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The Origin of the Work of Design

Thoughts based on a Reading of Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art"

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ABSTRACT This article takes Martin Heidegger's well-trammeled essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" as an object of reflection, engagement, and redirective innovation in order to think design now. The approach taken rests upon reading Heidegger from the perspective of a very different context: our present. By implication, engaging his text becomes informed by contemporary political, cultural, and environmental circumstances and imperatives. Such a reframed reading of Heidegger is then able to be taken to the ongoing project of rethinking design, not least its relation to art.

KEYWORDS: Heidegger, art, artwork, design, equipmentality, thinging, future/defuture, concealed/unconcealed, strife, revealing, truth

Martin Heidegger sums up his influential essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” by saying “The foregoing considerations are concerned with the enigma [*Rätse*] of art, the enigma that art itself is” (Heidegger 2002: 1). This view is now both true and false. Art remains an enigma, but it is not the same enigma it was when Heidegger made the statement in 1938. That is to say that the nature of art as enigma has changed: modernism and postmodernism expanded, blurred, and disrupted the boundaries of art; also, the very ground of world, earth, and work changed.

Our concern here is not with art but with “change” and “the same.” Design is central to any form of directed change. It should also be pointed out that design is so often erroneously made a couplet with art (art and design). So in reading design into Heidegger’s essay, what will be alighted upon is change as revealed by him by transposing and transforming what he had to say from art to design (although design does get a brief mention). Certainly art and design can be close, but equally they can be light years apart, while, in relation to origin, both are able to be asserted as “ur-forms.” What can be claimed, though, is that design is just as much an enigma as art.

From Work of Art(work) to Ontological Design

To bring design to what Heidegger presents in “The Origin of the Work of Art” means engagement, redirection, and avoidance. So said, and to make the point, this is what Heidegger has to say on the relation between the artist, artwork, and art:

The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. Nonetheless neither is the sole support of the other. Artist and work are each, in themselves and in their reciprocal relations, on account of a third thing, which is prior to both; on account, that is, of that form which both artist and artwork take their names, on account of art. (Heidegger 2002)

In taking the liberty of transposing the designer, the design object, and design for artist, artwork, and art something, commonalities and differences will become evident. First the transposition: *The designer is the origin of the design object. The design object is the origin of the designer. Neither is without the other. Nonetheless neither is the sole support of the other. The designer and the design object are each, in themselves and in their reciprocal relations, on account of a third thing, which is prior to both; on account, that is, of that form which both the designer and design object take their names, on account of design.* What we now have is a basic definition of ontological design, an idea drawn from Heidegger in almost Heidegger’s own words.

The Mention of Design

Heidegger not only acknowledged the causal relation between the artist, the work, and art as circular but asked if art exists as the

generative point of origin, or was it the other way around? Design answers the question. The practice of design predated any identity nameable as “designer,” yet at the same time design, as an act of prefiguration (the idea of the “to be made” going ahead of making to direct its form) was intrinsic to the most fundamental moments of the development of “the human.” By implication designing was separated from the classification and assignment of a role denoting the practice of designing as it advanced as (craft) making gained sophistication. The name of the role “designer” had to await the arrival of an economy with highly structured divisions of labor. Thereafter it became backloaded into the history of artifice. The formation of the discourse “design,” as the ordering of the practice, had to await it becoming constituted as a discernible field of human activity. This, in turn, had to await the arrival of the object named “design” as well as the named economic role of “designer.” The time gap between the emergence of beings who could design and the naming of design was massive. The picture of the coming of “art” has similar characteristics, as the act of making of what was later to be designated as “art” arrived a very long time before the creation of the category, which was then retrospectively applied. Thus in both cases design and art existed ontologically as productive of “things” that were eventually metaphysically named via applied values of culturally diverse systems of contextual classification.

Things Designed and the Nature of the Thing

Heidegger wrote on the “thingliness” and the “thinging” of things.¹ All material things have material qualities independent of whatever cultural values are posited with them, but conversely the possibility of cultural values depends upon the existence of the thingliness of the thing. The music, the score; the painting, the canvas; the dance, the stage – all made things are bracketed by a directive conjoined immateriality prior to and in addition to their thingliness. Here is design as the imposition of form on the thing from those things that prefigured its condition of possibility; the thing is not the end point of design but the thingliness that determines the nature of its thinging. Take the simple example of a chair. The designed form of the chair arrives out of the form of the elements of all chairs prior to its existence (designers design chairs with innovatory reference to chairs past and present). Good design, in its formal sense, can thus be understood as an aesthetically and functionally resolved bricolage. What informs designing as such can purely be the aesthetic thingly form of the chair, or the thinging of the chair (the aesthetic and/or qualities of sitting); or both what the chair looks like and the delivery of what it feels like to the sitter.

Designing thus exists: before the designer’s designing of some thing (via the designer designing in a designing environment of prior things); in relation to the designed thing (what the designer designs out of this context); and, as a result of the thing designed going

on designing as a designing thing. Simply illustrated by the chair seen as potentially implicated in the designing of other chairs, its designing of the ongoing good or bad ergonomic consequences of sitting, and as things among other things that are not only implicated in the aesthetic of place but often participate in the designing of social engagement (the chair thus can contribute to the designing of conditions of assembly, the thing assembles²).

Violence and Things

Things are taken to be self-evident, but they are not only what they appear to be. They are not just reducible to mere inanimate objects. Heidegger's statement that "We need to know, with sufficient clarity, what a thing is" continues to be true. The relation between the being of beings, beings as things, and the being of things was within the remit of his thinking – a thinking that reopened an earlier Western philosophical questioning from the Scholastics to the Enlightenment on the nature of things, which was touched by Eastern understandings (which he failed to discover had a greater ability to illuminate his question). Affirmatively, his notion of the thinging of things has had a major influence on the formation and development of ontological design. But his thinking has also received critical attention. Certainly Heidegger's view that "A human being is not a thing" (Heidegger 2002: 4) became a contestable proposition, not least when we place it between his address to the thing in "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935–36) and his published lecture "The Thing" (1950) (Heidegger 1971). When human beings are reduced to *zoe* (to bare life), their humanity is negated (Agamben 1998: 124).³ To take the humanity of humans away is to make them a thing. One could argue that human beings have been doing this for millennia, but the claim of the project of civilization was precisely to transcend such barbarism. That event named "Holocaust" dealt this claim and Heidegger's assertion a fatal blow if we acknowledge that to be human is to be more than a thing, but humanness stands on the thinking of "its" thingliness, to which the human can be reduced (that which was deemed to never happen again continually did so in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia – the human capacity for inhumanity is historically boundless: all that changes is the technology of death).

Things are always implicated in violence. This not just the assemblage of bodies and arms that constitute the things of war, but within the dialectic of sustainment itself wherein creation and destruction are indivisible. So when Heidegger says: "One has the feeling that violence has long been done to the thingliness of the thing and that thinking has had something to do with it," he is underplaying the violence against all that is (2002: 7). Our created perception of things itself does violence to the very nature of "things in being" – which is the relational character of all things as "world" – as it itself is reduced to "a thing" able to be violently appropriated by the application of "the thinging and thingliness of things."

Reduction and Things

Moving out from, rather than toward, the aestheticized design object and the artwork of Heidegger's consideration, one can see the reduction of things to matter, form, serviceability, and equipment as examples of how the relational character of object-things and existence is concealed by that particular mode of making present. Here, then, is the concealment of formalist abstraction that disarticulates things.

Serviceability is brought to the relation of form and matter by Heidegger as the means by which the being of form realized in matter "look at us" and invite use. Serviceability arrives by "the design and the choice of material predetermined by that design." Design is assigned to ground matter, form, and serviceability, which itself is always a "product of making." Design is what enables "the made" to become viewed as a "piece of equipment" – which, in turn, is the "true nature of matter and form" as it expresses "what is manufactured expressly for use and usage." Counter to Heidegger's seeming instrumentalism, here he goes on to say "Matter and form are in no way original determinations belonging to the thingness of the mere thing" (2002: 10). His observations here, in the contexts of the concealment and disclosure of things, invite two comments: one on design and the other on the character of an object-thing itself in relation to the difference between equipment and a granite block.

According to Heidegger, a piece of equipment "unlike the granite block, however lacks the character of having been shaped by itself" (Heidegger 2002). But nothing gains its shape by itself – as all that is "matter of the world" is shaped by "the forces of the world," this as it is contextually situated. Moreover in our age, contrary to Heidegger's characterization, making is now often independent of the human hand, and so much that is made, as with "black box" product, conceals the nature of its making and what it exists to do. Matter and form, as with form and function, have now become disarticulated Things, in the most profound sense, are not what they were for him. This includes his understanding of "mere things" as equipment that has lost its use (serviceability), for much equipment, as matter, can return reformed as another "thing" (2002: 11).

The "perceptions of things" is now predicated upon "controlled exposure." Often one cannot see what something is (as with equipment – functions are frequently the result of software, not mechanics), and even if it is seen, what it actually is, is hidden by some kind of interface that regulates sight and directs use. So while Heidegger remarks that interpreting the nature of "the thingness of a thing" is difficult, what is now being said is that this problem now extends to the thing itself (Heidegger 2002: 12).

"The Work"

Heidegger writes on the artwork, and for him, in this context, the work only becomes accessible if it is removed from all relations "to

anything other than itself” so that it may stand alone (Heidegger 2002: 18). But to be in the world is to be in a relation, so in reality, nothing can stand alone. Yet in its standing, the work stands upon a ground (2002: 21). As such it comes from, is materially indebted to, and is animated by practices that are all linked to the ground out of which it was made to emerge. But equally it is a connection back to its ground, thus the work “opens up a world.” The world it opens cannot long be deemed to be natural. The making of a world of human fabrication (the world within the world) has made the natural and the artificial indivisible: nothing is untainted. There is no pure air, soil, or water. As Nietzsche warned, so much of the *Earth*, once our/ the *homeland*, is rendered a wasteland.

The world is taken so often to merely be the imaged figure of planet Earth. Its being is so much more than this. Moreover, as Heidegger put it, “World is not a mere collection of the things – countable and uncountable, known and unknown – that are present at hand ... World is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at” (Heidegger 2002: 23). In that world's world they carry us into being. In so doing all that constitutes the being of the world is a force of “worlding” and thus implicated in our (coming into) being. In so saying Heidegger's notion of the stone being without a world, the animal being poor of world, and the human being rich of world is, as argued elsewhere, contestable.⁴

Nothing, including stones and animals, simply belongs to “the hidden throng of the environment into which they have been put” (Heidegger 2002: 23). They rather are elemental to the ecologies from which the form of the environment is constituted.

Things (including works of art) world worlds – in their thinging (their efficacy as things) they ontologically design transformations in the being of things from which worlds (in their assemblies that either future or defuture) are constituted. They, works, things, are both a “setting up” and a “setting upon” by design, but now without any assured future. World, so positioned, is “design as event” understood as the “world within the world,” as a designing of the world of its dependence (the Earth). Heidegger understood this – “World and earth are essentially different and yet never separated from one other. World is grounded on earth, and earth rises up through earth” (2002: 26). He had the possibility of imagining the destructive capability of the technological attainments of humanity, yet didn't grasp or the dialectic of sustainment.

Optimistically, and from the wisdom of the retrospective view of innocence, Heidegger asserts: “Earth shatters every attempt to penetrate it. It turns every merely calculative intrusion into an act of destruction. Though such destruction may be accompanied by the appearance of mastery and progress in the form of the technological-scientific objectification of nature, this mastery remains, nonetheless, an impotence of the will” (Heidegger 2002: 25). Now we know otherwise; we know that by design, the nature of the Earth

can be destroyed by the destructive powers of human creation, this in a moment of mutual madness or equally by a slow process of defuturing, which arrives incrementally and every day, and has been named unsustainability. There is no mastery, progress, or harmony, and no self-sustaining stream (Heidegger 2002) – yet the historicity of our species suggests we will survive; it likewise indicates that the survivors will likely be a small minority of the total population.

Making Appear

Heidegger moved between a concern with “what made the work appear” versus appearance resulting from a “revealing from within the work.” But he also pointed out that “Human making does not make things appear,” because for a thing to appear requires agencies of perception: language, image, knowledge in relation to context/discourse.⁵ Both appearance and the world of things are relational configurations. Now to his consideration of “setting up world and setting forth earth the work instigates strife” (Heidegger 2002: 26). The work here is presented as a fighting between world and Earth – but this conflict is a mere playground tiff over the telling of the truth. Let’s take this to another scale, where the work is all that which is made and therefore is the sum of all making – the world within the world; the tension between the world and Earth can now be generalized as the violence of the “design as event,” wherein tension has turned into a *riss*, rip, a tear – a wound existing between world and Earth beyond “the earth’s dependence on ‘the openness of world’” (2002: 27). In this situation of real warfare everything is at stake. Where deaths and wounds are promptly attended to, they may be healed; if neglected they will eventually be fatal.

The True and the False

Truth was fleetingly passed over, but it refuses to be so treated. So acknowledged, our starting point is Heidegger’s declaration that: “Truth in essence is untruth” (Heidegger 2002: 31). He comes to the question of truth via a preoccupation with *aletheia*.

Truth, so placed, turns on a phenomenological understanding of the dialectical relation of concealment and unconcealment, and the forcing of an opening, a crack, in the concealed, the untruth, out of which truth can arrive (just as untruth arrives as a crack in the truth of the unconcealed). The true and the false thus transpire to be triadic – they are opposites that coexist together (in so doing they mirror a Taoist understanding of yin and yang insofar as they are opposites that in their relationality constitute a something other than their individual character). By implication, intrinsic to the true and the false, the concealed and the unconcealed, is something that remains hidden. Truth and falsehood thus never totally appear, they are never absolutely singular, nor independent from a contextually grounded discourse – in this setting there is no means or authority of appeal. Thus truth abides in a condition of being among beings that is strife,

whereby conflict rules the openings and the closures inherent in concealment and unconcealment.

Does design figure in this discussion? Absolutely, for design turns on concealment and unconcealment. Design covers over, and in so doing conceals the “It could be otherwise,” the “not to be seen,” the “fate of the designed” – there can be no “truth to materials” (once a slogan in design). What you see is not what you get.

Design Comes into the Picture

Now in “the age of the picture of worlds” – the age of the fragmented reduction of world to picture – the conflict between the made (world) and the ground upon which making stands (Earth) is beyond Heidegger’s belligerent moment of “the strife of clearing and concealing” (Heidegger 2002). The crisis of now is that the pictures of crises effectively conceal that crisis beyond the picture, which is beyond the relational interaction of the causal forces that underpin all that threatens us rather than the Earth. Certainly the anthropocentric myopia of our world-making damages the biophysical “Earth,” but being damaged is its past and future as a fated object in time. It has no essential form at the level of life. Earth holds no meaning other than the meaning we humans have given it. It merely exists in a universe of process, and as process it will continue after we humans have destroyed all that we will have destroyed, including ourselves. Here is the “something which cannot be mastered” of which Heidegger wrote (2002). He casts truth as the *ur-strife* (that is the original strife) between clearing and concealment. Again untruth arrives as the indeterminacy between what is concealed and unconcealed as the one is always implicated in the other. Yet the desire for the unconcealed, “the truth” (the truth of beings as a whole) is retained, but as strife.

One can feel the pain of the blindness of seeing, the pain of all that is before us as concealed by the very way we see, the covering over of perception of the ontic, the very tyranny of the classificatory metaphysical systems of thought that art always tries, and always fails, to transcend. So when Plato told us we see with our mind not our eyes, he omitted to point out that our minds are not the containers of pure thought able to distill and express truth, but rather, our minds arrive out of the worlds of others – that making of worlds we call culture, and within it what Fredric Jameson in 1972 famously called “the prison house of language.”

Knowing, Seeing, Understanding, and Design

Our seeing, the concealed and the unconcealed, are prefigured by design. As such, design designs designing and the designed (just as for Heidegger art is the origin of the artist and the artwork). In both cases, practice under the direction of the discourse in which it is embedded (as Foucault made clear) is directive. Design, as prefigurative thought, goes ahead in the company of language with intent. It does

not enable seeing things as they are concealed, but rather as they might become as the unconcealed as simulacrum. The object, work, thing is never present for us as it is but rather as we represent it to ourselves (Heidegger 2002: 27). We project it, thus we have always been televisual, so, by implication, ur-sight is imagination.

Heidegger wants *techne* to be the knowing of something present as something present, but there is a difference between something disclosed (unconcealed) as present and what is present being known (Heidegger 2002: 35). World in this context is the consequence of the instrumental act of making from that which is present but unknown (for example, timber is the result of seeing the tree from which it is to be hewn as something instrumentally known and present, while the very nature of the tree remains unconcealed in its bio-atmospheric complexity). Thus for all the knowledge the craftsperson may have of timber, his knowledge of the tree from which it came would be negligible. The unconcealed resides in (a condition of) relationality, to truly know is to know this, but in making something present relations are ruptured (as timber ruptures the relation of the tree from the Earth and the sky), the being of some thing is ruptured from Being itself. In innocence, one might now ask whether notwithstanding all that stands in its name (metaphysics), is knowledge that truly knows possible? Additionally, at the end of knowledge, is not the goal to advance the task of understanding? Can one not put in place truth as present in the strife (as the tension of mutual dependence (Heidegger 2002: 38)) between the opposition of knowledge and understanding as that which exists between world and Earth, as Heidegger suggests?

Truth and the Word

Strife is but one take on the German *Streit*. In fact the broader meaning of *Streit* expands a complex tension of mutual dependence that swings between outright conflict and minor squabble. So when Heidegger says “Truth establishes itself as strife/*Streit*” is he not saying that truth is that won out of a contestation, which we now take here to be between world/Earth; the concealed/unconcealed; knowledge/understanding? More than this, he presents truth as the prefigured result of the deployment of strife – it is a designing (“the rift-design [Riss]” – “the drawing together into a unity of a sketch and fundamental design rupture and outline” [Heidegger 2002]). Now one asks whether what is being evoked here is merely (a) dialectic by design (named in his account as “the figure [Gestalt]”⁶)?

In the truth of the world, the truth of the ever increasing strife between world(s) that defuture and Earth as our damaged homeland, things, designed things (not and never reducible to mere objects) are forces of creation and destruction – the thinging of things can never be claimed to belong to the Earth. No matter the material or immaterial origins, their ontological designing can sustain or destroy, materialize care or negate it, extend the event of time or diminish

it. Things and their thinging are figures in that contestation which is strife (Heidegger 2002: 43). Our *understanding* of them is decisive. And this understanding can only arrive if “we” understand that we are situated in the endless ontological circling wherein things in part make us; while we in part make them, and that together we make and negate worlds and time. “We” as a species and as individuals were born into this circling, but as indicated it does not assure our future. We are creating by design things with the ability to destroy us, and which have already destroyed “the natural” (the natural and the artificial are now indivisible – the synthetic and the hybrid are now normative – the nature Heidegger calls upon has gone) and yet the reverse is, and must be, *true*.

Not only has nature as natural been lost, so has art and poetry. They have a trace, but have not survived the ravages of technologically amplified inhumanity. Certainly art retains a certain residual therapeutic agency, but only as the afterlife of “art.” Moreover, in “the light” of Heidegger claiming truth happens through “poeticizing,” (and that the essence of art is poetry [Heidegger 2002: 47] and that “Art allows truth” [2002: 49]). Theodor Adorno’s tragic proclamation⁷ needs to be cited: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” It is not that this view just is of one moment, or that it washes over Heidegger and contributed to his stain, but that barbaric actions represented by Auschwitz have been unending, as the late modern history of genocide affirms, and that the essence of the Holocaust lives on unnoticed in ever more prolific forms. This essence, as Zygmunt Bauman made clear in his fine book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, is simply “the culture and instruments of compliance” (instruments now intrinsic to omnipresent technology).

Return of the Enigma

Heidegger remarked in his Afterword that that since Hegel presented his lecture course on aesthetics in 1828–29 there have been many “new artworks and art movements” (Heidegger 2002: 51). This is an understated view. By the time that Heidegger was writing, modernism was fully established and the nature of art had been turned on its head. In this respect Heidegger’s moment can be bracketed between Walter Benjamin’s recognition that art had lost its “aura” and the arrival of nominalism epitomized by Robert Rauchenberg’s declaration in 1961 that: “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so,” which has been translated as “If I call it art, it’s art.” If we do unto Heidegger as he did to Hegel we can say while there have been many “new artworks and art movements” art has become a business, a commodity like any other, and the artist but another trained professional. Of course, the art world well knows this, as do its investors, but they nurture the illusion that art remains art, and of course “the masses” want the lie to live and the comfort of the deception.

Where does design reside in this desired spectacle that is the debacle of art? One could say that it exists as a monster in the

shadows. Design is everywhere; it is the prefigurative force that brought, and continues to extend, the world within the world of human creation, and it is that ontological driver that powers the endless (to date) transformative cycling of things, beings, and Being. Yet it mostly goes unseen, mostly exists in the concealed of the familiar and the everyday, or as anonymous components in all and everything manufactured. The anesthetized presence of design in galleries, in glossy magazines and coffee table books, as well as in the more serious tomes of design scholarship, rather than revealing design narrows the perception of what it is and conspires with its concealment in mind and made matter. The couplet “Art AND design” is no marriage of compatible partners. They are not of equal weight, nor in the same register, certainly not fellow travelers, and art is not a basic determinant of our collective future, whereas design, now that humanity has no naturally endowed future within the delimitation of evolutionary process, is decisive in bringing “us” a future with a future. As for the origin of design – it is lodged in our origin.⁸

Notes

1. See Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track* and “The Thing” in Heidegger’s *Poetry, Language, Thought*.
2. As Bruno Latour details, traditionally “the thing” was the name of the Icelandic political assembly, and as such brought difference into one place based on common concerns to arrive at “(dis) agreement.” See Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, *Making Things Public*, p. 23.
3. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 124.
4. Tony Fry, *Becoming Human by Design*.
5. “The Thing” in Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 181.
6. See Heidegger “The Origin of the Work of Art.” See the Appendix on Heidegger’s understanding of *Gestell* (*Ge-stell*) moved from “placement” to the “designate essence of modern technology” (design figures in both understanding), p. 54.
7. See Heidegger “The Origin of the Work of Art,” p. 44. The full Adorno quote is: “The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture of barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.” Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 34.
8. See Tony Fry, *Becoming Human by Design*.

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