

**Heidegger's Understanding of a Work of Art
in the Context of Klee**

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In 1962, Heidegger opened his lecture “Time and Being” at the University of Freiburg with a reference to two paintings by the Swiss-born German artist Paul Klee: “Saints from a Window” and “Death and Fire”.¹

This reference to Klee by Heidegger was not random nor was it an isolated incident: Heidegger frequently incorporated excerpts from Klee’s notes in his own thoughts and was said to have spent hours at a time observing his artwork.

What was it about Paul Klee’s work that made Heidegger ascribe such a special role to him as an epoch-making artist, and, according to his own claims, perceive Klee’s work to be of higher value than Picasso’s?

Although Heidegger didn’t agree with Klee’s primary focus on form and criticised his writings as too neo-Kantian, his frequent remarks on Klee give us reasonable ground to assume that there is a certain proximity between both of their conceptions of art. The following essay aims to analyse the relation between Heidegger’s philosophy of art and Paul Klee’s understanding of art.

Heidegger’s most well-known essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” serves as the primary point of reference for his philosophy of art, as well as his isolated comments on Klee published by the German philosopher Guenter Seibold.

Although Heidegger never included his remarks on Klee in a complete edition of his writings and ordered, in his will, that they not be published, his notes on Klee were made available posthumously to specialist circles. By his own admission, Seibold’s purpose in publishing Heidegger’s Klee notes was to “learn to see Klee’s work in a new way, to find a new approach to the artist whom Heidegger held in higher esteem than Picasso.”²

Martin Heidegger, “Time and Being,” in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), 1.

Günther Seibold, “Heideggers nachgelassene Klee-Notizen,” *Heidegger Studies* 9 (1993): 6.

Some scholars like Pöggeler and Petzet have even claimed that Heidegger considered dedicating a second part of the “Origin of the Work of Art” to Klee’s work, in which he perceived a “turning”.³ Maybe it was Heidegger’s own turning away from his work “*Being and Time*” towards a historical understanding of being, that made him relate to Klee’s shift.

While we can make use of several scholarly sources to learn about Heidegger’s view on Klee, there are none that document what Klee thought of Heidegger.

Paul Klee spent ten years of his life teaching the theoretical foundations of his art at the Bauhaus in Dessau and Weimar. Due to his teaching activities, he was prompted to analyse his own creative work and become aware of what he had unconsciously created, in order to pass it on to his students. By systematically tracing and analysing his own creative work during these years, he introduced a new analytical method to the field of art and implemented it into his teaching program, the *Weimar Preliminary Course* of 1924.

At the forefront of Klee’s interest always remained the form of things and the pictorial composition of his works. For basic aspects such as line, surface, weight, colour and balance, there had to be categories developed that allowed a standardised approach to the analysis of artworks. The theoretical framework Klee created during this time is laid out in writings of his, such as “Wege des Naturstudiums”, “Schöpferische Konfession” and “über die moderne Kunst”.

In this essay, the parallels and differences in Heidegger and Klee’s art understanding will be examined around their central themes: The duality of world and earth, Heidegger’s ‘unconcealing’ (*entbergen*) and Klee’s “making visible” (*sichtbar machen*) and the role of the artist in the creation of a work.

Heidegger’s Approach to Understanding a Work of Art

Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger, 1929–1976*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 146.

Inarguably, the most important source standing at the centre of Heidegger's understanding of art is his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," which was delivered between 1935 and 1936 and was last revised in 1957 through the addition of an "Addendum".

In the essay, Heidegger poses the question of the origin of art, more precisely, trying to determine the origin of the essence found in a work of art: "The question of the origin of the work of art becomes a question about the nature of art." In his writings, he doesn't give a definite answer to what art actually is and merely tackles the riddle, namely "the riddle that art itself is" ⁴.

The most immediate element of a work of art that becomes obvious to us is its thingly aspect, which Heidegger attempts to define: "Our aim is to come to know the thing-being of the thing".⁵

In Heidegger's deliberations on the thingly character of a thing, he introduces three different modes of thought that have been historically used to characterise things.

One of the concepts is focused on the equipment character of a thing, "the thing as a bearer of characteristics," ⁶ while another concept approaches thingliness through our ability to perceive it through the senses: "The thing is nothing but the unity of a manifold of what is given to the senses"⁷.

A mode of thought which combines both the workly character of a thing as use-objects as well as the mere core of a thing in its nature, is by looking at things as formed matter, as a synthesis of form (*Huelle*) and matter.

Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 27. Cited hereafter as PLT.

Heidegger, PLT, 20.

Heidegger, PLT, 24.

Heidegger, PLT, 25.

But Heidegger claims that even the form-matter understanding is not capable of capturing the true essence of a thing adequately and that instead all the above-mentioned interpretations “make an assault upon it (the thing)”.⁸

The concept of form and matter is mostly derived from equipment rather than the works of art, and so the question of the origin of the matter-form structure remains: “Where does the matter-form structure have its origin?”⁹

To answer this question, Heidegger inquires further about the nature of equipment, as equipment both contains a thingly character while at the same time being assembled through human work, similarly to a work of art.

Overall, Heidegger makes use of three different works of art to illustrate his train of thought and to allow the reader to experience a phenomenological encounter with art: Van Gogh’s painting of “A pair of shoes”, a poem by C. F. Meyer and a Greek temple at Paestum. When introducing these three works of art, Heidegger encourages the reader to use a phenomenological approach by simply describing and lingering within the happening of the work – “to let a being be the way it is”.¹⁰

This letting go of preconceived notions and familiar frameworks of interpretation is the ideal form of phenomenology and would allow us to perceive a phenomenon in its pure being, but it also turns out to be “the most difficult of tasks”.¹¹

In such a way is also the Van Gogh painting to be perceived, which, in the depiction of the peasant shoes, reveals a deeper underlying dispute between world and earth.

Heidegger, PLT, 25.

Heidegger, PLT, 27.

Heidegger, PLT, 31.

Heidegger, PLT, 31.

Through this dispute between the forces, a work of art reveals the true being of a thing and unconceals them: “The nature of art would then be this: The truth of beings setting itself to work”.¹²

Knowing that Heidegger attributes art to have the ability of opening up a domain of truth, it becomes obvious why Heidegger is often said to take a non-aesthetic stance and aims towards an “overcoming of aesthetics”.¹³

Heidegger’s understanding of art in the Greek context (truth as *aletheia* and emergence from earth as *physis*) might be why he was said to be rather sceptical about the abstract and contemporary art of his time. He found modern art unable to “reveal the emergence of the world”¹⁴ in the same way of greatness that Greek art did.

It might be due to Heidegger’s frequent incorporation of Greek concepts that his example of the lost Greek temple is at times misunderstood as his personal and nostalgic longing to return to the art forms of the Greek world.

However, Heidegger strongly rejects assumptions like these, as he claims that great art can only exist within the historical context in which it was created and under which it gathered a world around it. The Greek temple has been withdrawn from its original historical world and is no longer to be perceived as a great work of art.

The last introduction of a work of art by Heidegger happens through Meyer’s poem and grasps the very essence of what Heidegger understands art to be: “All art is essentially poetry”.¹⁵ Poetry itself comes from the word *poiêsis* and means “bringing into being”.

Because the nature of poetry is to bring the unconcealedness into being and founding truth, Heidegger concludes that “the nature of art is poetry.”¹⁶

Heidegger, PLT, 35.

Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 354.

Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues*, 66.

Heidegger, PLT, 73.

Heidegger, PLT, 72.

Central Themes in Heidegger and Klee's Writings

Earth and World in Heidegger

In “*Wege des Naturstudiums*”, Klee introduces the idea of a constitutive antagonism of forces between world and earth. In “Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger will take up this same terminology to explain the essential nature of artworks. To understand Heidegger’s concept of earth and world better, we can once again come back to his example of Van Gogh’s painting “A pair of shoes”.

By simply putting ourselves in front of Van Gogh’s work of art, we can experience the earthly character of the peasant shoes – the mud they went through, the impact of the weather conditions on the material – while at the same time experiencing them in the context of the world of the peasant women: “The equipment belongs to the earth and is protected by the world of the peasant women”.¹⁷

Heidegger describes the earth not in physical or cosmological terms but rather as something in which things arise and can be sheltered by: “In that things arise, earth is present as the sheltering agent”.¹⁸

Heidegger’s use of terms such as “emerging” and “arising out of” can be traced back a Greek origin: the thing that arises out of the earth is the *physis* while the composition (*Gestaltung*) of the work brings the true being of things in the Open.

When we observe components of a work of art, such as the peasant shoes, a world is opened up to us while simultaneously setting the world back into the grounds of the earth.

The materials of an artwork and therefore its matter– whether it is stone, wood or colouring – is what is set forth of the work’s character. When Heidegger refers to earth, he means qualities such as the heaviness of a stone or hardness of steel that come forth and “into

Heidegger, PLT, 30.
Heidegger, PLT, 41.

the open of the work's world".¹⁹ The world and the earth are essentially different from each other and yet never separated. The example of Van Gogh's painting and Heidegger's earth-world distinction leads him to conclude the first essential feature of artwork: art is setting up a world.

Not only does a work of art set up a world – it holds place for the primordial conflict between world and earth which Heidegger understands as truth happening in its unconcealedness.

Although the happening of truth within Heidegger's writings seems conspicuously close to Hegel's definition of beauty being the sensible shining of the Idea, as well as Hegel's concept of political aesthetics, the antagonistic figure of earth and world cannot be thought of in terms of Hegelian dialectics.²⁰

The antagonism between the entities' world and Earth does not resolve itself synthetically. Rather, the two remain in an opposing entanglement position - with the world being set up and the earth being set forth- which adds a sense of tension and unresolved dispute to the work of art. The striving between world and earth is indissolubly contested within the work, as the "work being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle".²¹

As mentioned earlier, Heidegger understands truth as the happening of unconcealment, which at the same time faces denial. Heidegger sums up this essential feature of denial in the nature of truth by stating that "truth, in its nature, is un-truth".²² Truth faces its own primal conflict between clearing, which corresponds to the Open, and concealment. As truth happens, the earth and world are part of the conflict of clearing and concealing, whereby the world "is the clearing of the paths" and finds grounding in the earth.²³

Heidegger, PLT, 45.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Die Fiktion des Politischen: Heidegger, die Kunst und die Politik* (Stuttgart: Edition Patricia Schwarz, 1990), 97.

Heidegger, PLT, 48.

Heidegger, PLT, 53.

Heidegger, PLT, 53.

Earth and World in Klee

Especially striking about Heidegger's use of the earth/world terminology is that Klee used the same concepts before to express his thoughts on aesthetics. In Klee's essay "Wege des Naturstudiums" he defines world and earth as polar forces that pervade nature, meaning the artist and the work of art itself. Earth is described by him as a "non-optical path of earthly rootedness" and "static" while the world is said to be the "non-optical path of cosmic commonality" and "dynamic"²⁴. The two mentioned paths refer to the artist's access to the object, with each path representing a different art style or movement.

For Klee, it is crucial that "the thing is more than what it's visible outside appears to be".²⁵ Klee demands that this "more" – the additional and concealed part of a thing – is to be made visible as the play of nature's forces. The process of unconcealment aims to display "the essence of the natural process of creation"²⁶ and is to be achieved by reducing the form to a its origin (also called *Ur-Form*).

Klee aims to find the common primordial ground that is the origin (*Ursprung*) of all things and to bring it into the light and out of unconcealment. He describes this primordial ground to be the origin of all things. Because all things stem from the same origin, they can all be equally regarded as direct examples of the natural principle of creation (*das natuerliche Schöpfungsprinzip*).

Klee understands the world and earth to be the natural forces out of which the interplay and entanglement of all creations and works are generated. Once the artist has understood this primal origin and the way in which the two forces interact, he arrives at a new freedom of creation and possibilities of composition.

Paul Klee, "Wege des Naturstudiums," in *Kunst-Lehre* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1987), 67.

Klee, "Wege des Naturstudiums," 66.

Paul Klee, "Über die moderne Kunst," in *Kunst-Lehre: Aufsätze, Vorträge, Rezensionen und Beiträge zur bildnerischen Formlehre* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1991), 82.

In his essay “*Schöpferische Konfession*”, Klee demands to unconceal the relativity of all visible things and thus to show that “what is visible to us is only a small fragment in relation to the world as a whole, and other truths are latent in the majority. Things appear to us in a general and emasculated sense, often seemingly contradicting the rational experience of the prior day”²⁷.

In Klee’s understanding, art should be concerned with tracing back the random forms in which things appear to us, to their essence, their principal origin of creation, so that the strife between earth and world becomes visible to us.

This concept of art “making visible” is summarised in Klee’s famous dictum: “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes visible.”

We can draw a direct parallel between Klee’s notion of making visible and the Heideggerian idea of the work-being of work, bringing forth the unconcealedness of beings.

In a comment on Klee’s writings, Peetz states that the decisive consequence of the polar play between earth and world however, lays in its immanent movement: “the artistic visualisation of the hidden forces of nature is ultimately a revelation that the play of time can be found at the origin of everything”. Peetz assigns time to be the origin, out of which results that “the truth of form is found in the process of its creation and in the movement beyond form”.²⁸

The concept of time takes a subordinate role in Klees’ understanding as well, as he perceives space as a temporal concept and emphasises the artwork's creation over time.

Klee’s and Heidegger’s thinking is similar in that both find art capable of bringing forth the unconcealed and uncovering what is hidden. What is concealed is understood by both thinkers as both the ultimate origin and the essence of beings.

Paul Klee, “Schöpferische Konfession,” in *Das bildnerische Denken* (Basel: Schwabe, 1964), 78.
Siegbert Peetz, “Welt und Erde: Heidegger und Paul Klee,” *Heidegger Studies* 11 (1995): 178.

The only difference in their terminology concerns the world-earth dispute: Klee describes it as an antagonism between the static and the dynamic, whereas Heidegger perceives it as a conflict between clearing and concealing.

Another important difference to be noted is that Heidegger understands the conflict between the “self-disclosing world” and the “self-secluding earth” to take place in the work of art itself and can therefore be observed in such.

Meanwhile, Klee views the earth and world dispute to be the principle of creation, which is at play during the process of the creation of a work of art and which can then hopefully be visible in the finished artwork as well.

The use of the same concepts of earth and world in Heidegger and Klee, however, is ultimately neither coincidental nor a mere lexical commonality - rather it underlines the similarities in both modes of thought.

The Role of the Artist

The term and concept of the genesis of form are recurring ideas in Paul Klee's writings. Hardly any other artist has dealt as thoroughly and systematically with creation as Klee. His interest and focus is placed on the process within the creation of art work rather than on the final result of the work. Klee understands the doings of an artist in analogy to the act of creation. Thus Klee writes to his wife on May 26, 1939: “ The reason for my silence was a painting, which was born and baptised by me” ²⁹.

In his letter, Klee is drawing a comparison between the process of a work's creation to the human life cycle of birth, baptism and redemption.

The artist is in this case a creating, in some ways female principle, that takes on the role of a maternal medium in the creation of art. Further he assigns the artist the role of a priest: He baptises the work in his name, introducing it into the spheres of the artists world.

Verdi, “Der späte Klee,” 453.

It is not surprising that the artist is assigned a much more significant role in Klee's writings, whereas Heidegger reduces the artist to medium, a mere although necessary handmaiden of truth. Although every work of art essentially needs a creator, it is simply released by the artist to take on its self-sufficient presence³⁰.

While Klee views the creator of a work as a birthing artist, himself part of the origin, Heidegger on the other hand regards the artist as merely a passage that allows the work to emerge - more specifically the artist is *technitēs*. Heidegger's definition of *technitēs* is a mode of productive being in which one's "decisive deed is guided by an understanding."³¹

For Heidegger, the truth of the work of art does not arise out of the doing of the artist but takes place as a self-establishing truth through the "opening up of the Open".³²

Interestingly enough, Heidegger's perception of the artist being a mere instrument is contrary to his later remarks in which he describes artists like Paul Klee or Paul Cezanne to be epoch-making and to be originators out of which work of art comes forward.

Heidegger's perception of Klee as an originator and birthing artist, might be what he meant by saying that in Klee 'something has happened that none of us yet grasps'.³³

Despite these different perceptions of the artist role, both Heidegger and Klee understand there to be an underlying principle that give the artist the ability of creation:

The receiving-giving role of the artist in Klee's writings, hints that there is a third thing that has to come prior to the emergence of the work through the artist. Something that allows the "birth" of the work to take place through the artist in the first place.

Heidegger identifies art itself to take on the role of this third agent: "Art is the truth of beings setting itself to work".³⁴

Heidegger, PLT, 38.
Heidegger, PLT, 137.
Heidegger, PLT, 69.
Quoted in Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues*, 150.

Heidegger, PLT, 35.

Truth meaning the nature of truth which takes place in the process of clearing and concealing as discussed earlier. This process of unconcealment through a work of art, is in both cases only achieved through the hands of the artist. Through examining the process in which unconcealment takes place in both Klee and Heidegger understanding, a fundamental difference in their perception of art comes to light.

Klee understands art as a representation of the totality of universal laws, as “a guide for the things of nature and of life”³⁵, as order of the spatial and temporal, as “a necessity for the rebirth of nature”³⁶ and overall as a mediator between nature and man in the cosmos.

However, as Heidegger is commonly known to support the idea of ontological historicity, his view of art is a historical one. For Heidegger, artworks take on the role of “grounding history” and display characteristics in the context of the foundation of the history of a people. Therefore, art, which according to Heidegger is essentially to be thought of as poetry, is “allowing truth to spring forth”.³⁷ By using an example of a Greek temple at Paestum, he reiterates the historical aspect of art that can represent and reinforce a particular sense of a historical world to the people in it: “It is the temple-work that first joins together and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline obtain the form of destiny for human beings.”³⁸

Heidegger suggests that, amid the ever-changing realities of different epochs of history, a work of art can give a historical group of people a sense of who they are and what truly matters.

Heidegger’s historical context of the emergence of truth contrasts Klee’s cosmological and natural dimension in which unconcealment takes place. For Klee, the

Klee, “Über die moderne Kunst,” 71.

Klee, “Über die moderne Kunst,” 74.

Heidegger, PLT, 77.

Heidegger, PLT, 78.

uncovering and bringing forth of truth in art aims towards the mystery of overall creation, whereas Heidegger inquires about the being of art as an origin in our historical existence.

Conclusion

Within scholarly circles, it is no secret that Heidegger found Klee's own interpretations of his works to be insufficient and inadequate. Nonetheless, Heidegger did not subject Klee's ideas to an immanent critique in his writings, but rather confronted his own philosophical understanding of art with Klee's pictorial composition and cosmological perspective. In this matter, Heidegger opened his understanding of art to the phenomena and abstract concepts in modern art, such as in Klee's constructivist style.

However, as a new addition or expansion of Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," which was never completed, his remarks in "Klee Notes" fall back on the same terminology and conceptual frameworks. We could say that Heidegger carries his language and thinking to Klee, which make it difficult to examine whether in Heidegger's fragmental Klee notes "something essential about Klee's art has been discovered, or whether Klee's art is only functionalized to fit Heidegger's own philosophical purposes."³⁹

Ultimately, both options speak for a fundamental closeness between Heidegger's thinking on one hand, and Klee's work on the other. This is evident not only in the correlation of concepts such as earth and world, but also that both characterise art in its ability to capture something essential, - to set forth the truth of beings. In Klee's creations, Heidegger recognised all the characteristics of a true work of art - the setting up of a world, the grounding in history and the truth of being setting itself to work.

The question remains open, to what extent Heidegger's thinking about art and Klee's reference to a principle of creation can, despite all their efforts, imagine themselves to be free of any metaphysics.

Seubold, "Heideggers nachgelassene Klee-Notizen," 74.

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