

# Removing the Mediocrity of Art

## Understanding the Relationship Between Heidegger's "Artistic Work and People"\*

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**Abstract**—According to Heidegger, it is the momentum of artistic work — the "That" of the created being that removes people from mediocrity and pushes them into the historic suspense where they coexist with the essence of truth. This paper discusses the mediocre presence form of human faced with artistic works through the way that "people understand things" in the Origin of the Work of Art. It analyzes the object being, work being and created being taking "knowing" as the clue and explores how people remove the mediocrity of "art". Reflecting on and criticizing the relationship between art works and people, this paper points out the mediocrity of art that lacks the action of thinking, blindly obeying words and being superficial to experience makes people lose the possibility of resonating with the flow of accumulation and the enlightening and shining of truth.

**Keywords**—artistic work; the mediocrity of art; *ausstehend*; the flow of accumulation

### I. INTRODUCTION

Heidegger believed that the origin of artistic works, which is the origin of creators and preserver, that is, the origin of a nation's historical presence, is art.<sup>1</sup> In the postscript of *The Origin of the Work of Art* he mentioned that the thinking of the article concerns the mystery of art, and the mystery is art itself. After the deeper and deeper reflection on "objects and work", "work and the truth" and "the truth and art", Heidegger thought he was by no means to solve the mysteries of art. Then what is the purpose of his questioning on the nature of art?

To question in continuous proximity to the residence of the art: an origin. This origin brings works of art, creators and preservers, and a nation's history together. Artistic works separate from artists and become purely "independent" at first, and then lose this "independence" by becoming the object of human experience. Heidegger looked for a new "independence" from the reality where art originates. In his opinion, "art is the creative preservation of truth in works." Truth in its essence is related to the work. On the one hand, "the origin of truth works in the work, and works in the way of the work."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, without the creator and the

preserver, truth cannot obtain the open field (*das Offene*) of its existence. The truth is by no means objective, waiting for the artist to identify, absorb or transfer in the works of art; it does not belong to works of art, but exists in the form of the works, shining in the mutual existence with people. Such "independence" makes works of art both close to and alienated from people.

### II. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THINGS AND PEOPLE

When thinking about the relationship between "art works and people", it's feasible to take the relationship between "things and people" as the starting point as Heidegger did. In the discussion of "things and works", Heidegger first revealed three common ways of grasping "the nature of things" of people.

#### A. Things Are Viewed Violently and Objectively by the People Who Have Lost Their Contemplative Character

In this first way, people think of things as substances with properties, or as bearers of traits.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Heidegger clarified the rootlessness of western thought. He held that the Greeks had basic experience of state of presence and the being of beings, so they believed that the [matrix, base] of things is exactly what is presented and produced in front of them, the [properties] of [the presenter], and that it belongs to the living encounter between man and the beings; in the inheritance of Roman-Latin thought, this understanding is transformed into an epistemological method of subject versus object, that is, the [subject] is the [attribute] of the [entity]. The translation of this thought is a reflection of the change of the relationship between "people and things". Heidegger thought, "Perhaps for a long time the objective elements of objects have been subjected to violence, and thought participated in this violence; because people reject thinking rather than try to make their thinking more thoughtful." The reason of perception, sensation and emotion is misunderstood as the reason of "intellect", and is misunderstood reasonably by everyone. In this way of grasping, in what kind of relationship do the things and man exist? — Things are viewed violently and objectively by the people who have lost their contemplative character.

\*Fund: This work was supported by "the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities".

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, edited by Sun Zhouxing and Wang Qingjie. Holzwege. Beijing: commercial press, 2015, page 72.

<sup>2</sup> Ditto, page 64.

<sup>3</sup> Ditto, page 8.

### B. Things Are Experienced Sensuously and Excessively by the People with Possessiveness

In the second way, people think of things as nothing more than the manifold of sense perceptions.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Heidegger pointed out another situation where people are trying to "view" things. People encounter things directly through sight, hearing and touch; and things rush to people through the senses. People try to separate "the thing" from the external environment and all the relevant factors, to get close to the thing itself at the "zero distance", or to move the "thing" into some kind of appreciative and possessive space. In this kind of relation, things are experienced sensuously and excessively by the people with possessiveness.

### C. Things Are Used Inanely and Expansively by the People Who Have Formed the Conceptual Mechanism

In the third way, the object is regarded as formed matter. Heidegger first pointed out that the matter-form is the autogenetic nature of the natural substance, that is, the self-configuration property of "things". The different distribution and arrangement of the matter shows the particular form of the natural substance. This characteristic seems to help us grasp "the nature of things". However, Heidegger immediately asked, isn't the matter-form structure universal among beings? In the objects of ware, work of art, and even in thing-in-itself that are excluded by natural substance, he analyzed the definitive property of the existence of matter-form: the matter-form structure of ware comes from its "usefulness"; the matter-form structure of a work of art is related to the characteristics of human participation in its production; the matter-form structure realizes its power in each field of beings, with the form and content being general concepts into which anything can be included.<sup>5</sup> In this relationship, things are used inanely and expansively by the people who have formed the conceptual mechanism

## III. THE MEDIOCRE PRESENCE OF MAN IN THE WORK OF ART

Such conclusion can be drawn according to Heidegger's dissection of the three habitual understandings of "the nature of things": the relationship between man and things presents the self-explanatory illusion; people's grasp of things shows the arrogation of subjectivity; man's view of things is detained in the epidemic appearance. Here, "the relationship between man and things" is used to present this kind of subject's surpassing of things. This kind of relationship is not the relationship between man and things advocated by Heidegger, and naturally it cannot be the relationship between man and works of art.

In Heidegger's analysis of "things", it reflects people's understanding of the objective elements in the works. In the modern popular view of aesthetics, works of art are the objects of people's aesthetic experience — People use art theories to interpret artistic creation, or use aesthetic

principles to investigate artistic activities; as the subject, "human" gives full play to the instrumental attributes of art and aesthetics, and weaves a net covering the artistic works at each end, so that they can capture the artistic works and satisfy their desire to evaluate, recognize and watch them from different perspectives. That's how the pure independence of the work is gone. As Heidegger described it, "Once the momentum into the dark and startling thing is intercepted in popularity and appreciation, the art industry begins to revolve around the work. Even the careful circulation of the work striving to regain the scientific discussion no longer achieves the existence of the work itself, but only a kind of memory of it. This memory also provides a place for the work to form its history, though."<sup>6</sup> This is undoubtedly a mediocre way of presence of "man on art". The more popular the power and less meditative serenity such "resolve around", "caution" "efforts to regain" represented by people who have relation with the work of art have, the more they subordinate to mediocre action, and the more this presence suppresses the true nature of art.

In order to better carry out the discussion on "ordinary and mediocrity" in the field of art in the following paragraphs, the author will call it "the mediocrity of art". Heidegger believed that "people talk about immortal works of art and art as a kind of eternal value, using the kind of language which does not take all essential things seriously, because it fears that "seriousness" would mean "thought" in the end." The content and essence of this kind of talk have neither insight into the work being of works, nor point to the origin of works of art; the fear of "thought" shown by the process of talking has become some superficial cliché or a characteristic that is imposed on knowledge and science. People cannot reach the origin of artistic works, close to the work elements of the works, but view artistic works in the way they grasp the objective elements of things — viewing without contemplation, experiencing with desire and conceptual using keep people out of the works of art and fall into the mediocrity of art.

## IV. REMOVING THE MEDIOCRITY OF ART

In "the origin of art works", Heidegger considered three kinds of being of works — the object being of works, the work being of works and the created being of works. In the continuous steps of examination, it can be investigated what kind of relationship the artistic works and people are really in, and how people in this relationship get close to the being of the works and gain insight into the characteristics of the works. In the object being of the work, Heidegger revealed to us the general relationship between the artistic work and the public (the public includes the ordinary viewers of the art work, the recipients who keep the inertia of ordinary thinking, practitioners in the art field, etc.), and pointed out that this relationship does not belong to the essence of the work; in the work being of the works, Heidegger, on the basis of the object being, explains in what kind of relationship should the works be — how does a work create a world juxtaposed with the earth, and its work being lies in the conflict between

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, edited by Sun Zhouxing and Wang Qingjie. Holzwege. Beijing: commercial press, 2015, page 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ditto, page 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ditto, page 61.

the world and the earth<sup>7</sup>; in the created being, Heidegger further explored the "generation" the work being of the works and investigated how the truth is fixed in the form, so that the work elements of the works can be highlighted. It is in this process of elimination and enhancement that Heidegger approached the most prominent reality and object elements in his works with the action of thinking.

#### A. *The Plight of Objective Being*

The work doesn't exist by being attached to some ware of aesthetic value and the object elements of the work cannot be grasped by the popular concept of objects. It seems that this kind of "object elements" should be searched from the pure independence of the work. Heidegger believed that the work immediately separates from its own essential space from the completion of the creation. He gave a pessimistic judgment on the world of art itself — "the detachment and the decline of the world can no longer be reversed and the work is not the original one."<sup>8</sup> He pointed out that when a work of art is moved to a museum, it is removed from its world, that is, the world is detached from the work of art; when people try to avoid this kind of move and go to explore the works of art in situ, the world has already declined from the works of art.

It seems that the works as something that once existed can only be inherited and preserved by people, that is, works are the objects of various art industries. Aesthetic research takes works as objects to satisfy individual artistic experience and aesthetic enjoyment; galleries take works as objects of collection and trade; the art society is busy in evaluating works; and members of society classify works as popular cultural phenomena. Heidegger held that, "all the art industry, even if all its activities are centered on the works, it can only achieve the objective being of the works."<sup>9</sup> In this objective being, the work no longer presents itself purely and independently. Since the objective being fails to present the "work of art" as what it is, Heidegger held that the objective being in a work does not constitute the work being of the work.

This kind of plight coming from "man and the objective being" has formed the mediocrity of art. People do not seem to realize the plight where they are that they cannot reach the work being of the works because mediocre people do not think. In the art system, individuals escape into the general popular behavior and evaluation, understanding and watching and allow the meaning of this arrangement with ordinary attributes to be imposed on being — the uncovering of the truth, goodness and beauty of art, as well as the mosaic of human destiny, presents a united silence. As Hegel said, "Art is no longer the highest form in which the truth makes its own existence."<sup>10</sup>

#### B. *The Initiation of the Work Being*

The experience in the questioning of object implements has to be rethought. When people try to clarify the relationship between objects and their surroundings, in order to reach the pure nature of objects, our excessive attempt is not successful. Therefore, when people think about the nature of work being, they first need to place the work in the relationship to which it belongs. A work of art cannot be attached to an artist who has lost himself in the process of creation, nor can it return to its own world. Where is its work being on earth?

Let's leave Heidegger's famous statement about the two basic features of the work being of a work — namely, that a work establishes a world and a work sets up the earth, and just explore the track of "thinking" in this process. In his interpretation of Vincent van Gogh' painting the Peasant Shoes, Heidegger argued: "we cannot even be sure where the shoes were put, according to van Gogh's painting. The possible use and ownership of the shoes is not revealed, and it is just an uncertain space." In demonstrating the establishment of a work, Heidegger said, "because a work is a work, it sets the space for that kind of vastness. 'Setting the space for.....' specially means the freedom of opening up the open field." When talking about the preservation of works, Heidegger pointed out, "the preservation of works means that one is placed in the openness of the beings that are in the works. The preservation of this 'being placed in it' is a kind of knowing... It is human's living place that springing into the Aletheia of being (undisguised existence)." At the end of *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger once again mentioned: "this kind of contemplative knowing is the antecedent and thus essential preparation for the generation of art. It is this knowing that prepares the space for art, the path for the creator, the place for the preserver." According to these expressions related to "space", the outline of the place where the work exists is established:

- The work being leads to an uncertain space;
- the "space" opens up the field of freedom for the vast gathering — the field of openness;
- "space" is implicated here in the history of mankind — a place full of people present;
- "knowing" precedes the "space", preparing for the "space".

Art works are placed in the "space" which is set for the vast space and thus in the opened "space". People who have the character of "thinking" and remain the knowing will and the willing knowing, enter the work being of works only when entering this space. This kind of "contemplative knowing" prepares a space for artistic works and makes creators and preservers belong to it in essence. This space is the "open field of unsheltered occurrence" of the beings according to Heidegger. Only when entering this openness can people be removed from mediocrity. According to Heidegger, "to submit to this process of displacement means: to change our relations with the world and the earth, and then to suppress our generally popular actions, evaluations, understanding and watching, in order to linger in the truth of

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, edited by Sun Zhouxing and Wang Qingjie. Holzwege. Beijing: commercial press, 2015, page 38.

<sup>8</sup> Ditto, page 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ditto, page 29.

<sup>10</sup> Ditto, page 74.

what happens in the work." <sup>11</sup>To get rid of the objective, inscrutable plights of the object is not the action for which the subject strives for its own ends, but a kind of "shifting out" or "pushing in" that places people in the attribution of the truth that takes place with the work.

### C. The Knowing of the Created Being

What moves people out of artistic mediocrity and into the open spaces? Heidegger thought it was a kind of contemplative knowing, which proceeded the generation of art and prepared space for art. The author continues to pursue Heidegger's track of "thinking-knowing".

1) *Knowing: Alotheia and unconcealment*: "The work element of a work lies in the creative presence it has been given by the artist." <sup>12</sup> Creation is a kind of production in the first place. Heidegger pointed out that the Greeks used the same word "craftsmanship" to refer to handicraft and art, but this word is rather a way of knowing. The essence of knowing lies in the "Alotheia", that is, the "unconcealment" of being, which undertakes and guides any behavior towards being — the clarity of openness and establishment in openness. When Heidegger first mentioned "knowing", he pointed out the occurrence attribute of "knowing" itself.

2) *Knowing in the sense of creation: production of being*: "Knowing" brings the people present to Alotheia from the state of concealment. The Greek word "craftsmanship" as "knowing" refers to the production of being. Heidegger thought: "the establishment of the entry of truth into works is such production of being, which has not existed before and will not be repeated thereafter." The production process puts the existent into the open field "so and so", that is, making the existent like what it is, and this production is creation. By receiving and acquiring within the range associated with the Alotheia, "creation" makes the work pop out. In this aspect, "knowing" is a construction closely related to the creator.

3) *Knowing in the sense of preservation: being present in the form of works*: The preservation of a work means to be in the openness of the being that takes place in it. The "being in it" of preservation is a knowing. Knowing is not simply knowledge and appearance, but a "will" to get rid of the plight of being and be open to the openness, which is the existing calm determination of self-transcendence. Heidegger said, "the preservation of the work as knowing, is calmly placed in the work of the truth happened in the dark amazing things"; "knowing is a determination to be in a dispute that is already embedded in the work." <sup>13</sup> Knowing at this level is an opening to the interrelationship with the preserver.

Because of this implication of the meaning of "knowing", the creator and the preserver both belong to the created being

in essence, and this "common identity" makes the work become a unity. Heidegger thought, "Such a meditation cannot force art and its generation." But this contemplative knowing, this slow-growing knowing, will determine whether art can be a source, and only this knowing provides space for art. <sup>14</sup> This "knowing" makes the being of the existent, and improve the actuality of people' grasp and cognition of themselves. Perceiving the historicity of the form of human destiny, and at the place where the essential determination of history takes place, people reveal themselves and retreat from themselves, throw back and re-plan, and the clarity of being is separated-ausstehend from the concealment and the essence of being.

## V. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARTISTIC WORKS AND MAN

The relationship between artistic works and man means making the existent exist and living being live. The living existent is suspended (ausstehend) in the open space of the work of art — the territory of openness, that is, Heidegger's clarity, in which beauty and truth stand side by side. Heidegger pointed out, "the preservation of works is not to isolate people from private experience, but to push people into the attribution relationship with the truth occurring in the works, so as to establish mutual co-existence as the historic suspense of this existence from the connection with the state of non-avoidance." The word "suspense" includes the ambiguous meaning of endurance and expectation as well as the meaning of shelving and waiting.

### A. Ambiguity

As has been mentioned above, the origin of art brings works of art, creators and preservers, and a nation's history together. In this process of "bringing together", the inner relationship between man and art seems to be both close and alienated. The truth is like a chain shuttling through it, a penetrating and invisible chain, which is set in the creation of works and endowed in the preservation of works. This kind of "penetration" and "shaping" makes the truth both the subject and the object, and the creation and preservation have both the initiative of absorption and the passivity of planning. Heidegger used ambiguity to describe this relationship in the origin of works of art.

Heidegger pointed out several times that the proposition implied a kind of "fundamental ambiguity" and "deliberate ambiguity" when he defined art as the self-setting of truth in the works. The former means that truth is both the subject and the object of the act of setting. If "art" belongs to the original being, then the truth derived from "nothing" is set into the work (generation) by itself, and its existence itself realizes the promise and appeal to people. The latter refers to "deliberation" in creation and preservation. The planning of poetic creation comes from "nothingness", yet it never comes from "nothing". What it projects is only the secret mission of history itself. The truth being set into the work means that this project of planning enters the occurrence. This

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, edited by Sun Zhouxing and Wang Qingjie. Holzwege. Beijing: commercial press, 2015, page 58.

<sup>12</sup> Ditto, page 48.

<sup>13</sup> Ditto, page 60.

<sup>14</sup> Ditto, page 72.



ambiguity is of great significance for us to understand the relationship between artistic works and people.

### *B. Historic Suspense*

In order to better understand this relationship of "historic suspense" entered by "ambiguity", the author uses some theories of Jung Carl Gustav, a psychologist at the same period as Heidegger, to understand Heidegger's "knowing" in his thought on the origin of artistic works. Jung believed that art is a living thing that contains itself in itself. In essence, art is an eternal existence that surpasses individuals, symbolizes and represents the common destiny of mankind. He put forward the important assumption of "collective unconsciousness", and in the description of its core "archetype image", he said: "In every archetype image there is a fragment of the human spirit and human destiny, a remnant of joy and sorrow that has been repeated countless times in the doctrines of our ancestors, and on the whole has always followed the same track." It is like a deeply cut riverbed in the mind, in which the stream of life (can) suddenly flows into a great river, instead of flowing slowly through the broad, shallow stream as before."<sup>15</sup>

Jung's theory involves the relationship between art works and people's deep psychological structure, and the "knowing will" in artistic creation originates from human spirit and human destiny. Jung believed that creative passion comes from lofty ideals and great aspirations, rather than personal ability and instinctive desire; Heidegger also proposed that the open field of works of art is not the creation of genius as artists call it. From the perspectives of psychology and philosophy, the two scholars brought the generation of artistic works into a similar historical source. And that "willing knowing", in the preservation of the work, moves people out of the ordinary and mediocrity and pushes them into the historical suspense of the clarity of openness. Then, for the artist, the work of art is not a subjective production, but a cumulative generation; for those who are not artists, works of art are by no means an objective struggle, but a historic opening.

### *C. The Flow of Accumulation*

Whether it is Heidegger's clarity of truth, the surging river of Jung, or the reflection of national thinking and the manifestation of spiritual power pursued by Chinese aestheticians such as Li Zehou, art works exist as a materialized accumulation<sup>16</sup>, as the inner being and civilization for a nation to survive and develop. Truth embeds its shine in the work, a shine that moves people out of the mediocrity, out of the "wide and shallow stream", out of the silence of the mind, out of the inevitable dilemma of the saying. The other side of truth is not the non-truth but the indifference and habitual taming of truth.

The streams of accumulation reverberate in the work of art, with varying courses, impact, and clarity, resisting the

human' plight of mediocrity. The plight of artistic mediocrity is like Hannah Arendt's coverage of the Eichmann Trial and the "evil of mediocrity" proposed by her — because of the artistic mediocrity of lack of thought, blind obedience to speech, and superficial experience, people lose the possibility of resonance with the ever-flowing accumulation, and we no longer see the illumination and shine of the light of truth. People's ignorance, shallowness and experience in front of art consumption, and their collective obedience and discernment in the art system make people attribute beauty to aesthetics and truth to philosophy, and thus beauty and truth go their separate ways or become the evidence of each other's existence. The "beauty" that shines in the works of art has lost the truth standing by its side, and the depth and essence of the shine.

## VI. CONCLUSION

People live in the reverse direction of the clock of life. The being of the existent flows, dissolves, sinks, transforms on the earth, and there is always something that survives in the form of "crystallization" or "amber", with the appearance of the world's origin and its rich contents, for which time and space no longer work. Works of art are just like pieces of pure "amber", upon the core of which the flow of accumulation has left clear marks. They endure, look forward to being touched, and put themselves in that quiet, abiding light.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by "the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities".

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<sup>15</sup> Jung, r. Feng Chuan (Trans.). Psychology and Literature. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1987, p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> Li Zehou. Ancient Chinese Thought and History, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008, p. 314.