite into the

> indefinite. In the same way it is measure which, in the work, prevents the limitless from ever being achieved. (Maurice Blanchot 1982, 82)

To say "yes" (or at least the temptation to say "yes") to every possibility before either erasing it with a subsequent "no," or, alternatively, allowing it to stand is the movement of a particular delay that separates art so radically from all of the extra-aesthetic contexts and contextualisations that would so like to speed the artwork to the goals of their choosing. Emmanuel Levinas (1989) captures something of this in his review of Michel Leiris's *Biffures* when he reminds us of the proximity of *biffure* (erasure) and *bifur* (bifurcation).

> Bifurcations—since sensations, words and memories continually turn a train of thought from the path it seemed to be taking towards some unexpected direction; erasures—since the univocal meaning of each element is continually corrected and altered. But in these bifurcations and erasures Leiris is less concerned to go down the new paths opened up or to latch onto the corrected meaning than he is to capture thought at that special moment when it turns into something other than itself….The primordial status of the notion of erasure affirms the simultaneity of multiplicity… [this] the ambiguity of erasures forms a space. (Levinas 1989, 145-146)

"Forms a space," this is the point: the logic of erasure both opens a space and gives it form—to repeat, a mode of *articulation*. This articulation is the product of a series of "yeses" and "nos" that are multiplicitous not only as a continuum of possibilities but also as a simultaneity that pluralises (or potentializes) the artwork at every moment, with all of the contingency each moment brings. If, as Levi nas claims here, "thought is originally erasure" (Levinas 1989, 146), this is not only because, as he suggests, always concealed within such thought is the "presence of one idea in another" (Levinas 1989, 146), but also the fact that the *contingency* of what is concealed and what is not at such moments of bifurcation vanishes into each univocal meaning: but the question remains—why this rather than that?

4. The Emancipation of Contingency

So, it would seem that the reason for art's resistance to the teleological logic of instrumentalism in all of its different forms is not, contrary to the now deeply unfashionable thrust of late modernism, due to an aestheticism intent upon protecting the pure essence of the work from anything outside of its own "truth," but, rather, a product of the contingency that, as Luhmann (2000) expresses it, is emancipated by art.

> The art system realizes society in its own realm as an exemplary case. It shows things as they are […] fies a situation in which the future, no longer guaranteed by the past, has become unpredictable. Operative closure, the emancipation of contingency, self-organization, poly-contexturality, the hyper complexity of self-descriptions, or, simpler and less accurately formulated, pluralism, relativism, historicism—all these trends offer no more than different cross sections of the structural fate of modernity. By suffering its own condition, art shows that's just how it is. (Luhmann 2000, 309)

But, quite apart from how things are, art's "suffering" of its own contingency needs to be viewed in a more affirmative light—the intention here—which, if we continue with Blanchot, begins to suggest that the affirmative dimension of art might be understood as an affirmation of the unknown, a "yes" to the "don't know."

> The unknown is neutral, a neuter […] let us propose that in research—where poetry and thought affirm themselves in the space that is proper to them, separable, inseparable—the unknown is at stake; on condition, however, that it be explicitly stated that this research relates to the unknown as unknown ….] In other words, we are supposing a relation in which the unknown would be affirmed, made manifest, even exhibited: disclosed—and under what aspect?—precisely in that which keeps it unknown. (Blanchot 1991, 300).

As described here, art becomes a form of research, albeit one completely uncoupled from the will-to-knowledge. But the crucial question raised by this passage is the following: if neutrality can be affirmed and, more to the point, if this affirmation is of the order of manifestation, exhibition, and disclosure as Blanchot suggests, then what form or forms does this affirmation take artistically and, more importantly, how are these forms arrived at?

First of all, it is clear that the affirmation of the unknown *as* unknown can only take place within the known, as a gap, space or erasure; anything else would be wantonly obscure or nonsensical. Thus, the neutral does not by any means inhabit an exclusive and refined aesthetic metaphysically beyond the familiar forms of art practice; on the contrary, its real force can be felt within artworks across the board, from the most original to

the most predictable (even clichéd) examples of creative practice. The unknown is not beneath, behind or secreted within the work, the unknown *is* the work to the extent that it turned out like this rather than that—why? It is this, the contingency of aesthetic judgements when confronted by the indefinite, but also the equalised space of possibility presented by the neutral that introduces the unknown into the known. We know the work—there it is—but we don't know how or why the artist came to say the final "yes" to this rather than a different work. And not only do we know that we don't know, but we know that we *cannot* know because the contingency of each affirmation or renunciation renders the productive process incomprehensible, the artist's claims of an immanent necessity notwithstanding. But, to say again, this incomprehensibility is not a mystification but, rather, the very *articulation* of the work itself as it emerges out of the logic of erasure that holds the alterity of the "this rather than that" in place or in the space between one possibility and another. And it is because erasure is always a contingent aesthetic act that this space between the "yes" and the "no," what's in or out, is always shifting and thus impossible to predict or reduce to the known.

The aesthetic affirmation described here, the affirmation required for a work to emerge, is not, then,

simply a "yes." As an inceptual rather than a confirmational or expressive enunciation, such a "yes" is, in reality, compound: a "yes," "no," "don't know," and the affirmation of all three elements. The co-presence of the positive, negative and the neutral (the marked, the unmarked/erased and the contingent space between them) and the affirmation of this concatenation is what distinguishes art from its contexts, where the dialectics of "yes-no" reign supreme. In a sense, art goes beyond dialectics, as long as this is understood in the Nietzschean sense as a going back before (genealogically) and/or beneath (archaeologically) the post-tragic introduction of the dialectic by Socrates. Indeed, to go further, Heidegger would want to press on beyond the existential tragedy of the pre-dialectical into an ontological space that, in its inhuman neutrality, eventually brings him back to art. To be sure, Heidegger describes what he calls this "other beginning" (the beginning beyond the initiation of dialectical thinking) in terms of negation, but he has a characteristically complex grasp on this term, one that brings it much closer to the affirmation of the neutral being considered here. What is more, as will become apparent, the movement of his thought within the "yes," "no," and the neutral ultimately affirms all three in its desire to resist what he considers to be the ontological superficiality of the dialectic.

So, in *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, Heidegger (1999) gives priority to the "no," but this is a long way away from any familiar sense of disapproval or rejection, let alone the more speculative "no" of dialectical thinking proper. But, interestingly, his defence of the "no" is also accompanied by an implicit re-evaluation of the "yes," one that likewise prises it away from the dialectic of approval and disapproval.

> How few understand—and how rarely those who understand grasp—"negation". One immediately sees in it only rejection, putting aside, degrading, and even destroying. Not only are these forms of negation often pretentious, they also most immediately encourage the common idea of "no". Thus the thought of the possibility that negation could perhaps have a still deeper being than "yes" is left out—especially since one quickly also takes "yes", in the sense of any kind of approval, as superficially as the "no".
>
> But is approving and rejecting in the domain of representing and of representing "evaluation" the only form of yes and no? Is that domain after all the only and essential domain, or is it rather like correctness, derived from a more originary truth? And in the end is not the "yes and no" an essential possession of *being* itself—and the "no" even more originarily than the "yes"? (Heidegger 1999, 125).

More originary than the "yes" perhaps, but the Heideggerian "no" is, nonetheless, itself fundamentally affirmative—a "no" that's really a "yes"—(like the artist's). As he continues: "the 'no' is the great leap-*off* by which the t/here in Da-sein is leaped into: the leap-off that […] 'affirms' that from which it leaps off […]" (Heidegger 1999, 125).

5. The Two Beginnings

Transposing this way of thinking into the domain of aesthetic production rather than (with Heidegger) the unconcealing of Being resonates well with much of the above. What is most useful is the way in which Heidegger works with the idea of two beginnings: the "first beginning" and the "other beginning." Artworks, like everything else, begin but, unlike everything else, artworks problematise the beginning. So, yes, they begin but they might not, or if they do, why like this rather than that? But not only does art problematise the beginning, it also dramatises it. Look! Something from nothing! Look! The marking of an unmarked space! But

the problem (and the drama) for the artist is not just the beginning but the continuation of the artwork. And, in a sense, the dominant perception of (and attraction to) art revolves around the oft-celebrated struggle with continuation. But this raises another problem: how to continue without obscuring or, indeed, negating the beginning; how to keep the work beginning.

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AFFIRMING ART: HEIDEGGER AND THE SENSE OF A BEGINNING

For Heidegger, origination does not simply occur at the beginning of the artwork but throughout its continuation understood as a perpetual origination—the eternal recurrence of the beginning. This is an idea Heidegger shares with Walter Benjamin (1985) who describes the origin thus: "the term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of its genesis" (45).

It is within this context—the becoming of aesthetic prduction—that Heidegger's notion of two beginnings begins to make sense, one that also helps clarify the intrmingling of the "yes," "no," and "don't know" in art practice.

Gerhard Richter speaks of a series of "yes" and "no" judgements familiar to any artist, but if we place this process within the Heideggerian frame proposed here then the "no's" take on a different significance. The "no" at issue here is does not negate but, as Heidegger puts it, "repels" the "first beginning" which, once begun, constitutes the past of the work as a "still-going-along-with" that needs to be interrupted. Put another way, the "first beginning" of the work, its origin [*Ursprung*], demands a continuation that is forever in danger of concealing, what Heidegger would see as, the originary unconcealment of the creative act. Nevertheless, it is still absolutely essential that this "first beginning" be affirmed otherwise there would be no work at all, even if this affirmation is articulated as a "leaping-*off*" that repels or is repelled by the descent of the beginning into its continuation. Saying "no" to the "first beginning" of the work then is necessary for the work to *become* a work: it is the *working* of the work understood as its becoming. Benjamin (1985) understands this in rhythmic terms, continuing the above passage: "that which is original is never revealed in the naked and the manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight" (45).

It is precisely that, the "dual insight" required to bring into view the "first" and the "other" beginning, that characterises Heidegger's way of thinking and which requires that negation and affirmation are thought together as the pulse of unconcealment/concealment that represents (for him) the *working* of the work.

Thought thus, and to reiterate, the negativity of the originary "no" is not conceived in terms of negation but, rather, as the affirmation of repulsion—a form or erasure that repels rather than destroys: renunciation. Again to reiterate, placing something under erasure should not be confused with the expression of disapproval any more than affirmation should be indicative of approval. For Heidegger, the "yes" and "no" have nothing to do with either, a fact that might usefully be recalled when considering Richter's remarks. As Heidegger (2006) explains in his *Mindfulness*:

> Affirming and approving are not the same….
> Affirming refers to decisions that are not yet-fulfilled, and have to be created for the first time.
> Approvals are easy to bear and there is a multitude of what is to be approved.
> Given their actual futurity, the affirming ones remain necessarily unrecognized and strange even among the likes of themselves….
> The approving ones lie because first they must lie to themselves, insofar as their approving is passed off as affirming, passed off as the freeness unto being-free, which is simply what they must evade.
> Affirming means "saying yes" to the nihilating of the ab-ground; it means taking over a decision. (99-100)

Like the famous song—"Yes, We Have No Bananas"—the co-presence of affirmation and negation is not dialectically resolved but announced as an affirmation of negation that, in Heidegger's sense, allows the work to leap into its own becoming. The question remains however, if the originary "no" of the "first beginning" leaps away from that which is affirmed and repelled at the same time, then who or what decides on the

direction of this leap into openness of the "other beginning"? If affirming does refer to "decisions that are not yet-fulfilled, and have to be created for the first time," then how are these decisions arrived at, how and why is one leap preferred above another? Why does Richter, like the rest of us, sometimes say "yes" and sometimes

say “no”? Uncoupled from right and wrong, the aesthetic decisions that keep the artwork working are difficult to ground. As already suggested, if artworks represent the “emancipation of contingency,” then the choice of one mark rather than another, as a move within the indefinite detour of errancy, will always be subject to revision. Richter claims that he ultimately *decides*, but is the exercise of choice the same thing as making a decision? Put another way; are the “yeses” and/or “nos” of the work’s becoming, choices or decisions? Heidegger (1999) is in no doubt: “What *is* decision at all? Not *choice*. Choosing always involves only what is pregiven and can be taken or rejected. *Decision* here means grounding and creating, disposing in advance and beyond oneself or giving up and losing” (69).

6. Choice and Decision

Clearly, making an artwork involves a series of choices. While the “unmarked space” might indeed be unmarked *by the artist* at the beginning of the work. The first mark and the subsequent marks of the work’s continuation are arrived at (whether “spontaneously” or after much deliberation) through a series of choices that inevitably draw upon the available patterns of marking that silently/invisibly inhabit the unmarked as an insistent possibility. In theory, the work could be anything, but in practice it usually turns out pretty much as one would expect—which, of course, includes the expectation of the unexpected. To this extent then, the “yeses” and “nos” of the work’s production can indeed be conceived as the operation of choice, the criss-crossing of aesthetic judgement within the parameters of the “pregiven.” Decision, on the other hand, as the word suggests (de-*cision*), describes a cutting, a cutting away from what is there as the initiation of a task to create another beginning and another time-space “ahead of yes and no.” “The decision must create *that time-space*, the site for the essential moments, where the most serious mindfulness, along with the most joyful mission, grows into a will to found and build” (Heidegger 1999, 68).

Does decision cut itself free from choice, or does it cut *into* it, thereby creating another space-time *within* or *between* the “yes” and “no”, or, as Heidegger describes it Kierkegaardian-fashion: the either-or? It is this possibility that raises the issue of neutrality again or “indifference” to use Heidegger’s (1999) language below:

> What is own most to decision can only be determined from within and out of its essential swaying. Decision is decision between either-or. But that already forestalls what has the character of decision. From where [comes] the either-or? Where does this come from, only *this* or only *that*? From where [comes] the unavoidability of thus or thus? Is there not a third, *indifference*? (70)

If the artwork *is* the product of a “yes” or “no,” where it is the emancipated contingency of art that always results in aesthetic choices being characterised by what might be described as conviction *without* knowledge, then the betweenness of de-cision suggests a way of outstripping the arbitrariness of a conviction-aesthetics, based upon baseless choice, by rooting the unknowingness of art not in the constantly erased space between the “yes” and “no”—earlier described as the “rather than”—but, more essentially, in the space *erased* by the space of erasure itself, the space “ahead of” the mutual erasure of “yes” and “no.”

The indifference of decision is double; it is indifferent to the “pregiven” choices that are all-too-ready-to-hand, and it is also in-*difference*, in a different space-time that decision is, if Heidegger is to be followed, able to “found and build.” To the extent that the indifference of decision points towards the more essential in-*difference*

where the “other beginning” can begin, then it throws off its merely aesthetic garb and acquires ontological significance as the necessary break not only with the either-or of choice but also with the no less contingent binarity of the artist and the artwork.

For the artist, the emancipated contingency evident in the production of the artwork makes it the perfect vehicle for both the articulation and the suffering of the “incomprehensibility” of Being. This results in the existential predicament of the artist faced with the task of producing an artwork without the requisite knowledge of just how (or even *why*) to begin. There is a certain ironic knowingness of the unknowingness of art that allows the artist to nevertheless affirm a beginning *without* an originary and founding origin to “unconceal.” The fact that the artwork began like this rather than that can be explained, no doubt, at the level of choice (some artists are very good at explaining their intentions) but as the continuation of the work so often demonstrates, without the decisiveness Heidegger speaks of, this continuation either finds itself incapable of

leaping away from this "first beginning," or, alternatively, becomes trapped in a proliferation of "first beginnings" that shatters the unity of the work and its continuity. The former uses the beginning of the work as an arbitrary arbiter in the "yes/no" choices that are secreted within the reassuring integrity of the final "yes." The latter swears no allegiance to the contingency of originary moment, engaging instead in a process of potentially infinite re-origination that celebrates the incessant "deterritorialization" opened up by the "yeses" and "nos" as they play across the surface of the work as flagrant indifference and infidelity. To say again: both affirm the "yes," "no," and "don't know" of the artwork—the first secretly, the second openly, but, from a Heideggerian perspective, the merely aesthetic or ironic affirmation of indifference is inessential because it is only ever exercised within the neutral space *between* the "yes" and "no" rather than, as Heidegger demands, "*ahead* of any yes or no." But what would it mean to "leap ahead of any yes and no"?

When Heidegger speaks of inbetweenness, as he often does, he is speaking not of the space between affirmation and negation or, as we have seen, between approval and disapproval, but of a space-time that is situated outside rather than within such binaries. Put another way, for him it is not a question of *either* "yes" *or* "no", but of a "no" that (in reality) says "yes" to a space-time that has outstripped the oscillatory play of the dialectician. As such, the affirmative dimension of Heidegger's thought is not related to the choice of this or that aspect of the given but, rather, to the prior givenness of the given and the giving of that: incessant origination.

While it might be true that Heidegger's famous anti-aesthetic "turn" towards art is largely indifferent to both the artist and the artwork, the fact remains that the issue for us here is the impact of such thinking on the task of the artist producing actual artworks. Heidegger, in common with the majority of philosophers, always speaks as a receiver of art, the issue here is the *production* of art within the context of his thought. What would aesthetic de-cision look like? How does ontological errancy differ from ironic/aesthetic errancy for the erring artist? What exactly is this "other beginning" and can the actual work of the artist realise its inception? In other words, can "inceptual thinking" be translated into inceptual action and inceptual production?

Perhaps the best place to begin considering this is alongside Heidegger and his particular mode of reception. As already seen, for him, saying "no" to the "first beginning" as the means by which the leaping-off into the "other beginning" is affirmed, is the way in which a fascination with the artist and the artwork is repelled. The leaping-off—from the existential to the ontological—amounts, then, to an essential affirmation of *art*. Just as Maurice Blanchot (close to Heidegger here) describes the act of reading a text as a silent "yes," an affirmation prior to (or "ahead of") any critical approval or disapproval, so the act of *writing* a text, of

producing an artwork, is itself already an affirmation of art. But what does it mean to affirm art? Indeed, what *is* art if not the artist and his/her work? Stripped of personalities and aesthetic objects, art, in Heidegger's view, represents a particular "style" of inceptual thinking, one that "enacts" the truth by offering it a particular form of "shelter." "*Style* is the law of enactment of truth in the sense of sheltering in beings. Because art, for example, is setting-into-*work* of truth and because in the work the sheltering comes *in itself* to stand unto itself, therefore style is visible, although hardly understood—especially in the field of art" (Heidegger 1999, 48).

7. Truth and the *Work* of Art

For Heidegger art is work, not the artwork but the *work* of art, one might say the *working* of the work. Nor should this work be confused with the labor of the artist whose personal style and private "truths" are secondary issues of interest only to art historians, biographers, connoisseurs, and "fans" and themselves. No, the *work* of art is, in truth, something essentially unaesthetic in nature, indeed, something *in truth*. But truth is not that which can simply be known as true. Truth is not known but enacted, is set to work neither as the content of the artwork nor the intentions of the artist but, rather, as the inception of another space-time—an "other beginning"—where, as the notion of "shelter" implies, truth is protected and preserved but also *concealed*. As Heidegger thinks it, "style" does not refer to the surface variety of aesthetic forms but to the more essential visibility of the work of sheltering itself (visibility being understood as that which outstrips visuality: the poetic word, the musical phrase can similarly render the work of truth's sheltering visible). In this regard, it is not a question of identifying different aesthetic styles, but of identifying art as that unique style which renders visible truth's invisibility alongside those other styles (philosophy, science, and religion) that do not. This clearly owes

a great deal to Hegel's aesthetics where art represents the phenomenological moment of Spirit's self-recognition as appearance but, surface similarities notwithstanding, it is here that one also witnesses the fundamental divide between Hegel's dialectic of Spirit and Heidegger's ontology of Being. The former offers up a teleological narrative that plots the historical course of misrecognition and unknowing from the viewpoint of an *absolute knowledge* that is arrived at through the work of the *negative*; the latter, on the contrary, presents us with an ecstatic non-narratable, non-dialectical, and non-teleological encounter with historicity that places truth *outside* of knowledge (absolute or not) in a "zone" of knowing unknowingness (unconcealing/concealment) that is *affirmed*. Everything in Hegel points towards the *end* of history, where the work of negation ceases. Everything in Heidegger points towards the *beginning* (both "first" and "other") and the work of affirmation that, as the motor of origination/re-origination, *never ceases*.

8. Why Art?

So, to ask the question again, an illegitimate question no doubt given its merely existential perspective: what impact does or could such thinking have on the nature of art practice and our understanding of its more essential significance? Perhaps one way of answering this is to suggest that it changes the register of the earlier question: why this rather than that? At the level of choice and the "yes/no" of the artist, the answer merely confirms the emancipated contingency of the aesthetic process and the unknown space between this "yes" and "no," but at the ontological level the question might be rephrased as: why art rather than philosophy or religion or politics or science? To this might then be added the subsidiary questions: why be an artist rather than a philosopher or a priest? Why make artworks rather than invent concepts (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 5ff) or preach sermons? And, if we want to follow Heidegger further, we will very quickly have to ask: why "why?"

rather than "how?" or "what?"? "And yet it is necessary to know that although in the course of that history the 'why-question' has taken on the appearance of the deepest and most extreme question, the 'why-question' is not an *originary* question at all, but rather remains trapped in the domain of explaining beings" (Heidegger 243).

Why art? Prior to committing to this or that musical or literary phrase, this or bodily gesture, and this or that aesthetic intervention, the artist has *already* committed to art, the decisive "yes" prior to the contingent "yes" and "nos" of aesthetic choice. Heidegger is right, once the why-question is posed it becomes immediately apparent that the "what?" and the "how?" must follow close behind. Knowing why something exists too easily distracts us from the more essential questions by diverting attention away from ontological errancy towards the ontic domain of explanation and explication: the "Why?... Because…" encounter known to every parent. As Jacques Rancière (1991, 13) has argued so eloquently in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, it is precisely the "stultification". He associates with the pedagogical process of explication that, in so confidently invading the space of ignorance, effectively destroys not only unknowingness but, more crucially, the affirmation of the knowing unknowingness under consideration here. Perhaps the worst parental answer is the best: "Why?"… "Just because, that's it, get over it." The artist is "thrown" into art, the why-question is largely irrelevant and uninteresting, it has happened, what now? In this regard, the shift from the why? to the what? should not refer to the shift from "why art?" to "what is art?" (the so-called ontological question that clogs up so many pages of so many remarkably un-ontological books on aesthetics), but to the shift from "why art?" to "what does it do?" "how?" These questions do not require explanations but *descriptions*.

What does art do? And prior to the artist choosing to do this or that, what *decides* the artist to do art? As shown, Heidegger does not offer an explanation of art (or of the artist's commitment) but describes it as the "setting-into-work-of-truth." But, to be clear, it is not the work of the artist that sets the truth to work, but the *work* of art prior to artist and artwork. Ask an artist *why* they are artists and they will offer you any number of explanations, some convincing, some not. Ask an artist *what* they do and they will most likely *describe* in great detail and with considerable precision the nature of their work and *how* they go about it. The question being asked here however does not at all fit into this neat duality. "*What* decided you to become an artist?" does not require, as a response, the description of an artwork but, rather, a description of a space that must be entered into, the space-time of art itself. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989, 109), very much under the wing of Heidegger, describes this space-time as "in-between" and relates it to a notion of "play" that overlaps significantly with the

latter's grasp of the *work* of art. Whatever the merits of this terminological shift from "work" to "play" (it serves Gadamer as a means of critiquing what he sees as "subjectivist" aesthetics) the different manner of describing the player's attachment and commitment to the game does offer some insights into how artists *decide* to become artists. Although Gadamer sticks to the concept of choice, it is clear in the following that a distinction can be made between choice as de-cision and choice as choice. He writes in *Truth and Method*:

> It seems to me characteristic of human play that it plays *something*. That means that the structure of movement to which it submits has a definite quality which the player "chooses." First, he expressly separates his playing behaviour from his other behaviour by *wanting* to play. But even within his readiness to play he makes a choice. He chooses this game rather than that. (Gadamer 1989, 107)

Clearly, *choosing* to play, and choosing which *game* to play are not the same thing. The first "choice" is the essential one in that, as de-cision, it both cuts the player away from what Gadamer describes as "his other behaviour," while also cutting open a space within the game thus ensuring that the player is held in place within

the subsequent structure of play. It is not, then, just a question of playing the game but, as Gadamer recognises, of *wanting* to play the game, it is this that is de-cisive. But how is this desire to play explained? Like Heidegger, Gadamer offers no such explanations but, rather, *describes* the manner in which the game casts a "spell" over the player.

> The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players.… The real subject of the game (this is shown in precisely those experiences in which there is only a single player) is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself. (Gadamer 1989, 106)

In order now to import these ideas back into our discussion of the what? and the how? of art, let us just remind ourselves that play is only significant for Gadamer to the extent that it relates to the ontology of art. "[w]hen we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself" (Gadamer 1989, 101).

As with the player, the de-cision to become an artist is not really a choice at all; *wanting* to do art, its attraction, the fascination it exerts, and the spell it casts describe a situation and encounter that leaves little room for choice. But *how* does this enchantment or intoxication come about? What is the fascination of art?

9. Fascination

Perhaps, it is here that we really begin to confront the unknown in art, not at the level of the mark or the genre or the form or the ever-expanding possibilities of aesthetic choice that occupy the artist within the contingency of any one situation, but at the fundamental level of art itself—why art? But to say again, this is not really a why-question but a what-question. It is not a matter of explaining why one might choose art above anything else but, rather, of describing what it is about art that is so fascinating. Interestingly, although perhaps symptomatic of the philosophical mind and mode, Heidegger is very good at describing *what* is so fascinating about art while, at the same time, not being very good at (or interested in) describing *how* this fascination impacts on the fascinated artist and the artwork. In other words, he is very good at describing a space outside of the existential, ontic, and the aesthetic, one that is opened by and demands for its continuance a particular "task" of thinking and a particular deployment of language, but he does not devote any time to describing exactly *how* this space is "leapt into"; it remains for artists themselves to describe this. What this signifies is that, while the thinker (whether philosopher or artist) can think outside of the aesthetic, the artist, (as the maker of work) remains *within* the aesthetic, albeit a domain now radically transformed by such thinking. It is this transformation, the importation of ontological "mindfulness" *into* the existential, ontic and the aesthetic that is ignored in Heidegger's account, thus leaving us with a way of *interpreting* art (an ontological hermeneutics) rather than of *making* it. For Heidegger, thinking allows us to re-*read* art as an opening onto Being; for him the encounter with the artwork is always a *means* to that (endless) end. For the artist, no matter how thought-full, the work never vanishes into the task of thinking but always remains, if not as an end, then as a brute reality that is transformed by having another space (an "other beginning") opened-up *within it* rather than outside it. It will take an artist such as Blanchot to recognise the manner in which the "thought from the outside" (Foucault

1986) is very much on the *inside* of the artwork and the subsequent aesthetic experience of the artist. The unknowingness of art, then, is both outside of it and within it. This will be returned to, but first let us return to the "what-question": what is it about art that decides the artists to become an artist? What is so fascinating?

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As Gadamer describes it, while the player chooses which game to play, the de-cision to play is not something chosen but is, rather, something that is played-out by what Heidegger would call as the very Being of the game. In this way of thinking, it is the game that plays the player rather than the player who plays the game, and it is precisely this playfulness of play that casts its "spell" and draws the player into game. In spite of Heideggers much-used metaphor of the "leap" into the unknown, it is this more processual notion of being "drawn" into the unknown that characterises his understanding of the task of thinking (and playing), and it is this, the allure of Being, that helps explain the fascination of art.

Heidegger thinks about art, but like Kant before him, his primary preoccupation is with thinking about thinking, art being an essential occasion for such thinking. Thinking is here not rooted in a given body of thought, ready and waiting to be thought again, but is understood as a "calling" that both demands commitment and, more essentially, a "heeding" to that which withdraws from the largely un-fascinating domain of knowledge and the known. Just as the player is drawn into the game not as a player but as the played, so Heidegger's thinker is not drawn *to* thought by the knowledge of what has been thought and is, thus, thinkable, but, rather, drawn *into* thinking by that which is *thought provoking*, an event of the unknown rather than the known.

> What must be thought about turns away from man. It withdraws from him. But how can we have the least knowledge of something that withdraws from the beginning, how can we even give it a name?... What withdraws from us draws us along by its withdrawal…Once we are drawn into the withdrawal, we are somewhat like migratory birds … caught in the pull of what withdraws, attracts us by its withdrawal. And once we, being so attracted, are drawing toward what draws us, our essential being already bears the stamp of that "pull." (Heidegger 1968, 9)

But the question remains: *what* is it that "pulls" the thinker into the event of thinking? To learn to think, for Heidegger (1968, 4), is to learn to give heed to "what there is to think about", but *what is* there to think about? Needless to say, Heidegger's own thinking is "pulled" by the (forgotten) question of the Being of beings, so why does he think about art?

In "The Origin of the Work of Art", Heidegger (1971) thinks about art, that is to say, he is called or pulled by art into the space of an "other beginning" where the Being of beings begins to be illuminated: he is fascinated. But the spell cast on him by art has nothing to do with the appreciation of aesthetic objects—he is not a connoisseur—nor is he interested in the foibles of the suffering or inspired artist played out in the endless psychodramas staged for the art-lover's delectation. No, art is the place or space where "truth sets itself to work," a statement that should be interpreted carefully. Heidegger is not saying that art is the truth or that art, or some art (authentic art), is true. Nor is he saying that the *work* of art is the work of truth: truth does not need art, it sets *itself* to work. What he *is* saying is that the work of truth is disclosed by art, not through the representation of aesthetic forms, but rather as a way of seeing the "setting to work," where seeing really means "heeding" or "hearkening": a particular form of knowing encapsulated by the word *technē*.

> The word *technē* denotes … a mode of knowing. To know means to have seen, in the widest sense of seeing, which means to apprehend what is present, as such. For Greek thought the essence of knowing consists in *alētheia*, that is, in the revealing of beings … *Technē*, as knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, is a bringing forth of beings it that it *brings forth* what is present as such *out of* concealedness and specifically *into* the unconcealedness of their appearance. (Heidegger 1971, 59)

So, to begin to answer the question as to what it is about art that so fascinates, clearly there is a "call" here into a mode of knowing that is exotic to the extent that it represents a break with the hegemonic

will-to-knowledge which, as Nietzsche had already spotted, increasingly dogs and perverts the thinker's task. But why should the unconcealment of Being be any more fascinating that the scientific verification of truth? It is here that one must recognise and understand the place and function of *work* within Heidegger's concept of

truth: truth is not just *there*, but *given* (*Es gibt*) again and again through the infinite becoming of work. It is the revelation of this work in and by art that draws the thinker in; not as a way of approaching the truth but, rather, as a way of tracking and tracing its withdrawal. Being drawn to what withdraws is the essence of fascination.

Within the economy of knowledge truth is truth. Within the knowingness of *technē* "*truth, in its essence, is untruth*" (Heidegger 1971, 54). It is this irresolvable duality that demands not the familiar dialectical work that would seek to overcome contradiction and actualise absolute knowledge, but the work of "dissembling" (Heidegger 1971, 54) that, as Blanchot describes it, incessantly reveals and re-veils. "The poem is thus the veil which makes the fire visible, which reveals it precisely by veiling it and concealing it. The poem shows, then; it discloses, but by concealing, because it detains in the dark that which can only be revealed in the light of darkness and keeps this mystery dark even in the light which the dark makes the first dawn of all" (Blanchot 1982, 230).

What does knowingness know? It knows of its own unknowingness. Misunderstanding this—described by Heidegger as the "denial" or "refusal" of truth by truth itself—results in a subsequent misunderstanding of the latter's encounter with art, one that is evident in many (mis)interpretations of his notorious discussion of Van Gogh. Heidegger's dubious politics notwithstanding, the famous passage in "The Origin of the Work of Art" suffers a radical distortion when it is taken merely as a proto-Nazi glorification of the blood and soil, not least because the very *work* of truth as described here precisely unravels the very certainties that make for the (admittedly unsavoury) political convictions attributed to Heidegger. This is the key passage: "[t]his equipment [the shoes] belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself …. But perhaps it is only in the picture that we notice all this about the shoes. The peasant woman, on the other hand, simply wears them" (Heidegger 1971, 34).

Certainly Heidegger's fascination does on occasions result in some ill-judged prose, more deserving of ridicule than serious political opposition—"the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death" (Heidegger 1971, 34)—but in essence his intention is clearly the affirmation of art rather than the fascistic glorification of the peasant (with or without the dreaded shoes). It is, in other words, the knowing unknowingness of art, rather than the unadulterated ignorance of the peasant that brings our attention to what Heidegger describes as the "strife" of "earth" and "world," and it is this, the co-presence of the open and the closed, that is at the heart of the truth-event. To properly understand this it is necessary first of all to strip "earth" and "world" of their fascistic connotations and grasp their philosophical purpose within the above passage and Heidegger's ontological project as a whole. To repeat: the real issue here is the play of unconcealment and concealment and the withdrawing of truth into itself.

> The world is the self-opening openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a 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…The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there….The opposition of world and earth is strife. (Heidegger 1971, 48-49)

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If, as Heidegger suggests, we only "notice" this strife in the artwork, this is not because the artist has arrived at an aesthetic form capable of representing and communicating the work of truth but, rather the contrary, that art itself withdraws into a solitude that in a sense absents it from the world of human communication and knowledge exchange. And, paradoxically, the more the work opens up an illuminated space, the more solitary it becomes: the overpowering presence of an untouchable absence. "The more this thrust comes into the open, the stronger and more solitary the work becomes…. The more solitary the work, fixed in the figure, stands on its own and the more cleanly it seems to cut all ties to human beings, the more simply does the thrust come into the Open" (Heidegger 1971, 66).

Judged by the contemporary standards of "knowledge transfer" and the communicative community that legitimates it (and is in turn legitimated by it) neither the thinker nor the artist *knows* the work in any sense that would be socially or academically useful. The former looks on from the outside and describes the fascinating spectacle of the known folding into the unknown, while the latter speaks from *within* the essential solitude, not

as one “in the know” but, rather, as one cast aside by the work as it dis-*closes* its incomprehensible truth-event. For both the thinker and the artist, in fact both cast aside by the work, the fascination with art can only be an affirmative experience: fascination cannot negate. But the peculiarity of fascination—its fascinating quality—is that, although devoid of negativity, it is only “pulled” into or towards art through the necessary affirmation of the “no” and the “don’t know.” It is this double affirmation that promotes the work to its essential solitude and its consequent unknowability.

10. Conclusion

The affirmation of the “no” that itself affirms the ground of the “first beginning” as it is repulsed, represents an affirmation of “world,” the opening of a beginning that originates the work of unconcealment even as that worldly beginning is leapt away from. To leap away from “world” is to leap away from knowledge or, to be more accurate, is the incessant repulsion of knowledge. To affirm the “other beginning” is in effect to say “yes” to the “don’t know,” to make the de-cision that cuts art away from knowledge and thrusts the work back into its sheltering concealment: “earth.” But it is not simply a question of affirming one or the other—“world” or “earth”—with “yeses” that bowdlerise or mystify art respectively, nor is there any suggestion here that both should be affirmed with a great big “yes” that obliterates the irreducibility of “world” and “earth” as well as the restlessness that keeps the work of truth (and the work of art) working. Anyway, fascination and choice are contradictory concepts, the fascinated do not choose to be fascinated, they are chosen and must decide if they wish to succumb not to “world” or “earth” but to the eternal “strife” between them.

Clearly, Heidegger is fascinated but, as a thinker, his task is to describe what it is that fascinates. In particular, it is the solitude of the work and its break with the human (thanks to the “don’t know”) that draws him towards art as it withdraws. This break with the human, so typical of Heidegger, also draws him away from humanism and the existential which, on the level of philosophical thought is its real strength and value. However, as we have seen, this results in an obliviousness to the actuality of art practice and the experience of the practitioner that, while refreshing as a necessary antidote to the multitude of ghastly humanistic texts on “the Artist”, does nevertheless deny us any insight into the existential/aesthetic confrontation with anti-humanism. So it is not a question of returning to a discredited and somewhat embarrassing humanism obsessed with the tragedy of the subject, but, rather, of considering just how that subject/artist continues to make work not about solitude as with Heidegger, but from *within* the solitude that is art.

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