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David Sayer

Art and the Play of (Un)Concealment

ABSTRACT

This essay meditates on Heidegger, Derrida, readymades and a certain erratic boulder. It is structured around Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935); the first section briefly explicates his phenomenological method based on the bracketing of one's preconceptions in order to let the thing show itself. From methodology, the essay moves to a reading of Heidegger's interpretation of van Gogh's *Old Shoes with Laces*. Heidegger argues that a work of art presents a singular, though historical, truth. Against that view I juxtapose Derrida's deconstructive reading in *Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing* (1978) where he shows that due to a work's 'essential indeterminacy' it cannot be reduced to a singular reading. The tensions between phenomenology, deconstruction and hermeneutics are explored but not definitively resolved. In the second part of the essay, I read Duchamp's readymades and Maura Doyle's *Erratic Boulder* through a Heideggerian lens as well as Heidegger's argument through those works. Duchamp and Doyle offer an opportunity to further draw out some of Heidegger's ideas as well as to reveal the limits of his division of things into natural things, useful things and works of art.

BIOGRAPHY

David Sayer is a fifth year PhD student in Social and Political Thought at York University, Toronto, Canada. His current research interest is the nexus between western philosophy, political philosophy and history.



ART AND THE PLAY OF (UN)CONCEALMENT

What vanity painting is, which attracts admiration by resembling things whose originals we do not admire!

Pascal, *Pensée* 74

THE UNCONCEALMENT OF PAINTED SHOES, READYMADES AND A CERTAIN ERRATIC BOULDER

In his 1935 essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, (*The Origin*) Heidegger presents truth as a historical, non-teleological play of concealment and unconcealment. The mode of unconcealing truth that he focuses on in the essay is that of great works of art. In the course of the essay, he describes how works looks at us, speaks to us, and gives us our outlook on ourselves. However, as is seen in his analysis of van Gogh, Heidegger argues that works of art, when experienced phenomenologically, present an essential, objective truth. For Heidegger, the work itself speaks this truth directly to the attentive viewer, or what he calls the works 'preservers.' Derrida, in his 1978 essay *Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing*, a critique of *The Origin*, counters that it is in fact the work's silence that makes us speak about it, even putting words in its mouth. The arguments of both thinkers problematize the subject-object relation by questioning the agency of the subject and attributing agency to the work, but, whereas for Heidegger the preserver's experience is determined by the work, for Derrida there is an unavoidable element of play in the structure of a work. Derrida shows that in speaking for a work one cannot attribute to it a single truth or meaning, since its play of absence and presence gives it an 'essential indeterminacy.'¹ Derrida argues that both the work and its historical context present only a patchwork of traces, not keys to the artist's intention and historical objectivity. This essential indeterminacy of the work gives one the freedom to interpret its possibilities within the limits determined by its centreless structure and contextual traces. As heirs to poststructuralism, this critique of intentionality and truth may sound obvious, but we should remember what is at stake. Leo Strauss, whose work takes up the challenge introduced by Heidegger and others, laments that under the influence of historicism no one, when approaching a work, any longer cares to ask: 'What was the conscious and deliberate intention of its originator?'ⁱⁱ Not only does he argue that the creator's intention is the only objective standard for understanding a work, but that it is possible that what the work says is *the* truth.

By those who defend traditional hermeneutics, the poststructuralist position is often said to mean that every interpretation is of equal value. Since poststructuralist theories are situated between the universalism of ahistorical truths and the relativism of subjective caprice, that critique only addresses a straw man. The work itself undoubtedly gives something to be interpreted. In attempting to understand the work, one can refer to the work's historical context, to the artist's other works, as well as to the artist's own statements. But in all that we never come across the truth itself, a moment of presence that grants objective certainty. Those hermeneutic moves only lead to more textual traces—what is given in the work leads to the work's historical context, which leads to interpretations of the work's historical context, and so on. Likewise, the artist's conscious intentions cannot exhaust the meaning of the work, and the possibility of unconscious influences seals off the possibility of a definitive interpretation. What Heidegger says about art can, against Heidegger, be said about interpretation: an interpretation unconceals some possibilities and conceals others. While this means that no interpretation can claim to be the sole truth of the work, interpretations can still be evaluated based on how insightfully they unconceal the possibilities offered by the textual structure.

One of Heidegger's main concerns in *The Origin* is undermining the notion of subjectivity upon which modern notions of representation and truth rest. Hence, Heidegger's investigation of the origin of art becomes an investigation of the relationship between art and truth. Because, for Heidegger, a work of art reveals the nature of what it presents in a way the thing itself never can, art is a way of founding truth. As Pascal repines, it is only when a thing is represented in art that we really come to see or admire it. But Heidegger goes much further than Pascal by arguing that a great work of art is not simply a representation of a thing but a presentation that unconceals both the nature of the thing and the world it belongs to. Great works conceal some ways of seeing and unconceal others. Derrida takes Heidegger's questioning of truth as adequation further; he deconstructs Heidegger's notion that the truth of a work can be accessed phenomenologically by showing that in the structure of any work there is an irreducible element of play. The play of interpretation replaces the search for 'the author's intention' or 'the truth of the work.' In *Restitutions*, Derrida dramatizes the essential indeterminacy of interpretation; the essay consists of numerous voices debating the possibility and impossibility of attributing painted shoes to a subject outside the painting. Derrida questions both Heidegger's restitution of the shoes to a peasant woman and Schapiro's restitution of the shoes to van Gogh himself. That a work of art can support two such opposing views serves to prove Derrida's point that a work is open to many interpretations, but that none can claim to be *the* truth. Derrida's sceptical position, grounded in the indeterminacy of the work's centreless structure, reveals the very possibility of interpretation itself. If it were not for the work's essential indeterminacy, there would be no debates about the meaning of a work. But, in fact, even hermeneutic expositions of a work contest each other; phenomenological interpretations reveal more or less similar experiences of a work, and deconstructive readings, in more or less interesting ways, reveal the play latent in a work. The work has a materiality rich in possibilities.

After analyzing Heidegger's phenomenological approach to art, and, briefly, Derrida's critique of it, I will read Duchamp's readymades and Maura Doyle's *Erratic Boulder* through a Heideggerian lens as well as Heidegger's argument through those works. Through Duchamp's readymades and Doyle's *Erratic Boulder* something that would normally go barely noticed comes into conspicuous existence. These works make the usual unusual and *explicit* the fact that the thing *is*. As such, these works of art not only represent things from the world to which they belong, but also present, or found, an understanding which shapes that very world. To the extent that these works bring a world into being a happening of truth is at work in these works. These material works help weave the immaterial tapestry of the (post)modern world.

PHENOMENOLOGY: BACK TO THE THINGS THEMSELVES

What is the origin of a work of art? The obvious answer is—the artist. Yet this obvious answer leaves the subjectivity of the artist unquestioned. Both artist and artwork originate from something more originary, namely, art. The question then becomes, what is art? To answer this we must study works of art to find their common qualities. But now we already find ourselves in the hermeneutical circle, since, if we do not yet know what art is, there is no way to know whether a thing is, or is not, a work of art. However, as Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*: 'What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to get in it in the right way.'ⁱⁱⁱ This means starting with an examination of one's presuppositions but then letting them tremble by allowing the thing in question to show itself.

All works of art—art being taken here in its broadest sense as *poiesis*—have a material aspect: marble, paint, notes, words, and so on. They also have value *as* art. In order to discover what it is that makes a work of art a work of art, Heidegger differentiates things into three types: natural things, products (or equipment) and works.

Since artistic value is not found independent of a work's materiality, he begins his search for 'the work-being of the work' by questioning the thingliness of natural things (rather than starting from products or works). In order to make apparent the presuppositions about the nature of thingliness in western thought, he begins by questioning the interpretation bequeathed to the west by Greek thought. *To hypokeimenon* means the 'core of the thing' and *ta symbebekota* means the thing's 'characteristics.'^{iv} Through the translation of *hypokeimenon* and *symbebekos* into the Latin *subiectum* and *accidens* arises the interpretation of a thing as a subject, or substance, with characteristics. But this interpretation of the thing conceals the enigmatic quality of thingliness: 'What presents itself to us as natural, one may suspect, is merely the familiarity of a long-established habit which has forgotten the unfamiliarity from which it arose. And yet this unfamiliar source once struck man as strange and caused him to think and wonder.'^v Presuppositions confine thinking to unquestioned categories, but, when the enigmatic nature of things becomes apparent, habitual thought fails and things once again cause one to question.

Heidegger concludes that the interpretation of a thing as a subject with characteristics not only says nothing about the nature of the thing but 'attacks it.'^{vi} What is his argument for this claim? He simply says it comes from a 'feeling' that the understanding of a thing as a substance with characteristics inadequately describes the nature of the thing.

...prior to all reflection, to be attentively present in the domain of things tells us that this concept of the thing is inadequate to its thingliness, its self-sustaining and self-containing nature. From time to time 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. Instead of taking the trouble to make thinking more thoughtful, this has led to the rejection of thinking. But when it comes to a definition of the thing, what is the use of a feeling, no matter how certain, if the word belongs to thought alone? Yet perhaps what, here and in similar cases, we call feeling or mood is more rational – more perceptive, that is – than we think; more rational, because more open to being than 'reason' which, having meanwhile become *ratio*, is misdescribed as rational.^{vii}

In the western tradition, the nature of a thing means is consciously or unconsciously thought of as a substance with characteristics. Heidegger grants that every thing can be understood in such a way but argues that it conceals something essential about the nature of the thing. The thingliness of the thing cannot be grasped through rational thought alone; one must encounter the thingliness of the thing itself. Since an *idea* cannot grasp the thingliness of the thing, one must open oneself to the thingliness of the thing through 'mood.' By remaining 'attentively present in the domain of things' and attuning oneself to the 'mood' of the thing, one lets the thing show itself. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger says this attunement means not just staring at a thing or sensing it, but letting oneself be 'affected or moved.'^{viii} When we open ourselves to things in this way, the enigma of thingliness becomes apparent and the concepts enframing it reveal their inadequacy. From this point of view, mood is more open and receptive to the being of the thing than reason, which, understood as *ratio*, reduces the nature of a thing to its calculability.

Our experience of things is predetermined by long since dead concepts that once originated from the inquisitiveness of Greek thought. Just as Heidegger says the understanding of a thing as a 'subject with characteristics' assaults the thingliness of the thing, he says the same about the thing as a 'unity of sense impressions' and as 'formed matter.' Only by becoming aware of these concepts, descended to us by occidental language and thought, can they be recognized when they press themselves upon us. By bracketing these concepts, the thing is allowed to show itself anew, destructuring our grammar and categories. But seeing a thing with fresh eyes is not easy because it requires shifting one's will from conceptualization to opening, from imposition to questioning, from categorizing to letting be. This way of seeing (*theoria*) is also a way of acting (*praxis*).

EXHIBIT A: A STILL LIFE OF SHOES

Since trying to discover thingliness through the traditional categories only shows how thingliness evades those categories, Heidegger turns his attention to products—the type of thing most familiar to us from everyday use. To avoid preconceptions about the nature of products he proposes 'to describe a piece of equipment quite apart from any philosophical theory.'^{ix} He chooses 'a pair of peasant shoes.'^x Rather than describing an actual pair of shoes, he describes a pair of shoes by referring to 'a well-known painting by van Gogh.'^{xi} The painting shows that shoes are a useful product, but, to know what usefulness is, one must describe shoes in use. It seems the painting cannot reveal the nature of the product. However, Heidegger then adds:

A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet. From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the

field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field. This equipment^{xii} is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at once more having withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death.^{xiii}

With his now well known 'And yet,' Heidegger moves from simply looking at the painted shoes and describing what can be seen in the painting to a description of the mood opened up by the painting. Although Heidegger at first grants there is nothing in *Old Shoes with Laces* that could indicate the world to which they belong, he goes on to convey the mood evoked by the painting through the image of a peasant woman eking a hardy existence from an unmasterable countryside. It is not surprising that Heidegger uncovers such a mood in the painting since, like himself, van Gogh valorized peasant life. Nonetheless, Heidegger's description of peasant life begs the question of whether it is objectively evoked by the mood of the painting or whether Heidegger subjectively projects it into the painting? Put sharply, is the mood Heidegger describes a subjective interpretation or an objective truth? Anticipating the question, Heidegger writes:

To suppose that our description, as subjective action, had first depicted everything thus and then projected into the painting would be the worst kind of self-delusion. If there is anything questionable here it is only this: that in the proximity of the work we have experienced too little, and what we have experienced has been described too crudely and hastily.^{xiv}

Heidegger defends the thesis that the work has an objective truth. As we have already seen, he argues that moods are more perceptive than instrumental rationality. He does not approach the painting as a hermeneut concerned with the artist's intention, but as a phenomenologist concerned with the truth of the work. The phenomenological approach requires that 'we transport ourselves out of the habitual and into what is opened up by the work.'^{xv} Transporting oneself into what is opened by the work means opening to the mood, or truth, of the work, of letting the work speak for itself. Heidegger shows no concern for the artist's intention. That a work is made by a particular person is, he says, inconsequential compared to the fact that the work is; the less that is known about the artist and the origin of the work, the more purely the work manifests.^{xvi}

That art reveals a mood is further supported by what Heidegger said about Klee's paintings. Heinrich Petzet writes: 'He said that works such as *Heroische Rosen* (Heroic Roses) are not paintings, but feeling. Klee was capable of making moods 'visible' in pictures. *Heilige aus einem Fenster* [Saints from a Window] offers a whole world. The less we think of Klee's paintings as presenting objects, the more they 'appear'.^{xvii} This phenomenological approach to a work requires a willing which opens itself to what is given in the work. By opening to the mood of the work, one's experience is determined by the work. When one takes the work as an object, one relates to it as a subject, but in that way one does not hear what the work itself has to say. By describing the experience of art in this way, Heidegger gives more agency to the work than to the viewer.

However, in his effort to overcome subjectivism, Heidegger goes too far in ascribing to works an objective ontological content. Although for Heidegger the objectivity of the work is not the objectivity of a timeless truth, Heidegger, as is seen in his exposition of the painting by van Gogh, attributes an objective experience to the work. As such the proper understanding of a work does not lead back to the artist's intention, but to what the work conceals and unconceals about the world. Like Heidegger, Derrida challenges equating human subjectivity with agency and the world with masterable objects, but he goes less far in effacing the subjectivity of the viewer and in attributing any objectivity to a work. For Derrida, the work is an indeterminate play of traces, its logic determined by hauntology rather than ontology. For that reason, Derrida says it is not the work which 'spoke'^{xviii} to Heidegger, but the work which made Heidegger speak about it. Heidegger tries to grant objectivity to his interpretation through ventriloquism. In Derrida's polylogue about the truth in pointing or painting, the work retains agency by making one speak about it, but, at the same time, both the viewer and work are granted a freedom more true to the multiplicity of interpretations that arise from almost any work. This means there is a dialogic relation between the work and the viewer, rather than the unilateral relation that Heidegger describes. Since each work is itself overdetermined and since each viewer comes to it with his or her own predispositions and preconceptions, not everyone will be affected by the work in the same way. Further, there is no final means, or authority, to arbitrate between different interpretations of a work.

Returning to *Old Shoes with Laces*, the first charge Schapiro brings against Heidegger is: they are not the shoes of a peasant women but 'the shoes of the artist, by that time a man of the town and city.'^{xix} With that second qualification, 'by that time a man of the town and the city,' Schapiro thinks he has shown that Heidegger's vignette is indeed his own subjective projection. But Schapiro's entire reading is based on what for Heidegger is

the 'view, now fortunately abandoned, that art is the imitation and depiction of reality.'^{xx} Schapiro, however, tries to rehabilitate mimesis and trounce Heidegger's phenomenological approach. The metaphysics of presence that Derrida deconstructs in both Schapiro's and Heidegger's discourse is the restitution of painted shoes to a proper subject. At the same time, he points out that there is nothing in the painting to prevent either interpretation. But Derrida also argues that the correspondence between Heidegger's restitution of the shoes to a peasant woman and Schapiro's to van Gogh breaks down because of their different views of art. On Schapiro's side, Derrida argues it is only through a gruesome violence that he can claim to discover 'the artist's presence in the work.'^{xxi} On Heidegger's side, Derrida sees the vignette 'as a moment of pathetic collapse,'^{xxii} but finds attenuating circumstances for his restitution of the painted shoes since the whole movement of *The Origin* is to show that a work is primarily a way in which truth is founded, not a mimetic representation. Further, Heidegger works to put the autonomy of subjectivity in question, but Schapiro tries to drag the subject back into the picture, to lace up van Gogh's feet in a pair of painted shoes.

In their own ways, van Gogh and Heidegger both challenge the old god of mimesis: van Gogh's impressionism undermines the value placed on pictorial mimesis, and Heidegger's definition of truth as *aletheia*, or unconcealment, undermines truth as correspondence. In its essence truth is not a correspondence between a statement and a thing; rather, truth is the disclosure of a thing in a particular way. Correspondence already presupposes such a prior disclosure of what and how a being is. Art is one way in which such an original unconcealment happens.

UNCONCEALMENT AND PLAY

Heidegger's thesis does not negate the possibility of interpreting a work according to traditional hermeneutics. However, while such interpretations may be 'correct,' they may be said to be ontic, that is, they treat the work as an art *object* or mimetic representation. Heidegger describes mastering works in that way as the busy activity of art connoisseurs, critics and researchers. Heidegger's understanding of 'mood,' '*aletheia*' and 'art' are concerned with the ontological aspect of a work. For Heidegger, the task of 'preservers' is to stand within the truth of the work. 'Preservation of the work means: standing within the openness of beings that happens in the work.'^{xxiii} Heidegger's discourse puts the autonomy of subjectivity in question by showing how it is embedded in a world. If we abstractly consider the Greek, Roman, medieval and modern world it becomes obvious how radically each historical epoch determines the subjectivity of both 'creators,' those who bring works into existence, and 'preservers,' those who willfully expose themselves to the truth opened up by the work. This standing in the truth of the work is figured as a collective experience. Heidegger writes: 'Preservation of the work does not individualize human beings down to their experiences but rather, brings them into a belonging to the truth that happens in the work. By doing so it finds their being-with-one-another as the historical standing out of human existence [*Da-seins*] from out of the relation to unconcealment.'^{xxiv} By resolutely submitting to the work, one steps out of the ordinary to participate in the extraordinary truth presented in the work.

However, if truth is merely a historical bias, one may feel a certain claustrophobia at the idea of such a resolute standing within the truth of the work. Questioning the meaning of a work is more apposite than submitting to it; nonetheless, in order to seriously question a work we must first expose ourselves to the (play of) truth happening within it and, although Heidegger speaks of preservation as a seemingly blind resolution to a collective historical truth, it must be read alongside a key mode of his thought, expressed succinctly in the words: 'questioning is the piety of thought.'^{xxv}

Although Heidegger argues that great works found some sort of objective historical truth, he also argues that there can be no trans-historical truth in the sense of a universally valid truth. The play of concealment and unconcealment contains an intrinsic denial: 'The essence of truth, i.e., unconcealment, is ruled throughout by a denial.'^{xxvi} As such, humans cannot master their world. That unmasterable, 'self-closing' aspect of the given^{xxvii} is what Heidegger, in this essay, calls 'earth.' In his later works, he calls this withdrawal within what is given 'expropriation.'^{xxviii} Appropriation is the way humans grasp what is given, so the happening of truth is the play, or, more appropriately for Heidegger, 'strife,' of expropriation and appropriation, of earth and world. Since a world is transformed over time, truth is historical, a non-teleological play of concealment and unconcealment.

But even Heidegger's conception of truth, insofar as he claims to uncover historical objectivity, remains caught in the desire for presence. Derrida takes the play that Heidegger shows in the strife of concealment and unconcealment further by undermining the notion of a work presenting a singular, even historical, truth. The denial inherent in unconcealment becomes, for Derrida, the deferral of truth itself. Heidegger, in looking at art from an epochal point of view, makes plain how much the subjectivity of 'individuals' is determined by a collective historical world; yet, when we look closer at any historical epoch the deferral of truth reveals its trace

through the manifold interpretations, perspectives, traditions and schools that arise in the fields of art, religion, politics and philosophy. We face degrees of indeterminacy when interpreting a work of art, a certain irreducible blurriness in both the text and context.

READYMADES

In 1913, twenty-two years before Heidegger wrote *The Origin*, Duchamp started accumulating his readymades. In 1917, he submitted *Fountain* under the pseudonym of R. Mutt to a show in New York organized by the newly formed Society for Independent Artists, of which Duchamp was a director. Although the Society's motto was "no jury, no prizes," Duchamp's pseudonym's work was rejected by a last minute vote of the available director's, prompting Duchamp's resignation.^{xxxix} Nonetheless, Duchamp did not give up on Mutt's *Fountain*. He requested Alfred Stieglitz to photograph it for the second issue of *The Blind Man*, a magazine published by Duchamp, Henri Roché and Beatrice Wood. The photograph appeared in the magazine along with an unsigned editorial defending the work. The defense, thought to be worked on by all three publishers, stated: 'Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary object of life, placed it so its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.'^{xxx} It is of course not simply removing the urinal's usefulness that transforms it (since a broken discarded urinal is just that) but the creation of a new thought for the object. But what is that new thought? The argument presented in *The Blind Man* is that the artist's choice—in other words, the artist's intention—is what is significant, not the act of creation. On the one hand, such a view could be seen to reify the idea of artistic 'genius.' On the other, it could be seen as a radical critique of the very same notion, an effacement or mockery of the individuality of the artist. Either way, the work highlights the strange fact that merely through being recognized as art a product can be transubstantiated into a work. The status of something as art is decided through a choice about valuation. Duchamp suggested that a reciprocal readymade—using a work of art as a readymade object—could be produced by using a Rembrandt as an ironing board; that devilish idea also plays on the idea of valuation, questioning the distinction between works and products. This questioning of boundaries problematizes the distinction Heidegger relies upon throughout his essay.

Like the painted shoes, the urinal—bracketed from its ordinary context and made useless—is revealed in a new way. Duchamp, in an interview from 1961, states that a readymade is 'one way of instating the object in a new domain. Like the bottle-dryer that no longer holds any bottles and becomes something you don't even look at, but that you know exists, that you look at when *turning your head*, and whose existence was decided by an action I took one day. This is the kind of complete difference that interests me most.'^{xxxi} This is the same difference that interests Heidegger the most, what he calls the ontic-ontological difference, the difference between beings and being. In almost the same language as Duchamp, Heidegger describes the way in which we barely take notice of the things that surround us: 'We are capable, in general, of noticing of anything present that such a thing is; but as soon as this is noted it falls, just as quickly, into the oblivion of the commonplace.'^{xxxii} By representing a thing stripped of its usefulness, a work presents the thing in a new light, making its being accessible to contemplation in a way that evades us when it is seen as a useful thing or scientific object. Duchamp took that same logic one step further and revealed products themselves as art.

As we have seen, Heidegger argues that a work of art sets up a world: 'the work opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force.'^{xxxiii} Since such language can easily be taken in too grandiose a sense, it would seem more precise to say that a work is in conversation with previous and contemporary works and, thereby, participates in the battle between the old and the new. With this interpretation in mind we can run the risk of asking if Duchamp's readymades play a part in opening a world and holding it in place. *Fountain* is one of the most iconic and discussed works of the twentieth century; in 2004, it was ranked the most influential work of the twentieth century. As such, something essential, and, to be sure, enigmatic, must be decided by it. Most obviously it questions the fundamental distinction, maintained by Heidegger, between products and artworks. If, in questioning that distinction, it reveals products as aesthetic objects, as the many readings that point to its graceful lines suggest, then it remains within the limits of modern aesthetics and its concern with the beautiful. Although Walter Arensberg, a friend of Duchamp in on the gag, is reported to have defended its 'aesthetic contribution' in a heated discussion with another director, the editorial in *The Blind Man* does not defend *Fountain* based on aesthetics.^{xxxiv} Rather, it points to the creative act of choice and the fact that the urinal's usefulness had disappeared. Further, despite the aesthetic qualities it may have, the idea that a urinal could be a work of art seems calculatedly transgressive. So although *Fountain* cannot escape aesthetics, it is simultaneously a rebuttal to aesthetics. As Duchamp said in 1962: 'I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.'^{xxxv}

Further, if what is said to distinguish a work from a product is originality, then *Fountain* questions the notion

that a work is an original object created by an artist. What is original in *Fountain* is not found in the object but in the ideas, or questions, the work confronts us with. It is not the urinal itself that is transformed, but our ideas about what art is. That many of the original readymades were thrown away or lost, including the original *Fountain*, affirms that the idea of the readymade has been more important than the objects themselves. Art becomes conceptual. As the retinal importance of the work recedes and the *idea* set to work in the work comes to the fore, we can say that the interpretation of being as *idea*, which conceals the idea's origin in *phusis*, or 'emerging sway', reaches its consummation in aesthetics.^{xxxvi} Conceptual art remains related to western aesthetics by challenging previous assumptions about the nature of art (in that sense the readymade was almost a readymade idea). However, the idea that a urinal could be a great work not only becomes possible in the (post)modern world but helps to found and hold open that world. Although body art and performance may be seen as a reaction to conceptual art, no hard distinction can be maintained between mind and body or conceptual art and body-based performance art, and when, in 1993, a sixty-four-year-old retired seed merchant named Pierre Pinoncelli went to the opening of a new art gallery in Nîmes and urinated in the replica of *Fountain*, he interpreted it in the most bodily way. As Leland de la Durantaye points out, his act was in the spirit of Duchamp's idea of reciprocal readymades: in this case, using a great work of art as a readymade—urinal.^{xxxvii} Pinoncelli went on to strike the big-ticketed replica with a hammer to protest against the museum's co-optation of the spirit of Dada. In 2002, he cut half of his left little finger off with an axe to "share in Columbia's violence" and protest Farc's kidnapping of Ingrid Bettancourt.^{xxxviii} The end of his finger now resides in the Cali art museum of Colombia. That piece gives a new, sinister meaning to the idea of the readymade, gothically combining in one the conceptual and bodily.

A CERTAIN ERRATIC BOULDER

Heidegger's discourse raises the difficult question of what establishes the difference between a natural thing, a product and a work. Duchamp's readymades question the opposition between product and work. The readymade that comes closest to questioning the opposition between a natural thing and a work is *50cc of Paris Air* (1919). Here the elemental itself is presented as art, but, in line with his other readymades, also as a reproducible product. Duchamp does not go so far as to present a natural thing itself as a work of art.

A boulder, of course, is a natural thing, not a work of art. Nonetheless, Maura Doyle exhibited an erratic boulder in the Toronto Sculpture Garden from October 2004 to April 2005 as just that, a work of art. In a short essay on Doyle's *Erratic Boulder*, Amish Morrell writes:

a boulder is an ordinary object, not a work of art. It is only by naming it as such that it becomes art, an aesthetic gesture that in this exhibit implicates a thousand other boulders within an idiosyncratic taxonomy. Through bracketing these unnoticed rocks from the context in which they have long been embedded, Doyle casts them into a new set of associations that endows them with aesthetic value.

While we may question whether the value of art is largely 'aesthetic' or whether, more originally, it gives us our outlook on ourselves, Morrell's logic, being grounded in the phenomenological tradition, is similar to Heidegger's. The boulder, bracketed from its context—like the painted shoes and urinal—shows itself in a new way. A boulder, which would normally go 'unnoticed,' becomes conspicuous. Not only that, *Erratic Boulder* 'implicates a thousand other boulders within an idiosyncratic taxonomy'; the twenty other erratic boulders which Doyle identifies throughout Toronto also become more conspicuous through her intervention. Similarly, Heidegger argues that the presentation of a thing in a work of art brings that thing in general—and all its relations—more into being (or maybe one could say, in an un-Heideggerian way, more explicitly into consciousness).

Erratic Boulder challenges Heidegger's differentiation of natural things and works. In order to establish this differentiation, Heidegger serendipitously begins his analysis of thingliness with a boulder: 'A mere thing is, to take an example, this block of granite. It is hard, heavy, extended, massive, unformed, rough, coloured, partly dull, partly shiny.'^{xxxix} A boulder, like all things, is a substance with characteristics, but, as we have seen, Heidegger wants to bracket this interpretation of the thing and let thingliness show itself. However, in attempting to discover the nature of a thing through analysis, its nature evades one:

The stone presses downwards and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness weighs down on us, at the same time, it denies us penetration into it. If we attempt such penetration by smashing the rock, then it shows us its pieces but never anything inward, anything that has been opened up. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the same dull weight and mass of fragments. If we try to grasp the stone's heaviness in another way, by placing it on a pair of scales, then we bring its heaviness into the calculable form of weight. This perhaps very precise determination of the stone is a number, but the heaviness of the weight

has escaped us.... It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained.^{xi}

According to the logic of Heidegger's argument an encounter with *Erratic Boulder* would reveal the thingliness of things more so than any quantitative analysis of a thing. This is because something indeterminate lies at the heart of all things, something which evades empiricism and reason. Instrumental rationality conceals this enigmatic aspect of a thing by turning it into a number or concept. *Erratic Boulder*, on the other hand, makes the ungraspable strangeness of the boulder conspicuous.

Doyle writes that her erratic boulder arrived in Toronto 'with the intent of spending the remaining duration of humanity as a public sculpture.' Although the boulder has now been legitimized as a work of art, it has already existed for over a 1000 million years and will likely continue to exist after its value as art has long been forgotten. The geological time of the boulder hints at the brevity of human life and human valuations. Further, *Erratic Boulder* symbolizes the contingencies of our own displacements and errant paths.^{xii}

'Erratic' comes from the Latin root *err*, which forms the verb *errare*, 'to stray.' As such, *err* has two related meanings, straying and error. *Erratic Boulder* has strayed from its autochthon and from the ordinary to the extraordinary. In continuing to radically question the meaning of art, it tells us something about the ethos and possibilities of our postmodern world. As humans we are destined to stray, questioningly, through an unmasterable world. This is why Heidegger says: 'Man errs. Man does not merely stray into errancy. He is always astray in errancy.'^{xiii} Truth is an error a people has strayed upon—but, by letting beings show themselves, our error-truths stray less far from that which is given itself.

Walking through a park close to my home, three years after first meeting *Erratic Boulder*, I was surprised to discover that it had somehow strayed to a small open space between the pathway and the playground. In this new setting its conspicuous thrust has become more concealed. In the Toronto Sculpture Garden, *Erratic Boulder* stood out and caught the eye. The Garden sits across from a beautiful old church, and when the busy passers-by ignored them, the boulder and church engaged each other in conversation about time, mortality, immortality, and human endeavour. If, instead of a play ground, *Erratic Boulder* finds its way into an art gallery, it surely would stand out strange and solitary. The boulder probably prefers the carefree laughter of the children, but *Erratic Boulder* awaits more thoughtful playmates, for the process of naming something as art involves not only the gesture of the artist but also the legitimization of that gesture through recognition and discourse. Duchamp said a work has a life of about forty years, so now the idea of the readymade—having been pushed as far as it can go in every direction—may be in its twilight.^{xiii}

SUBJECTIVITY AND THE HISTORICITY OF TRUTH

As stated in the beginning, the origin of both the artist and the artwork is art. In this sense 'art' means the dynamic historical truths which both the artist and artwork are subject to. Even if one challenges the dominant truths of one's time, one is still determined by opposition to *those* truths. Even though artists are entangled in the historical truths of their world, they put those truths up for 'decision.'^{xiv} Through those decisions, old ways of seeing are concealed and new ways of seeing are unconcealed. The artworks of previous worlds become art objects or tourist attractions once the world they held open has decayed. In 2006 a Greek court unbanned the worship of the classical Greek gods; in 2007 revivalists held their first legal ceremony at the Temple of Zeus in Athens.^{xv} The world to which these rituals and truths belonged has long since passed. Such a revival is impossible since '[w]orld-withdrawal and world-decay can never be reversed.'^{xvi} Hegel had already argued that the works of classical Greece can no longer give us 'the ethical life in which they blossomed and ripened.'^{xvii} 'The statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown, just as the hymns are words from which belief has gone.'^{xviii} For this reason such revivals represent the relativity of postmodern New Age movements more than any genuine experience of a previous world. The world of a time and place is the intangible worldview which gives a people an understanding of themselves. Heidegger writes that '*World worlds*, and is more fully in being than all those tangible and perceptible things in the midst of which we take ourselves to be at home.'^{xix} One of the ways in which such worldviews come to be, and are shaped, is through works of art.

ART, AGENCY, AGONISM

The open spaces cleared by Heidegger's effacement of subjectivity may induce agoraphobia; at the same time, in his writing, being everywhere presses upon one, simultaneously threatening claustrophobia. The only meaningful agency found in Heidegger—though not as an autonomous individual—belongs to those he here calls the 'creators.' Everyone else is, at best, a 'preserver' of the truths opened by the creators, or, worse, inauthentically lost in 'the they.' Although Heidegger's thought deconstructs onto-theology, he still privileges

the efficacy of being over the material. One may respond to such post-metaphysical idealism with Marx's response to Hegel—that it is not ideas that determine practical life, but practical life that determines ideas. The truth seems to lie in the interplay of both views. The opening of a new horizon develops not through a figurative battle of old and new gods but through the cumulative effects of all the particular artistic, social, and political acts that shape and transform a horizon. Preservation is, in fact, interpretation, and interpretation involves creation. Heidegger's distinction between creation and preservation contaminates itself. His writing reveals our thrownness and the possibilities that lie within it. Derrida emphasizes a Nietzschean affirmation of play. But, if truth is a plaything, one has all the more responsibility for it. Remaining faithful to Heidegger, one would seek to expose oneself to the truth happening in the work. However, since a work is an assemblage of signifiers, themselves only pointing to other signifiers, we can never reach a final assured signified. Nonetheless, the most objective standard of interpretation remains trying to understand a work as its creator understood it. All three approaches have their rightful place. All three contribute to the agonistic discourse that shapes our world.

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- ^v *Ibid.*, 7.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*
- ^{viii} Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 129.
- ^{ix} Heidegger, 'The Origin,' 13
- ^x *Ibid.*
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xii} Hofstadter and Young both translate *Zeug* as "equipment"; in *Restitutions*, the translators use "product."
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 14.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 15-6.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, 47.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 19, 39.
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- ^{xx} Heidegger, 'The Origin,' 16.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 206.
- ^{xxii} Derrida, 'Restitutions,' 262.
- ^{xxiii} Heidegger, 'The Origin,' 41.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxv} Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology,' trans. William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 341.
- ^{xxvi} Heidegger, 'The Origin,' 31.
- ^{xxvii} I use "given" throughout in the phenomenological sense of that which is given to experience.
- ^{xxviii} See for example *On Time and Being*
- ^{xxix} William A. Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917,' in *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 67-8.
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- ^{xxxii} Heidegger, 'The Origin,' 40.

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- ^{xxxv} Quoted in *ibid.*, 80.
- ^{xxxvi} On *idea* and *phusis* see *Introduction to Metaphysics*. *Phusis* is usually translated as nature. Heidegger translates it as 'emerging sway,' since 'nature' only indicates *phusis* in its narrower sense.
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