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The Ontological Foundations of Digital Art

Abstract:

In recent decades, the internet has become our predominant public space and yet the role of art in this space remains largely unthought. This paper argues that graphic art, and in particular digital graphic art, has great power to shape and transform our thinking and experience. But with that power comes an enormous political and ethical responsibility, a responsibility too often ignored by programmers and computer scientists. This paper uses the work of Denis Schmidt and Jacques Taminiaux as important resources for developing a Heideggerian response to this lack.

"The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture."[1]

1. Philosophy, History, and Art

In recent decades, the internet has become our predominant public space and yet the role of art in this space remains largely unthought. This paper argues that graphic art, and in particular digital graphic art, has great power to shape and transform our thinking and experience. But with that power comes an enormous political and ethical responsibility, a responsibility too often ignored by programmers and computer scientists who are the

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1) Martin Heidegger, "Age of the World Picture," in *The Heidegger Reader,* ed. Günter Figal, trans. Jerome Veith (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 134.

creators and designers of this public space. This paper uses the work of Denis Schmidt and Jacques Taminiaux as important resources for developing a Heideggerian response to this lack.

Jacques Taminiaux, in his book *Poetics, Speculation, Judgment* (1993)*,* traces Heidegger's increasing realization that "great art" can function not only as the manipulation of objects present-to-hand, but as the very "worlding" or cultural opening that allows for an experience of the world. In great art, the contemplative and poetic fuse into a unity of efficacious presencing; a moment of insight into the nature of being. This fusion is described by Denis Schmidt as a "crossing over" of *logos* and image. Schmidt in *Between Word and Image: Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis* gives a compelling account of the possibility of art (*technē*) as political agency, and argues in light of Heidegger's ontology of art, that the image has the power to change its audience. Crucially, for this paper, Schmidt sees the crossing over of word and image particularly manifest through the works of Paul Klee and Franz Marc. His analysis of their prescient retrieval of graphic art in the first half of the twentieth century then provides the grounds for my extension to contemporary digital graphic design, which often remains a "petty" art that aims to tantalize the senses, paying little attention to its political power. I contend that this has provided the internet with the power to manipulate its audience without recourse to ethical or political principles. However, if there is to be a determination of the character and achievement of graphic art as great art, then it will need to be thought in relation to a genuine sense of history, a history that is one and the same as the nature of philosophy itself, a history that can be traced through the works of Heidegger.

In his 1942 lecture course on Hölderlin's "*Der Ister*," Heidegger emphasizes the interwoven kinship of art, history, and philosophy. He argues that only when we learn to see images independently of distinctions between sense and meaning, sense and the non-sensible, and form and matter, can we think the sensible freed from its subordination to the supersensible. In other words, "the essence of art stands and falls with the essence and the truth of metaphysics."[2] Thus, the turn away from representational thinking, to works such as the Greek temple, pottery, and poetry, is not arbitrary for Heidegger, but is a central part of his attempt to think truth in terms of historical immanence. This "power" of the artwork is decisive in the movement of history and in a very real sense defines the achievement of the work of art far more than any sense of the pleasure we might take in the beauty of such works. Yet we need to ask ourselves "does modern art today reach into the movement of history itself?" Can a painter such as van Gogh still possess the power of setting such relations into motion? Does the painting that hangs in the museum still preserve the founding power to gather a people together in the modern age? In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger considered modern art an instance of the technologization of the world belonging to *Gestell*. He understood modern art as demonstrating the dominance of technology in establishing the metaphysical forgetting of being. For Heidegger, Hölderlin's poetry remained the exception to this rule until his 1956 visit to Basel where he attended the Beyeler Foundation exhibition of Klee's works. After witnessing Klee's art works, he submitted to the idea that certain contemporary art can point beyond a future of aesthetics, thus opening up the realm of possibility for truth to emerge.

Heidegger was not alone in referring to Klee's work as an opening to truth. Gadamer, Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Adorno, and Bloch all wrote on the philosophical significance of Klee's paintings and drawings, placing him as a central figure in the history of art. In particular, these philosophers have been moved by Klee's claim that "art does not repeat the visible, rather it renders visible."[3] This shared premise by

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2) Fredrich Hölderlin, "Der Ister," in *Fredrich Hölderlin Selected Poems and Fragments,* ed. Jeremy Adler, trans. Michael Hamburger, Reprint Edition (London, New York, Victoria, Ontario, New Delhi, Auckland, Johannesburg: Penguin Classics, 1998), 19.

3) This sentence was heavily underlined by Heidegger in his copy of Klee's writings and would be cited by Merleau-Ponty in "Eye and Mind", see: Denis. J. Schmidt, *Between Word and Image: Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 83.

both Heidegger and Klee demonstrates the movement from non-being into being and is thematic throughout Heidegger's philosophical writings. But it is also a movement from talking *about* the work of art *to* the work of art itself, what he refers to as the artwork. Heidegger insists that this is not understood as a Kantian aesthetic experience but a moment of intelligibility, or insight. Klee calls this "the double life of the word and the image; each crossed into the other even while remaining itself."[4] An example of this can be seen in his 1940 painting, *Tod und Feuer,* one of Klee's last paintings before his death. This painting resembles the hieroglyphics of the ancient Lascaux cave paintings with its use of simple black lines and naive strokes. The painting expresses two figures; a white skull and a naive figure that appears to be poking or nudging the white skull, set against a canvas of deep reds and browns. Both figures are carved out with the letters "T", "o", "d", Tod, the German word for death. The deadly white skull, encased within thick black bold lines, is surrounded by the deep earthy colors of the underworld. These dualities of existence: life, death; light, dark; white, black are fully articulated in Klee's suspension of the subject/object divide by collapsing the word and image. This painting can be seen as symbolic of Klee's resoluteness in the face of death with both fear and reverence, crossing "into the other even while remaining itself."[5]

This is not incidental to Klee's project. In fact, according to Schmidt, "[t]he urge to bring images and word into some sort of reconciliation drove Klee." Nonetheless, Klee understood the impossibility of this reconciliation, for there are important temporal and spatial differences between the word and the image. In particular, words are marked by what Schmidt calls "the deficiency of the temporal character of language."[6] The simultaneous multi-dimensionality of art, and even music, is lacking in the word. For the price of the careful distinctions that are made possible by language, is that they can only be experienced sequentially.

However, Klee is careful to explain that modern abstract painting, in particular graphic painting, is not to be explained simply as a spatial overwriting of images. Therefore, graphic art is not a copying of nature, but a movement that brings something into being. "This movement, out of which the natural world itself emerges and comes to be, that drives the growth, is what the artist needs to repeat and further. As such, art furthers life."[7] The essence of the painting is not what is represented, since the finished form of nature is not what motivates the artist. In other words, the visible is not what is significant, rather art renders visible the life of nature: genesis itself.

In rendering visible, the artist creates new forms, but these forms are not viewed in isolation. They exist within a social and political context. By the 1940s the reconciliation of opposites, of word and image, that Klee sought, became the dominant mode of art and graphic design. Fueled by the politics of the propaganda machine of the war and advertising on television, graphic art became the language of our historical moment, i.e., an age of endless repetition and instantaneous presence. By the turn of the twenty-first century this dominance of graphic art was intensified even further by the ubiquity of digital information technology, but this still did not complete the task of Klee's vision to collapse the distinction between word and image. But perhaps progress can be made by continuing not only to focus on the intelligibility of art, but also on the event-like nature of truth. In other words, we can supplement Klee's call for the blending of word and image with Heidegger's hermeneutical ontology that prepared him for a reassessment of modern art under Klee's tutelage. Taminiaux shows us that to understand this move we must begin with Heidegger's re-appropriation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* particularly in the lecture courses on *Plato's Sophist* and *The Basic Concepts of Greek Philosophy.*

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4) Ibid.

5) Ibid.

6) Ibid., 66.

7) Ibid., 87.

2. Great Art and Petty Art

The movement from thinking of art as production to art as a mode of truth was not an arbitrary task set by Heidegger. Heidegger juxtaposes the ontic notion of art as *technē* in *Being and Time,* to the ontological understanding of art as *alētheia* in *Plato's Sophist.* Such a move dismantles the objectivity of the artwork, offering a phenomenological account of art as revealing. Taminiaux begins by making a distinction within Aristotle's dianoetic virtues, thus determining the status of art as *technē* on two levels: on the lower level are the deliberative virtues, on the higher level are the epistemic virtues. *Technē,* art, is an intellectual virtue insofar as it discloses or uncovers some truth, *alētheia.* The "a" is an a-privative. Thus, the Greeks have a negative expression for something we understand positively. Truth has for them the same negative sense as has our privative words, such as imperfection. Heidegger writes, "That which we designate as imperfect does not have nothing at all to do with perfection; on the contrary, it is precisely oriented toward it: in relation to perfection it is not all that it could be."[8] This type of negation is often hidden in words and meanings: for example within the word blind or silent lies their correlatives, sight and sound, for only those who can see can be blind, and only those who can speak can be silent.

This showing through negation Heidegger links to his idea of truth as both a revealing and a concealing. The revealing that comes by way of *technē* is one of producing; it is the activity of *poiēsis*, that "setting-into-work" [*energein*] of creation. For Aristotle, the origin of the work of art is *poiēsis* (i.e., the productive activity), but the productive activity has its origin in art, in *technē.* Thus, when Heidegger says "the origin of the work of art is art" he is following Aristotle's theory of knowledge. As such, the essence of art, its *hypokeimenon*, is an activity; this activity or movement is the happening of truth. Truth, therefore, is not something that stands over against us; rather, truth is a deliberate process of the intellect that expresses itself ongoingly.[9]

However, Aristotle's *technē* and *poiēsis,* as activities of production, are not self-sufficient, because the end or *telos* of the productive activity ruled by *technē* is not in the agent. Rather the *telos* lies outside the artist in the intended use of the object by her patrons and customers. While the production process itself might be internal to the artist, the end product lies outside the agent and is, therefore, deficient for Aristotle. According to Taminiaux:

> Such deficiency does not characterize the highest deliberative excellence, namely, *phronēsis*, a way of *alētheuein*, of unconcealing, that is adjusted to the activity that is no longer *poiēsis*, but *praxis*, action in the sense of the conduct by an individual of his life among, and in the presence of other individuals. *Phronēsis*, practical judgment, is the highest deliberative virtue insofar as neither its principle, its *archē*, nor its end, its *telos*, fall outside the agent himself. *Phronēsis* is a prior option of the agent for acting well; its end is the acting-well of the agent.[10]

As we can see here, *phronēsis*, *technē,* and *poiēsis* occupy the same realm of the intellect, and are concerned with the temporal finite structure of being, that part that shares in the *lēthe* of *alētheia*. That means that even if

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8) Martin Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*, trans., Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997).

9) I use the non-standard English here advisedly for, in a significantly revealing way, the alternatives that are considered proper, "currently" and "continuously", do not carry the temporal connotations of presencing that Heidegger correctly identifies as truth.

10) Jacques Taminiaux, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetics, Speculation, and Judgment: The Shadow of the Work of Art from Kant to Phenomenology,* ed. and trans. Michael Gendre (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 155.

phronēsis is highest among the productive intellectual activities, it is not the highest excellence. While *technē* and *phronēsis* linger within the temporal structures of consciousness, they cannot participate in what is most true, infinite, and imperishable. Thus *epistemē* and *sophia* are higher than *poiēsis* and *praxis,* having nothing to do with the perishable, finite existence of humanity. *Epistemē* is concerned with unchangeable entities, like mathematics. *Sophia* on the other hand, is concerned with ontology. *Sophia*, of course, can never be known completely. However, we can remain *in* truth even when that includes a privative if we contemplate or speculate on the origins of existence. According to Aristotle, the contemplation of that immutable realm is for a mortal being the most authentic way of being. As long as such a contemplation lasts, the mortal spectator comes close to the divine. He reaches *eudaimonia*, or authenticity, in the sense of being himself with excellence.[11]

Taminiaux thus clearly explains the Aristotelian distinctions between lower and higher forms of knowing: First, that between the contemplative and the calculative, and within the calculative between *phronēsis* and *technē*. The early Heidegger reappropriates Aristotle's distinction between *technē* as a mode of production that discovers truths, and *phronēsis* as a mode of disclosing the conduct of human life. Thus, he agrees with Aristotle's distinction between art as production and *phronēsis* as *praxis.* The distinction is made in ontological terms between an everyday way of being – concerned with and preoccupied by ends to be attained by utensils and their readiness-to-hand, for example the utility of graphic art by the advertising industry on the one hand, and an authentic way of being that cares for the very being of Dasein's existence, as exemplified in Paul Klee's work.

With regard to the distinction between the contemplative and the calculative Heidegger reappropriates *theoria* as ontological, removing the more theological notion in which the meaning of being is limited to *ousia*, presence in the sense of [*Vorhandenheit*] presence-at-hand, a notion in which only one mode of time has been taken into account. Eternity of the prime mover is but a concept derived from everydayness, a situation from which our art constantly attempts to escape into permanence. This fascination with permanence "is nothing but a way of escaping our own being, a falling away from our own existence and its finite time."[13] In Plato, for example, behind the temporal embodiment of a work of art there is an absolute form of beauty that can only be known, if at all, by subjective intelligibility. In contrast it is by taking into account our own finite time as originary that fundamental ontology overcomes what remains indeterminate in the meaning of being, when the latter is limited to sheer presence.[12] In this framework, we can see that art, for the early Heidegger, is in no way originary, although it is understood as a mode of unconcealment. "On the contrary art [*technē*]*,* and the activity of setting-in-work ruled by it, are secondary; they are derived, they are in a position of fallenness with respect to what is our own; our existence and its finite time." [13]

Until 1933, then, *technē* was relegated to the lower faculty of the active life and imperfect realm of everydayness. Confirmation of this is seen in the 1927 lecture course, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology,* where the poet, according to Heidegger, cannot be of the same rank as the thinker: the poet cannot go beyond an improper or imperfect understanding of existence, because while he has a presentiment of what existence is, he either projects existence upon things or projects upon existence the mode of being of thing.[14] Heidegger believes

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11) Ibid., 156.

12) Ibid.

13) Ibid.

14) Compare *Being and Time* (GA: 162): "The communication of the existential possibilities of one's affectivity [*Befindlichkeit*] ... can become 'poetical' discourse's own aim." see: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. Joan Staumbough, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 289.

that the Greeks conceived of *theoria* as the "implementation of the highest form of *praxis*."[15] Aristotle following Plato before him "conceived of *theoria* as a *bios* (life that is lived, that involves civic and ethical elements), a way of existing, a way of behaving, namely, a *praxis*."[16] This is a reversal of Heidegger's earlier claim about the pre-eminence of *pure* philosophy. In *Being and Time* the knowledge of the being of beings is the highest knowledge; it is *theoria*. Now, "knowledge of the being of beings is both *theoria*, which is the highest form of *bios* or *praxis*, and *technē,* that is, to some setting-into-work over which it rules."[17] This does not mean that *technē* as everydayness disappears. Rather, Heidegger is setting up a distinction between two types of *technē*. The first is a lower form of *technē, which* is unable to overcome *Vorhandenheit* (or presence-at-hand). Taminaux calls this "petty *technē*" and argues that while it is trapped within everydayness, *technē* is blind towards being. For example, modern graphic design with its appeal to the immediate senses is an instance of such petty *technē*. In graphic design this culminates in advertising where everything becomes a commodified experience to be bought and sold, which binds us to *Vorhandenheit,* as can be seen most fully in the objectification of women and children through sexual images presented on video games. The second is "great *technē,*" which sets-into-work being itself as unconcealment. Great *technē* discloses the truth about the world; it is revolutionary in its vision. Epochal manifestations of great *technē* might include the Parthenon, Paul Klee's *Death and Fire*, and Franz Marc's *The Deer in the Forest*.

3. Petty Art and the Problem of Presence

If petty art seeks pleasure in the moment, great art elevates the mind to contemplation. Marc's work *The Deer in the Forest* is representative of great *technē*, according to Heidegger. In Marc's work the geometric shapes that make up the form of the deer are carefully proportioned and simplified to represent the deer's features, while their rhythmic movement is echoed in the stylized shapes of the rocks and foliage of the background. The colors and lines symbolized an age of innocence like Eden before the Fall, free from the materialism and corruption that arose in the wake of World War II. This is an idealistic view of nature – an image designed to lift its subject above the brutality of nature in its raw state. Marc represents the inner being of the subject as agility. In terms of truth, this is neither a copy [*Abbild*] nor a schematization of a concept in the Kantian sense. The *hypokeimenon* (nature) of the deer is inseparable from its environment, it is this deer as "being-in-the-forest" and presented as something existing. The presence of the deer's existence is *noticed* before it is known. The deer merges with its environment, what comes to light is a sense of movement and time. Thus what is encountered in the work is not an object (the deer), but the emergence of a being from nature (deer-in-the-forest), a particular way of being marked by harmony and relation.

In contrast, petty art exploits the mind for commercial use. As Marshall McLuhan so aptly notices these kinds of art are created as distractions to dull the "collective mind"[18] in order to manipulate, exploit and control our behavior for the profit of the creators and their employers. Schmidt descriptively analyses Adorno's impression of art in the modern world as

> the grotesque barbarisms of our age [from] the quiet seductions of the consumer and technological world, [this is an] age that is defined by a peculiar noise. We assault ourselves, we ravage our world,

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15) Taminiaux, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 158.

16) Ibid.

17) Ibid.

18) Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), preface.

and we tacitly distract ourselves from the truth of our time. We are flooded with images, inundated with words, companioned with sounds. It does not require much reflection to see that in our times, it is increasingly difficult to be arrested by a work, to be silenced, to be brought to linger.[19]

Taking the example of Athena, Adorno's sentiments become clear. For the Greeks, Athena was housed in a temple where the *polis* gathered and expressed their faithfulness to the goddess as symbolic of the embodiment of truth and justice. In other words, Athena was an event of truth. Today, with the use of graphic design, Athena is transformed into the idealized embodiment of an early adolescent child in the SNK game, *The King of Fighters.* The Greek "event" of Athena in contrast to the "image" Athena is a difference between an artwork that is "alive" and one that is representational. The former dwells in the Parthenon as a deity where the public gather together and linger in her presence. The latter is a snapshot representation of the sexualization of young girls. Such sexualization of young girls exploit and excite the senses; these desires feed the lower part of the intellectual faculty. It does this by using an algorithm of continuously recurring moments, concealing truth behind a veil of appearances, and in fact, appearances of the most impoverished sort: using a few lines to draw large eyes to suggest youth, the simple curve of the breast to suggest sex.

There is no temporal depth to such images. The video game evokes sexual intimacy with a child. However, the promise of the experience is constantly deferred until the next image appears. The initial novelty of subverting social norms by looking at such images of young girls becomes an ever-recurring process until such time as the experience is other than novel. Here the great *technē* of Athena who arrested the public and brought them to linger, defining the political and social structures of Ancient Greece, gets transformed into the petty *technē* of the consumer culture of contemporary society. The shift in thinking about Athena from a goddess of truth to an erotic child exemplifies the current consciousness of humanity set-in-place by representational thinking. The image is, as Adorno says, a grotesque barbarism of our age arising from the quiet seductions of the consumer world. This is made possible by technological advances in the mechanical reproduction of the image, beginning with the mass production of wood-cut etches by the printing press, but intensified in the mid-nineteenth century with the introduction of photography. Media theorists argue that the image was not merely a supplement to language, it was meant to eclipse it.[20] For the Greeks, sameness defines the relation of word and image: Athena and truth are interwoven. In the modern image, there is no such intelligibility. The function of branding is to absorb or conceal the present, with no lingering elevation into the contemplative life. It absorbs us in the direct presence of mechanical (digital) time while denying any possibility for endurance or presence, grounded in our understanding of time and being. The desire for pure presence is foreclosed, except where we engage in great art.

4. Concluding Remarks

Schmidt argues that the work of art can rise above the nihilism of the age. Achieving this means to think of graphic art as an opening to truth. We have used Taminiaux's distinction here to understand the potential to escape the falling tendency of everyday petty *technē.* If graphic art is the predominant form of production by which we experience the world today, then it has the power to open up the possibility for *technē* not only to serve

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19) See Schmidt's description of Adorno's question about the possibility of art after Auschwitz: Schmidt, *Between Word and Image,* 11.

20) See: Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: First Vintage Books, 1992), 256–257. Also: Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Business* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 74.

as a functionary in the current orientation toward objectification and instrumentalism, but also as an opening onto an attentiveness of things in their intelligibility and their being. Liberating it from the limitations of the Kantian heritage of the present-at-hand, graphic art can be thought instead as "the initial and persistent sight looking beyond what is directly given before the hand [*Vorhanden*]" towards a "manifesting implementation [*Er-Wirken*] of Being in beings."[21] Inscribing art, language, and politics into graphic art elevates it as a great work of art. As Heidegger writes, "unconcealment occurs only when it is achieved by work: the work of the word in poetry, the work of stone in temple and statue, the work of polis as the historical place in which all this is grounded and preserved."[22] If it is true that art no longer functions in society as a shining forth of a people but rather as a merely instrumental technique for manipulating others within the context of branding, then the temporal embodiment of art remains disconnected from the meaning of our world, specifically graphic art which stands today as the bastion of public art. However, if there is an interweaving of truth as *technē,* truth as word, and truth as political, such artworks are transformative. In other words, graphic art is a creation that has the potential to reveal truth, to change consciousness, and, therefore, to institute political change in a positive way. Graphic artists can challenge instrumentalism by tapping into the origins of their craft, by recognizing the cultural responsibility that public art demands, and by taking their place with great *technē*, building a way for an ontology beyond idealism and the subject towards an integration of peoples and cultures as a way of understanding the human condition.

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21) Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics,* trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 122.
22) Ibid., 146.

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