

**ARTIST AS TREE: THE ROOT OF ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE.
THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ARTIST
IN HEIDEGGER'S *ORIGIN* VIA PAUL KLEE**

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In Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology"¹ he writes about how his (and our) society has fallen into the trap of *enframing*, (*Gestell*) i.e. viewing everything as merely a resource and thus losing the ability to see beings as they are and the appropriate way of interacting with them. Art, he states will be our salvation because it allows us to see the beings of the world in different ways, thus encouraging a return to right-relationship, through an action he terms *disclosure* (*Erschlossenheit*). In "The Origin of the Work of Art"² he develops a phenomenological description of what Art is, but specifically focuses on the artwork as his doorway to Art claiming that;

"It is precisely in great art – and only such art is under consideration here – that the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge."³

In this paper I take the position that his basic conclusions, that Art is the *disclosure* of Truth (in the technical, non-propositional sense elucidated by Heidegger⁴) and thus capable of combatting the excessive *enframing* of our culture, are correct. On the other hand, his artist-as-passageway premise illustrates

a fundamental lack of understanding of Art because, I argue, the ability to encounter artworks as art comes from the nature of *BeingThere*⁵ (*Dasein*) - i.e. humans - as art-creators, which is rooted in our particular bodily nature. To dismiss the artist as merely a passageway from the outset is to ignore the key to understanding what Art, as an action, is; *BeingThere* as audience can encounter artworks as Art because *BeingThere* is fundamentally Art-istic. In order to balance Heidegger's position I bring Paul Klee, an artist who wrote on the experience and nature of creation, into the discussion. Through Klee's descriptions of creating it becomes clear that the activity of the artist is both primary and primarily bodily, thus giving lie to the myth that the artist is inconsequential - a position that even Heidegger reluctantly admits and yet avoids recognition of its primacy, when he finds himself forced to discuss the fact that artworks are created beings, and thus the role of the creator is somehow important and a reflection of the disclosure that occurs for the audience. Heidegger begins;

"The origin of the art work is art. But what is art? Art is real in the art work. Hence we first seek the reality of the work."⁶

There are plenty of definitions of art which use various criteria to identify objects as artworks, for example defining them as created objects of aesthetic experience, or viewing only items accepted by 'the art world' as artworks. Instead of beginning with a search for criteria, Heidegger delves phenomenologically into the function of artworks in relation to *BeingTherein* order to illuminate what art does in our lives. Heidegger argues that artworks, when viewed as capable of

¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", *Basic Writings*, Ed. D. Krell, (Routledge, 1993)

² Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Trans. Albert Hofstadter, (Harper & Row Publishers, 1975)

³ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p40

⁴ Please see the collection of Heidegger's works called *Basic Writings* for discussions of the technical usage of Truth in Heidegger's philosophical works. In summary, this is not propositional truth but is rather an 'unconcealment' of 'that which is' and 'how that which is'.

⁵ Whilst it is common practice to not translate the term *Dasein*, I find myself agreeing with the comments made by D. Walford in his seminar series in Lampeter (2006-2008) on Heidegger's *Being and Time* describing this as encouraging the English reader to think of *Dasein* as a noun rather than a state or activity. Using the literal translation of 'BeingThere' is also intended to highlight the nature of the kind of beings we, as humans, are - i.e., already and always *There*. Please refer to *Being and Time* for more detail on this topic.

⁶ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p39

speaking to us rather than passed over through familiarity or ignored, present something to us. In doing this they show us beings and relationships which illuminates better how we can approach those beings as valuable in themselves (for example: Van Gogh's shoe paintings, reveal the relationship between the shoes depicted, the earth and the work done in them through the wear depicted on the soles). Artworks, in their disclosure of this, disclose the Being of beings i.e. *Truth* – their nature and the fact of their existence independent of ourselves. This action of artworks is, he claims, their essence and therefore Art, as the essence of artworks, is disclosure. This is the position I will be working from in this paper, rather than debating the merits of Heidegger's suggestion that art is somehow essentially disclosure, I am allowing this to be a foundation on which to build further. It is always possible, for example, that some beings created to be artworks will fail to disclose anything, but here I would make the case that the potential to disclose *Truth* is enough for a created being to be an artwork as the artist is striving for disclosure and this process is what gives the work the essence of Art, although Heidegger did not present this possibility.⁷ This disclosure, however, is not necessarily through portrayal or representation of something;

⁷ Does what is disclosed have to be the same for every audience member, or the same as what the artist intended? Given that I have already posited that a collaborative piece could have multiple intentions behind it, it is impossible to claim now that the audience must experience the disclosure that the artist intends, so we are left with artworks as the beings created through the bringing together of *world* and *earth* with the intention to disclose something, regardless of what. This disclosure is never an accidental thing, in art, however, as every artwork is presented with the intention that it will be experienced by someone in such a way that it shows them something, inspires, delights, horrifies, illuminates, invokes, provokes or otherwise reveals something to the audience. Klee's work, as with the work of many artists, is titled to clarify the content that the viewer is supposed to find, showing that the artists indeed intend some form of disclosure.

"A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the whole precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple."⁸

According to Heidegger, Art is also the origin of artists, so the essence of artists must *also* be disclosure. As the artist is one who 'creates' artworks the title 'artist' refers to an action, thus describing the one who creates artworks as 'one who discloses' and specifically 'one who discloses Being'. Therefore the action of creating an artwork is an action of disclosure. However, since any action can fail and one cannot know the outcome in advance, any activity is an attempt at something, and therefore the activity of the artist, in this instance, must be an *attempt* at disclosure, with the potential to illuminate something for the audience, whoever that audience is to be (perhaps even only the artist themselves). The techniques utilised may be different depending on who the intended audience is, writing may be edited differently for a private audience than for a public reading, or for personal reflection.⁹ Whatever is potentially to be disclosed the artist wishes to provoke or invoke a response in the audience and this response is a presenting of relationship between beings to the audience. In collaborative works the individual artists could each even intend something different, but there is still the potential for disclosure.

⁸ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p41

⁹ The occasion of taking something written for personal consumption and presenting it for public viewing is also a point at which the intention of re-presentation and therefore a re-framing for disclosure can occur; whilst the private piece could lack intention to disclose anything, the act of framing it as artwork changes this. I would, however, assert that even the act of writing for oneself only is generally an attempt to disclose something to oneself. This is perhaps a tautology, however, as the act of disclosure happens prior to and during the act of creating the artwork and is not necessarily an event that occurs after the fact.

This disclosure can also occur through both the direct representation of beings and the non-representational artforms, albeit apparently in slightly different ways.¹⁰ In both cases, I would argue, the artist has already had the disclosure, or possibility of the disclosure, disclosed to them. The artist becomes aware of the relationship between the tower and the wind, the material and the form, the shoe and the path it treads and the pigment that depicts it, otherwise the depiction and creation could not occur. This prior disclosure may well be on a non-conscious level, given unthematically through the artist's experience of the *world* – defined by Heidegger as the network of relationships in which we dwell – and the *earth*.

“The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground.”¹¹

Earth, roughly, is the raw material of life which ceases to be itself when we try to dissect or explain it, such as colour or marble, ‘colour shines and wants only to shine’¹² when we try to define it we can only describe wavelengths, which aren't the colour, or feelings, and so on. It *is* and we experience it as such but we cannot really explain it. Where *world* can be understood through language, *earth* is understood through experience. The dancer can discuss his theories, themes, emotions and intentions, and we understand, but he cannot explain the moving in a way that we can grasp it without having experienced moving, or what it is to be in a body, for ourselves. Artworks are formed of *earth*, they are grounded in it, ‘set into it’ and they present the

earth as what it is and this is what Heidegger says allows for the disclosure. The body is present as the body *dancing* in dance, the painting both shows us its content and is present as paint on canvas. When we forget that these are all present and are transported into the content alone, we are transported through the use of the material and it is the material itself behaving in a way natural to it to present itself as other than what it is (such as marble carved to appear ethereal) that allows this transportation.

In the artwork, *earth* and *world* are brought together and the tension between them is what allows the audience to experience disclosure; the impenetrable *earth* holds the ever-unfolding *world* in place to be experienced. This is what the artist does through working the material in the artwork, but before that in herself. However, this still does not bring us closer to the experience of the artist, so we turn to the writings of Paul Klee.

Klee describes the painter as one who “surveys with penetrating eye the finished forms which nature places before him”¹³ which can perhaps be shortened to ‘one who sees’ and this description can translate into other artforms, the musician begins as ‘one who hears’ and the dancer as ‘one who is moved’ perhaps?¹⁴ In Klee's writings he describes his process as beginning with lines and building into forms, only eventually becoming something he recognises and then refines into content and finally names. This pattern of working from form to content would appear to contradict the idea that the artist experiences the disclosure prior to creating artworks, and as he says, “any image of complex structure can, with some effort of imagination, be

¹⁰ Representational art discloses through shining a light directly onto the being represented and its relationship to the world. Non-representational art discloses through its relationship to the world, partly through contrast and partly through its own existence as materials formed by an artist into something new.

¹¹ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Basic Writings*, p168

¹² Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Basic Writings*, p172

¹³ Paul Klee, *On Modern Art*, Trans. P. Findlay (Faber and Faber Ltd., 1946) p45

¹⁴ I shall continue to use the visual term ‘see’ and those that relate to it as a stand in for all the senses because this is the perspective Klee, as painter, utilises, but it is intended as a metaphorical ‘see’, rather than literally.

compared with familiar pictures from nature."¹⁵ This could also imply that he hasn't really *seen* anything to start with but is merely playing until something emerges. This is not the case, however. Firstly, in order to see the content which emerges, the artist must have *seen* beings already, must be able to recognise them in the patterns and must be able to understand, even instinctively, the relationship between the beings recognised in order to recognise *Truth* and to refine the lines into an image. However, Klee claims;

"Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible."¹⁶

This reinforces the idea that art is about revelation, about bringing to the awareness of the viewer that which *is*. In the process of making artworks, the artist undergoes the mirror image of the experience that the audience has in viewing them. The line moving into forms and then into content is the disclosure of that content to the artist, the recognition that occurs in the artist is disclosure, and so on. But where does this come from? What allows an artist to set the *world* into the *earth*? What allows the artist to recognise the message in the artwork, or to choose the direction to begin with? What gives the artist the techniques to express their intention in an artwork? *Experience*.

First, the artist *sees*; through their experiences of the world the artist gathers together ideas, understandings, images, sounds, becoming a channel through which those experiences are transformed and poured into the artwork. Truth is disclosed to the artist and then again through the artist:

"The creation of a work of art – the growth of the crown of the tree – must of necessity, as a result of entering into the specific dimensions of pictorial art, be accompanied by distortion of the natural form. For, therein is nature reborn."¹⁷

What art thus makes visible is *Nature*,¹⁸ the nature of the world and thus our own nature, as seen by the artist and as channelled through her hands, mind and experience. Artworks, then, are *Nature* reborn through the artist. The artist experiences nature and, acting as nature does, brings together the past experiences with the present materials and relationships. *Nature*, here, is both that which is and how it is experienced by *BeingThere* and the nature of that which is, specifically in terms of the independently directed parts of the world in contrast with the aspects which *BeingThere* makes and controls. In plain language it is the organic world which is self-created and self-directed as opposed to tools and equipment, cities and relationships. As part of the organic world *BeingThere* contains the impulses of *Nature*, taking part in the nature of nature as the grand, self-creating, ever-evolving womb of all.¹⁹ Klee describes how, as part of *Nature*, the artist *looks* at the world and how this leads to the act of creation:

"The deeper he looks, the more readily he can extend his view from the present to the past, the more deeply he is impressed by the one essential image of creation itself, as Genesis, rather than by the image of nature, the finished product."²⁰

The artist, in making visible *Nature*, is both creating an image which makes this visible, and is making visible through the process itself. The perpetual creation of the world by *Nature* is a given, it is not an act of one time, but a process: "Genesis eternal!"²¹ Art, then, is born from the eternal Genesis of *Nature*, of the artist's daily living which springs from connecting with the source of creation and which reflects on the artist's experiences of the world. Art is the child of the *artistas part of Nature*. Klee's position allows for all of humanity to manifest

¹⁸ 'Nature' here is capitalised and italicised to indicate a technical usage of the largest sense of the word, which would not be out of place described both as 'Mother Nature' and as 'Human Nature'/'Non-human nature'.

¹⁹ Klee, *On Modern Art*, pp 51

²⁰ Klee, *On Modern Art*, p45

²¹ Klee, *On Modern Art*, p45

¹⁵ Klee, *On Modern Art*, p31

¹⁶ Paul Klee, *The Inward Vision*, (London; Thames and Hudson, 1958) p5

¹⁷ Klee, *On Modern Art*, p19

through the mode of artist – through expressing one's experience of *Nature* in a creative way, as occurs at least in moments throughout human life lived with a degree of freedom, one is transforming nature-experienced into nature-expressed through the creative impulse inherent in all *Nature*. In the broadest sense all human beings are therefore artists and this broadest sense is the foundation of the possibility of the more specific senses of 'artist'. In the same way Klee delineates between artist and non-artist very simply:

"In the womb of nature... the source of creation, where the secret key to all lies guarded. But not all can enter. Each should follow where the pulse of his own heart leads."²²

The artist is the one who is drawn to act as *Nature* by 'the pulse of his own heart'. Her rhythms are what lead her to looking at the genesis that is nature and mirroring it. *Nature*, as that which is being how it is, is earth expressed through the world when they are both, ultimately one and the same, i.e. materiality in motion through relationship. As such the urge to create comes from bodily compulsion and the artworks are then shaped by the artist's body; dance, music, words, painting, the rhythm of speech, processing, expression, growth - these are all rhythms within the artist, all coming from the movement and rhythm of the body; the hand's motion, the patterns of speech, the limitations of mortality. As embodied, earthly, beings, and only as such, artists are capable of shaping *earth* to allow *world* to be made visible. As part of *Nature* they share in the creative powers of *Nature*, and due to their experiences are inclined and able to mimic these powers in the particular way that leads to disclosure of what is. Artists look through the now into the genesis of nature, and no doubt other *BeingThere* do too, but only artists feel the urge to replicate this action in such a way that allows others to *see* (or hear, or otherwise experience) what they have *seen*.

²² Klee, *On Modern Art*, p51

The experience of the audience after an encounter with the artwork has an interesting parallel to the process of the artist as one who sees. John Berger describes it thus:

"After we have responded to a work of art, we leave it, carrying away in our consciousness something which we didn't have before... What we take away with us – on the most profound level – is the memory of the artist's way of looking at the world. The representation of a recognizable incident... offers us the chance of relating the artist's way of looking to our own..."²³

This psychological way of describing the process by which an artwork affects an individual transforms the artist from 'one who sees' into one who sees in a particular way, contrasting with the way of the audience. The artist *sees* and then *makes visible* to the audience their way of seeing the world. This new perspective discloses the perspective of the audience to their self, making visible the essence of the world which they inhabit and shifting their relationship to it by providing another viewpoint. As Berger goes on to elucidate, this process has meaning for us because it discloses these relationships which embody a code of 'morality', i.e., how one *should* behave towards other beings in the world;

"why should an artist's way of looking at the world have any meaning for us? ... Because, I believe, it increases our awareness of our own potentiality... a way of looking at the world which implies a certain relationship with the world, and every relationship implies action."²⁴

A relationship is a connection between beings manifested through their actions towards one another. Understanding the relationship accurately reveals the mode of being which is appropriate for the individual conscious of this. The artist sees the beings and their relationships and makes them visible to the audience. The artist in the audience then takes that vision and

²³ John Berger, "Introduction", *Permanent Red*, (Butler & Tanner Ltd. Frome and London, 1960) p16

²⁴ Berger, "Introduction", p16

retells it from their own view whilst the audience who is not-artist applies their understanding of that vision to the world around them and, ideally, to their actions. The experiences of life that the artist draws on unintentionally could be said to be those that have been processed and absorbed into the artist's underlying understanding of the world and as a result of their particular state of being, i.e. mortality. Arguably, then, the Artist can create artworks that disclose *Truth* (what is, that it is and how it is – i.e. world and earth) because they first experience that disclosure of *Truth* themselves. This experience is available to all *BeingThere* and is primary and fundamental for the experience of the audience to occur because, if *BeingThere* was not capable of experiencing *disclosure* in the world they could not experience it in the parts of the world called artworks.

The primacy of the body is a strong current throughout Klee's writings; the channelling of the artwork through the movement of the artist's hands, the transformation of nature 'reborn' from the artist, and the notion of rhythm all speak to this. Speaking of the act of creation, Klee states that: "Genesis as formal movement is the essence of the work of art."²⁵ This refers to the movement of the point to the line to the plane, which occurs in painting, and which happens through the movement of the artist's body. He also explains how, for an artist:

"All ways meet in the eye and there, turned into form, lead to a synthesis of outward sight and inward vision."²⁶

The experience of *Nature* is through the body and from that sensual input experience is internalised and through the motion of the body form flows which becomes something with content - art, *Nature* as creator reborn.

Creation is not about form but formation, which occurs bodily. Even in digital art the movement of the body is present, and the rhythm of lived experience shines through all artworks. The experience of the audience is similarly *earthly*. The disclosure of *Truth* for both the artist and the audience thus occurs because we are somatic, bodily.

The essential aspect of Klee's creative process is not concentrated on form but *becoming* based in the movement of the body. An image is built through movements which cause forms to occur. These forms intersect with content to disclose an image containing meaning but without movement those forms could not exist and so Klee's philosophy of art revolves around temporality as becoming.

Despite all his philosophical explorations of the essence of art, Klee was an artist first and foremost and his position on the nature of creativity was clear:

"The power of creativity cannot be named. It remains mysterious to the end. But what does not shake us to our foundations is no mystery. We ourselves, down to the smallest part of us, are charged with this power. We cannot state its essence but we can, in certain measure, move towards its source. In any case we must reveal this power in its functions just as it is revealed to us. Probably it is only a form of matter, but one that cannot be perceived by the same senses as the familiar kinds of matter."²⁷

For Klee creativity, the artist's process, is inherent in every human being as creatures of nature. The artist expresses this creativity in specific ways and, through the creation of artworks, moves towards the source of creativity itself. As one who expresses nature through the process of *nature*, the artist discloses both the process and the *world* which underlies human nature itself. She differs only from the audience in the action of creation which is the act of disclosure, and the rhythm of the body and its ability to shape *earth* in relationship

²⁵ Paul Klee, *Notebooks, Volume 1; The Thinking Eye*, Trans R. Manheim, (Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 2 Oct 1992) p17

²⁶ Klee, *Notebooks, Volume 1*, p67

²⁷ Klee, *Notebooks, Volume 1*, p17

with *world* means that whilst all people can create artworks, many people in the kind of culture Heidegger and Klee lived within do not. This is perhaps because we are arguably, as a society, divorced from our own bodies,²⁸ and thus divided from the pulse of our heart which calls us to respond to the world rhythmically combining our experience and relationships (*world*) with materials (*earth*) in a way that makes visible the particular relationship we are in with the world, and that other beings are in with each other. Or perhaps, rather, the pulse of our heart calls us to express the rhythms of nature inherent within us in a different manner, leading to scientists exploring, doctors healing, teachers lecturing and parents raising.

“In the work of art, paths are laid out for the beholder’s eye, which gropes like a grazing beast... The pictorial work springs from the movement, it is itself fixated movement, and it is grasped in movement.”²⁹

Ultimately the experience of the artist arises from the bodily compulsion and limitations of our mortality, our temporality. As human, rhythm is in the beat of our heart and the motion of expression, guided by the things we have experienced and processed through the body. Then, driven by a primal urge, we artists pour it upon the page or stage, setting it free, this experience transformed through us, to disclose what we have seen to the world. Like a tree draws on what is around it, transforming it into fruit, so too the artist transforms the world as seen in her particular way and offers it to the audience with the hope that they, too, will see something that changes their world.

When Heidegger, then, describes the artist as merely a passageway he is glossing over the connection which he could not avoid himself;

“If there is anything that distinguishes the work as work, it is that the work has been created. Since the work is created, and creation requires a medium out of which an in which it creates, the thingly element, too, enters into the work.”³⁰

Despite this he still ignores the key to understanding the action of art; the primacy of artistic experience and potential for experiencing disclosure is that which allows the artwork to be made and that allows the audience to experience as an artwork. If we were not all inherently artists, *ones who see*, embodied, somatic beings, there could be no audience to experience the artworks and, indeed no artworks at all, created by those *BeingThere* that lay their hands on the earth to marry it to the world and disclose *Truth*.

²⁸ Here I am primarily thinking about the commodification of the body, the legacy of Cartesian dualism and the impact of Christianity’s divorce of the world of the flesh from the world of spirit – and its parallel emphasis on the primacy of the spirit – to name a few examples of the foundation of this denial of the body.

²⁹ Klee, *Notebooks, Volume 1*, p78

³⁰ Heidegger, *Origin, Poetry, Language, Thought*, p56