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Special Issue: *Thinking Contemporary Art with Heidegger*

Editors' Introduction

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In 2016, when we first began planning this special issue, eighty years had passed since Heidegger's 1935–36 lectures on “The Origin of the Work of Art” momentarily turned the philosophical attention from the beauty of art to its *truth*—to the process of truth “setting itself to work” in the work of art, now understood as the exposition of the conflictual interaction or “strife” between the meaningful configuration of a historical “world” and its material seat in the “earth.” In the course of those decades, the Western art world has undergone profound transformations. Very generally speaking, the visual arts have witnessed a passage from the peak of modernism in the interwar period, through postwar late modernist movements such as abstract expressionism and postmodernist tendencies such as pop art and conceptual art, to the polyvocal world of today described by labels such as post-postmodernism, metamodernism, contemporaneity, and post-

contemporaneity. General trends such as the progressive experimentalism of modernism, the postmodern disillusionment with modernist utopias and the associated playful eclecticism and blurring of distinctions between “high” and “popular” cultural forms, as well as the various more recent reactions against the ironical nihilism of postmodernism, have also been reflected in literature and classical music. Traditional boundaries between different art forms and between art and non-art have become increasingly fluid as the arts interact ever more intensely with one another and with other modes of human culture, such as the media, popular culture, science, and technology. New artistic genres, practices, and theories—from bio art to Internet art, from virtual realities to posthumanism—pop up faster than one can keep track.

These developments within the art scene echo wider cultural and societal transformations of the late twentieth century brought about by the postindustrial changes and globalization of developed consumer economies, digital technologies, and new mass and social media. Even if the physical and mental distances between people across the globe have shrunk with the emergence of unforeseen possibilities and intensities of communication, the accelerating flow of information, images, ideas, opinions, and innovations also contributes to an increasing fragmentation of the contemporary context, at least in Western and Westernized societies. The loss of credibility of grand metanarratives proclaimed by Jean-François Lyotard in his 1979 *The Postmodern Condition* and the proliferation of competing micronarratives appear to take us farther and farther from the kind of relatively stable cultural unities and historical continuities Heidegger still seems to presuppose in the mid-1930s as he reflects—without being immune to the nationalist fervor and totalitarian conformism of the surrounding Third Reich—on the significance of art in grounding the dwelling of communities in their historical worlds, embedded in situated local soils.

Moreover, the postwar wave of decolonization and the more recent economic and political rise of China and other Asian countries have challenged the global hegemony of the West and its intellectual and cultural traditions, largely uncontested in Heidegger’s day. The end of the Cold War marked the end of the bipolar global competition of two superpowers, seen by Heidegger as “metaphysically identical” representatives of the technical age¹; the result has been an increasingly multipolar, rather than unipolar, world. These shifts, together with the rise of post-colonialist intellectual sensitivities since the

1960s, has made Western art increasingly receptive to non-Western artistic traditions, styles, and influences that no longer hearken back to Greco-Roman classical antiquity as the self-evident point of reference that it still was for Heidegger's understanding of art.

These considerations raise the obvious question of whether Heidegger's thinking of art has become outdated. In addition to the general air of conservatism in his writings and his bleak view on modernity, this suspicion is strengthened by explicit disparaging comments, such as Heidegger's remark in a 1966 interview that he fails to see what is truly "orienting" or "pioneering" (*das Wegweisende*) in modern art or where modern art "perceives or at least seeks that which is most proper to art," characterizing modern literature as downright "destructive."² However, at least in the field of theory, the constantly expanding volume of the literature on Heidegger's philosophy of art, now too vast for one person to handle, suggests otherwise.³ Heidegger has become a staple figure in courses, textbooks, and reference works of aesthetics, and there is no question of his decisive impact on contemporary phenomenological, hermeneutic, and deconstructive approaches to art from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer to that of Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Gianni Vattimo. Much of post-Heideggerian aesthetics has followed Heidegger's project of thinking art outside the parameters of the metaphysical tradition—either adopting the Heideggerian perspective on the relation between art and truth or reacting against it. Furthermore, as awareness of global climate change has become more and more acute, Heidegger's analysis of modern technical and calculative thinking, as well as his notion of "dwelling" (*Wohnen*), have become sources of inspiration for discussions on environmental and ecological art and on art's role in attracting attention to questions of sustainability.⁴

Against this background, it is rather surprising that extensive discussions of the relevance and applicability of Heidegger's thinking to works and trends within contemporary art—tentatively definable, in a loose and institutional sense, as comprising the kind of works one would find in a museum of contemporary art, that is, mainly by living artists or belonging to trends that are still active and relevant—are rather scarce. Matthew Biro's *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*, Barbara Bolt's *Heidegger Reframed*, and Iain Thomson's *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* are among the rare book-length studies touching on the topic.⁵ The question of what is potentially useful in Heidegger for reflecting upon today's art and artistic practices and institutions has been addressed occasionally and

fragmentarily at best. Can fruitful conceptual resources be found in the Heideggerian opus for analyzing artistic forms, genres, and experimentations that did not exist in the context in which he worked and wrote? Is, for example, the contemporary art world still determined by the framework of the subjectivist aesthetics of modernity within which, as Heidegger provocatively puts it in 1935, art is primarily “intended for enjoyment” and thus “belongs in the domain of the pastry chef”?⁶ Or do later artistic developments introduce dimensions or tendencies that could arguably be said to challenge, even transgress, that framework?

Our original purpose in launching this special issue of *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* dedicated to “Thinking Contemporary Art with Heidegger” was to see how Heidegger scholars and philosophers of art would react to such questions. The present issue is the result of the wide-ranging responses we received.

Andrew Benjamin’s “The World in Ruins: Heidegger, Poussin, Kiefer” addresses some of the most fundamental issues in Heidegger’s philosophy of art. The project of Heidegger’s later thinking was to prepare for an “other beginning” in Western thought and its relation to being, and his meditations on art can be read as aiming to show how art can take part in this preparation. However, in the light of global warming, such optimism of a new opening is increasingly being shadowed in our contemporary intellectual “now” by the prospect of a catastrophe, an end of the world after which there is no “other beginning.” This specific temporality of the present “now” calls for a modified way of applying Heidegger’s account of the artwork as an “at-the-same-timeness,” a contemporaneity of the opening up of a historical world and its installment into the material locality of the earth. Benjamin meticulously uncovers, in works by Nicolas Poussin and Anselm Kiefer, ways in which artworks can capture, at the same time, both the imminence of an end of the world and the refusal of such an end by exhibiting a “world in ruins.”

In “Of the Earth: Heidegger’s Philosophy and the Art of Andy Goldsworthy,” Tobias Keiling probes into Heidegger’s complex notion of “earth,” situated at the heart of the Heideggerian analysis of the work of art. Keiling argues that while the earth, in Heidegger’s account of art, is the dimension of materiality, sensuousness, and nature, it is not simply reducible to any of these phenomena. Rather, the earth is undifferentiated elementality which only appears and becomes phenomenal in its tensional interaction with the “world” of meaningful configuration—precisely as the “self-secluding” principle that inherently *resists* phenomenality and articulation. Keiling complements the Heideggerian notion with

Husserl's analysis of the earth as the phenomenological Archimedean point of movement and as the ground or basis supporting and unifying humanity, and with Hegel's remarks on the earth as the "universal individual" that interrupts the systematic differentiation of nature into genera and species. With the help of the "land art" of the contemporary British artist Andy Goldsworthy, Keiling illustrates how the earth and its strife with world can very concretely appear in a work of art.

In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger suggests that art, while it is a realm fundamentally different from modern technics, could, precisely by virtue of this difference, provide a site for exposing the truth of the contemporary technical age, and that, conversely, reflections on the essence of technics could also cast light on the essence of art.⁷ In "Liberation—of Art and Technics: Artistic Responses to Heidegger's Call for a Dialogue between Technics and Art," Susanna Lindberg argues that the contemporary artistic practices connected to what has been labeled a "technological turn" in art contribute to such a dialogue by placing art and technology in constant interaction in a novel manner. Using examples from the works of Rebecca Horn, Jean Tinguely, Anaïs Tondeur, Eduardo Kac, and Tomas Saraceno, Lindberg exposes the senses in which contemporary art can be said to "liberate" technics from the matrix of instrumentality and calculation and introduce a novel possibility of a "free relation to technics." Conversely, Lindberg also discusses the ways in which contemporary artistic uses of technology can, in turn, "liberate" art from the subjective mastery and virtuosity attributed to it by the modern tradition of aesthetics, thus offering art new possibilities of world-disclosure.

Finally, in "Disclosing Worldhood or Expressing Life? Heidegger and Henry on the Origin of the Work of Art," Steven DeLay contrasts Heidegger's philosophy of art with Michel Henry's discussion of painting. DeLay argues that Heidegger's notion of art as world-disclosure does not adequately cover the essential dimensions of the work of art, since it intentionally overlooks the internal aspect of aesthetic experience. By applying Henry's philosophy to the works of Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Signac, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and Abedelkader Benchamma, DeLay argues that the essence of art is to be sought in the way it promotes and exalts the feeling of life—a function which, DeLay maintains, makes art eminently capable of challenging the nihilism of the late modern age.

Admittedly, at present, art is not the most prominent theme in Heidegger scholarship. The publication, in 2014–2015, of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks*, his fragmentary "thought

diaries” from the 1930s and 1940s, has once again revitalized the longstanding debate over Heidegger’s involvement with National Socialism, fascism, and radical conservatism, and the repercussions of this involvement for the status of his philosophy. The fact that certain remarks found in the *Notebooks* betray an anti-Semitism not unequivocally present in his previously published works has given rise to a particularly heated polemic and yet another re-evaluation of Heidegger as a thinker.⁸ Since we felt omitting a reference to this discussion would, at the present moment, be an oversight in a volume dedicated to Heidegger’s work, we have included two shorter discussion papers on the significance of the *Black Notebooks* and their reception.

Donatella Di Cesare’s “The ‘Jewish Question’ and the Question of Being: Heidegger before and after 1945” summarizes the main argument elaborated in detail in her two recent books, *Heidegger e gli ebrei* (2014; forthcoming in English from Polity Press as *Heidegger and the Jews*) and *Heidegger & Sons* (2015). Di Cesare interprets Heidegger’s anti-Semitism in the light of the way “the Jewish question” (*Judenfrage*), which has loomed over European thought at least since the Enlightenment, is connected to Heidegger’s own “question of being” (*Seinsfrage*). According to Di Cesare, Heidegger’s anti-Semitism is to be regarded as “metaphysical” in nature, in the sense that it connects the figure of the Jew with the tradition of metaphysics that Heidegger seeks to overcome, and also in the sense that Heidegger’s own way of conceptualizing “world Jewry” falls prey to the Western tradition of metaphysical thought and its prejudices.

In “On Overestimating Philosophy: Lessons from Heidegger’s Black Notebooks,” Ingo Farin and Jeff Malpas tackle another, less publicized aspect of the *Black Notebooks*: their extremist view of philosophy’s capacity for attaining an overarching grasp of the meaning of being that gives absolute priority to the philosophical over all other perspectives. In their nuanced reading, Farin and Malpas sketch out the development of Heidegger’s hubristic notion of philosophy as well as the way in which Heidegger’s early lecture courses already contain resources for undermining such an overestimation, which Heidegger himself finally comes to recognize in the 1940s in a shift from the “history of being” towards a “topology “of being.

We are proud to be able to present such a premium selection of original, compelling, and mutually complementing perspectives on Heidegger’s relevance for contemporary art. Since the present issue indeed represents a selection from which several fine contributions

had to be left out, we also owe our warmest thanks to the contributors whose work could not be included; we hope they and other scholars will be sufficiently inspired by the topic to make relevant studies abound in the future. Very particular thanks are due to the expert referees who took the trouble to provide authors with valuable advice and helpful suggestions. Finally, we wish to thank the editors of the journal, Arto Haapala and Gerald Cipriani, for entrusting us with the fascinating opportunity to guest edit this issue.

Notes

¹ Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 40, 40–41 (hereafter, GA 40)/*Introduction to Metaphysics*, 40.

² Heidegger, “Spiegel-Gespräch mit Martin Heidegger” (1966), in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 16, 670, 682/“Only a God Can Save Us,” 106, 115.

³ To list only some of the most prominent existing works on Heidegger’s philosophy of art: Babich, *Words in Blood, Like Flowers*; Bolt, *Heidegger Reframed*; Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*; Geulen, *The End of Art*; Harries, *Art Matters*; Kockelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Art Works*; Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics*; Mitchell, *Heidegger among the Sculptors*; Sallis, *Transfigurements*; Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age*; Schmidt, *Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis*; Seubold, *Kunst als Ereignis*; Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*; Vattimo, *Art’s Claim to Truth*; von Herrmann, *Heideggers Philosophie der Kunst*; Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*; Zimmerman, *Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity*.

⁴ On Heidegger and environmental aesthetics, see, e.g., Forss, “The Aesthetics of Dwelling”; Morton, *Ecology without Nature*; Toadvine, “Ecological Aesthetics”; Wood, “Can Only Art Save Us Now?”

⁵ For further applications of Heidegger’s philosophy on contemporary art, see Costello, “Museum as Work in the Age of Technological Display” and “Leaning into the Wind”; Kockelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Art Works*, 202–208; Parvu, “The Interior Void of Things”; Vinegar, “*Reluzenz*”; Zuidervaart, “Art, Truth and Vocation.”

⁶ GA 40, 140/*Introduction to Metaphysics*, 140.

⁷ Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik,” 39–40/“The Question Concerning Technology,” 340–341.

⁸ For some of the main published contributions to this discussion, see Krell, *Ecstasy, Catastrophe*; Farin and Malpas, *Reading Heidegger’s Black Notebooks 1931–1941*; Mitchell and Trawny, *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks*; Nancy, *The Banality of Heidegger*; Trawny, *Heidegger and the Myth*.

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