

Ahead of 'Yes' and 'No': Heidegger on Knowing Unknowingness

Gary Peters

(Paper delivered at 'On Not Knowing' symposium, New Hall College,
Cambridge, 29th June 2009)

*I am the one who has to decide what they should ultimately look like (the
making of pictures consists of a large number of yes and no decisions and a
yes decision at the end).*
(Gerhard Richter)

*But we know the beginning,
the other one, we know it by questioning
we stay in the leap ahead of any yes or no.*
(Heidegger)

The affirmation of the unknown as unknown can only take place within the known, as a gap, space or erasure; anything else would be wantonly obscure or nonsensical—not unknown as unknown, but simply unknown. The unknown is not beneath, behind or secreted within the work, the unknown *is* the work to the extent that it turned out like this rather than that—why? We know the work—there it is—but we don't know how or why the artist came to say the final 'yes' to this rather than a different work. This incomprehensibility is not a mystification but, rather, the very *articulation* of the work itself as it emerges out of the logic of erasure that opens the space between one possibility and another. And it is because erasure is always a contingent aesthetic act, that this space between the 'yes' and the 'no', is always shifting and thus impossible to predict or reduce to the known. As Kant says, such aesthetic judgements contribute 'not one jot to knowledge' but, rather, initiate an infinite project of *reflection*—reflection on not knowing. The following reflections should be understood in these terms.

Why does Richter sometimes say 'yes' and sometimes say 'no'? If, as Niklas Luhmann argues, artworks represent the 'emancipation of contingency', then the choice of one mark rather than another will always be open to revision or

erasure. Richter claims that he ultimately *decides*, but is saying 'yes' or 'no', a decision or a choice, are they the same thing? Heidegger doesn't think so:

What *is* decision at all? Not *choice*. Choosing always involves only what is *pregiven* and can be taken or rejected. *Decision* here means grounding and creating, disposing in advance and beyond oneself... (Contributions to Philosophy [From Enowning] p. 69)

While what Niklas Luhmann calls 'unmarked space' prior to the artwork might be unmarked *by the artist*, the first mark and the subsequent marks of the work's continuation are arrived at through a series of choices that inevitably draw upon the available patterns of marking that silently/invisibly inhabit the unmarked as an insistent possibility. In theory the work could be anything, but in practice it usually turns out pretty much as one would expect—which, of course, includes the expectation of the unexpected. To this extent the 'yesses' and 'no's' of the work's production can indeed be conceived as the operation of choice, the criss-crossing of aesthetic judgement within the parameters of the 'pregiven'. *De-cision*, on the other hand, as the word suggests, describes a cutting, a cutting away from what is there as the initiation of a task to create another beginning and another time-space outside or *ahead of* 'yes' and 'no'. Heidegger describes this as 'indifference':

Decision is decision between either-or. But that already forestalls what has the character of decision. From where [comes] the either-or? Where does this come from, only *this* or only *that*? From where [comes] the unavoidability of thus or thus? Is there not a third, *indifference*? (Contributions p.70)

If the artwork *is* the product of a 'yes', 'no', where it is the emancipated contingency of art that always results in aesthetic choices being characterised by conviction *without* knowledge, then the betweenness of de-cision suggests a way of outstripping the arbitrariness of a conviction-aesthetics based upon baseless choice by rooting the unknowingness of art not in the constantly erased space between the 'yes' and 'no' but, more essentially, in the space *erased* by the space of erasure itself, the space 'ahead of' the mutual erasure of 'yes' and 'no',

The indifference of decision is double; it is indifferent to the 'pregiven' choices that are all-too-ready-to-hand, and it is also *in-difference*, in a different space-time that decision is, as Heidegger describes it, able to 'found and build'. To the extent that the indifference of decision points towards the more essential *in-difference* where the 'other beginning' can begin, then it throws off its aesthetic garb and acquires ontological significance as the necessary break not only with the either-or of choice but also with the no less contingent binarity of the artist and the artwork.

For the artist the emancipated contingency evident in the production of the artwork makes it the perfect vehicle for both the articulation and the suffering of 'incomprehensible' Being. This results in the existential predicament of the

artist faced with the task of producing an artwork without the requisite *knowledge* of just how (or even *why*) to begin. It is the (ironic/aesthetic) knowingness of the unknowingness of art that allows the artist to nevertheless affirm a beginning *without* an originary and founding origin to unconceal. The fact that the artwork began like this rather than that can be explained, no doubt, at the level of choice (some artists are very good at explaining their intentions) but from Heidegger's perspective, the merely aesthetic affirmation of indifference is inessential because it is only ever exercised within the neutral space *between* the 'yes' and 'no' rather than, as he demands, '*ahead of* them. But what would it mean to 'leap ahead of any yes and no'?

When Heidegger speaks of inbetweenness he is speaking not of the space between affirmation and negation but of a space-time that is situated outside rather than within such binaries. As such, the affirmative dimension of his thought is not related to the choice of this or that aspect of the given but, rather, to the prior givenness of the given and giving of that.

Just as Maurice Blanchot describes the act of reading a text as a 'silent yes', an affirmation prior to (or 'ahead of') any critical approval or disapproval, so the act of *writing* a text, of *producing* an artwork, is itself already an affirmation of art. But what does it mean to affirm art? Indeed, what *is* art if not the artist and his/her work? Stripped of personalities and aesthetic objects art, in this view, represents a particular 'style' of inceptual thinking, one that 'enacts' the truth by offering it a particular form of 'shelter'.

Style is the law of enactment of truth in the sense of sheltering in beings. Because art, for example, is setting-into-work of truth and because in the work the sheltering comes *in itself* to stand unto itself, therefore style is visible, although hardly understood—especially in the field of art. (Contributions p. 48)

For Heidegger, art is work, not the artwork, but the *work* of art—the working of the work. This work should not be confused with the labour of the artist. The *work* of art is, in truth, something essentially unaesthetic in nature, indeed, something *in truth*. But truth is not that which can be known as true. Truth is not known but enacted, is set to work neither as the content of the artwork nor the intentions of the artist but, rather, as the inception of another space-time—an 'other beginning'—where, as the notion of 'shelter' implies, truth is protected and preserved but also concealed. As Heidegger thinks it, 'style' does not refer to the surface variety of aesthetic forms but to the more essential visibility of the work of sheltering itself. In this regard, it is not a question of identifying different aesthetic styles, but of identifying art as that unique style which renders visible truth's invisibility (the unconcealment of concealment) alongside those other styles (philosophy, science, religion) that do not. This clearly owes a great deal to Hegel's aesthetics where art represents the phenomenological moment of Spirit's self-recognition as appearance. But it is here that one also witnesses the fundamental divide between Hegel's dialectic of Spirit and Heidegger's ontology of Being. The former offers up a teleological narrative that plots the historical course of misrecognition and unknowing from the viewpoint of an *absolute knowledge*

that is arrived at through the work of the *negative*; the latter, on the contrary, presents us with an ecstatic non-narratable, non-dialectical, non-teleological encounter with historicity that places truth *outside* of knowledge (absolute or not) in a 'zone' of knowing-unknowingness that is *affirmed*.

If nothing else this changes the register of the earlier question: why this rather than that? At the ontological level the question might be rephrased as: why art rather than philosophy or religion or politics or science? And, if we want to follow Heidegger further, we will very quickly have to ask: why 'why?' rather than 'how?' or 'what?'?

And yet it is necessary to know that although in the course of that history the 'why-question' has taken on the appearance of the deepest and most extreme question, the 'why-question' is not an *originary* question at all, but rather remains trapped in the domain of explaining beings. (Mindfulness p. 243)

Heidegger is right; once the why-question is posed the 'what?' and the 'how?' follow close behind. Knowing why something exists too easily distracts us from the more essential questions by diverting attention away from ontological errancy towards the domain of explanation and explication: the 'Why?...Because...' encounter known to every parent. Perhaps the worst parental answer is the best: 'Why?'... 'just because. The artist is 'thrown' into art, the why-question is largely irrelevant and uninteresting, it has happened, what now? In this regard, the shift from the why? to the what? should not refer to the shift from 'why art?' to 'what is art?' (the so-called 'ontological question'), but to the shift from 'why art?' to 'what does it do?'... 'how?' These questions do not require explanations but *descriptions*.

What does art do? And, prior to the artist choosing to do this or that, what *decides* the artist to do art? Heidegger does not offer an explanation of art but *describes* it as the 'setting-into-work-of-truth'. But, to be clear, it is not the work of the artist that sets the truth to work, but the *work* of art prior to artist and artwork. Ask an artist *why* they are artists and they will probably offer you any number of more or less convincing explanations; ask an artist *what* they do and they will most likely *describe* in great detail and with considerable precision the nature of their work and *how* they go about it. However, 'What decided you to become an artist?' does not require, as a response, the description of an artwork but, rather, a description of a space that must be entered into, the space-time of art itself. Hans-Georg Gadamer, very much under the wing of Heidegger, also describes this space-time as 'in-between' and relates it to a notion of 'play'. Although Gadamer sticks to the concept of choice, it is clear in the following that a distinction can be made between choice as de-cision and choice as choice. He writes in *Truth and Method*:

It seems to me characteristic of human play that it plays *something*. That means that the structure of movement to which it submits has a definite quality which the player "chooses." First, he expressly separates his playing behaviour from his other behaviour by *wanting* to play. But even within his readiness to

play he makes a choice. He chooses this game rather than that.
(Truth and Method p.107)

Clearly, “choosing” to play, and choosing which game to play are not the same things. The first “choice” is the essential one in that, as de-cision, it cuts the player away from what Gadamer describes as ‘his other behaviour’. It is not just a question of playing the game but of *wanting* to play the game. But how is this desire to play explained? Like Heidegger, Gadamer offers no explanations but, rather, *describes* the manner in which the game casts a ‘spell’ over the player.

The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players....The real subject of the game...is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself. (p.106)

As with the player, the de-cision to become an artist is, in a sense, not a choice at all. *Wanting* to do art, its *attraction*, the *fascination* it exerts and the *spell* it casts describe a situation and encounter that leaves little room for choice.

Perhaps it is here that we begin to confront the real unknowingness of art. Interestingly, Heidegger is very good at describing *what* is so fascinating about art while, at the same time, not being very good at describing *how* this fascination impacts on the fascinated artist and the artwork. In other words, he is very good at describing a space outside of the existential, ontic and the aesthetic, one that is opened by and demands for its continuance a particular ‘task’ of thinking, but he does not devote any time to describing *how* this space is ‘leapt into’ and what it’s like once you’ve leapt; it remains for artists themselves to describe this.

What this signifies is that, while the thinker can think outside of the aesthetic, the artist remains *within* it, albeit a domain now radically transformed by such thinking. It is this transformation, the importation of ontological ‘mindfulness’ *back into* the aesthetic that is ignored in Heidegger’s account, thus leaving us with a way of interpreting art rather than of making it. For Heidegger, thinking allows us to re-read art as an opening onto Being, for him the encounter with the artwork is always a *means* to that (endless) end. For the artist, no matter how thought-full, the work never vanishes into the task of thinking but always remains, if not as an end, then as a brute reality that is transformed by having another space (an ‘other beginning’) opened-up *within* it rather than outside it. The unknowingness of art, then, is both outside of it and within it. But, to ask again, what is it about art that decides the artists to become an artist? What is so fascinating? This is where Heidegger is at his best.

In spite of Heidegger’s much-used metaphor of the ‘leap’ into the unknown (or unknowingness), it is this more processual notion of being ‘drawn’ into the unknown that characterises his understanding of the task of thinking, and it is this, the allure of Being, that helps explain the fascination of art.

Just as the player is drawn into the game not as a player but as the played, so Heidegger's thinker is not drawn *to* thought by the knowledge of what has been thought and is, thus thinkable, but, rather, drawn *into* thinking by that which is *thought provoking*, an event of the unknown rather than the known.

What must be thought about turns away from man. It withdraws from him. But how can we have the least knowledge of something that withdraws from the beginning, how can we even give it a name?...What withdraws from us draws us along by its withdrawal...Once we are drawn into the withdrawal, we are somewhat like migratory birds...caught in the pull of what withdraws, attracts us by its withdrawal. And once we, being so attracted, are drawing toward what draws us, our essential being already bears the stamp of that "pull". (What Calls for Thinking? in Basic Writings, p. 351)

To learn to think, for Heidegger, is to learn to give heed to 'what there is to think about' (p. 346), but *what is* there to think about and why exactly does Heidegger think about art?

In 'The Origin of the Work of Art' Heidegger is 'called' or 'pulled' by art into the space of an 'other beginning' where the Being of beings begins to be illuminated: he is fascinated. But the spell cast on him by art has nothing to do with the appreciation of aesthetic objects. No, art is the place or space where 'truth sets itself to work', a statement that should be interpreted carefully. Heidegger is not saying that art is the truth or that art, or some art (authentic art), is true. Nor is he saying that the *work* of art is the work of truth: truth doesn't need art, it sets *itself* to work. What he *is* saying is that the work of truth is disclosed by art, not through the representation of aesthetic forms, but rather as a way of seeing the 'setting to work', where seeing really means 'heeding' or 'hearkening': a particular form of knowing encapsulated by the word *technē*.

The word *technē* denotes...a mode of knowing. To know means to have seen, in the widest sense of seeing, which means to apprehend what is present, as such. For Greek thought the essence of knowing consists in *alētheia*, that is, in the revealing of beings...*Technē*, as knowledge experienced in the Greek manner, is a bringing forth of beings in that it *brings forth* what is present as such *out of* concealedness and specifically *into* the unconcealedness of their appearance. (Basic Writings p. 180)

What fascinates? Clearly there is a 'call' here into a mode of knowing that is exotic to the extent that it represents a break with the hegemonic will-to-knowledge. But, having said that, why should the unconcealment of beings be any more fascinating than the verification of truth? It is here that one must recognise and understand the place and function of *work* within Heidegger's concept of truth: truth is not just *there*, but *given (es gibt)* again and again through the infinite becoming of work. It is the revelation of this work in and by

art that draws the thinker in, not as a way of approaching the truth but, rather, as a way of tracking and tracing its withdrawal. Being drawn to what withdraws is the essence of fascination.

Within the economy of knowledge truth is truth. Within the knowingness of *technē* 'truth, in its essence, is untruth' (Basic Writings p. 176). It is this irresolvable duality (or 'strife') that demands not the familiar dialectical work that would seek to overcome contradiction and actualise absolute knowledge, but the work of 'dissembling' (p. 176) that, as Blanchot describes it, incessantly reveals and re-veils.

What does knowingness know? It knows of its own unknowingness. Misunderstanding this—described by Heidegger as the '*denial*' or '*refusal*' of truth by truth itself—results in a subsequent misunderstanding of the latter's encounter with art, one that is evident in many interpretations of his notorious discussion of Van Gogh. Heidegger's dubious politics notwithstanding, the famous passage in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' suffers a radical distortion when it is taken merely as a proto-Nazi glorification of the blood and soil; not least because the very *work* of truth as described here precisely unravels the very certainties that make for the (admittedly unsavoury) political convictions attributed to Heidegger. This is the key passage:

This equipment [the shoes] belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself....But perhaps it is only in the picture that we notice all this about the shoes. The peasant woman, on the other hand, simply wears them. (Basic Writings p.163)

In essence Heidegger's intention is clearly the affirmation of art rather than the fascistic glorification of the peasant (with or without the dreaded shoes). It is, in other words, the knowing unknowingness of art, rather than the unadulterated ignorance of the peasant, that brings our attention to what Heidegger describes as the 'strife' of 'earth' and 'world', and it is this, the co-presence of the open and the closed that is at the heart of the truth-event. To repeat: the real issue here is the play of unconcealment and concealment and the withdrawing of truth into itself.

The world is the self-opening openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions.... The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing...The opposition of world and earth is strife. (Basic Writings p. 172)

If, as Heidegger suggests, we only 'notice' this strife in the artwork, this is not because the artist has arrived at an aesthetic form capable of representing and communicating the work of truth but, rather the contrary, that art itself withdraws into a solitude that in a sense absents it from the world of human communication.

The more this thrust comes into the open, the stronger and more solitary the work becomes....The more solitary the work, fixed in the figure, stands on its own and the more cleanly it seems to cut all ties to human beings, the more simply does the thrust come into the Open...(Poetry Language Truth, p. 66)

Judged by the contemporary standards of knowledge exchange and the communicative community that legitimates it, neither the thinker nor the artist *know* the work in any sense that would be socially or academically useful. The former looks on from the outside and describes the fascinating spectacle of the known folding into the unknown, while the latter speaks from *within* the essential solitude, not as one 'in the know' but, rather, as one cast aside by the work as it *dis-closes* its incomprehensible truth-event. For both the thinker and the artist the fascination with art can only be an affirmative experience: fascination cannot negate. But the peculiarity of fascination—its fascinating quality—is that ultimately it is only 'pulled' into or towards art through the necessary affirmation of the 'don't know'. Not the 'don't know' between 'yes' and 'no', but 'ahead of' them. It is this affirmation that promotes the work to its essential solitude and its consequent unknowability—something to be described by the thinker or *lived* by the artist.