

# THE CONTAINER, THE COIN AND THE PICTURE FRAME

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**ABSTRACT** — The goal of this paper is to address some pertinent problems with ways in which the *double-character* of the artwork has been understood, particularly in the sense of its being both autonomous and instrumental, by deploying three different master-metaphors, the *container*, the *two-sided coin* and the *picture frame*. I would like to argue that when Jacques Derrida displaces the *container* and the *two-sided coin* with the *picture frame*, he succeeds in surmounting the most pressing problems with ‘the double character’, as it is understood by Theodor Adorno and Martin Heidegger. First is a brief glimpse of the intractable problems with “containerly-thinking” about artworks, after which follows a presentation of one of the main problems of viewing the artwork as does Adorno, by using the master-metaphor of *the coin*. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of an alternative conception of the double character — one that can be described in Heidegger’s essay “The Origin of the Work of Art”, which, although it still deploys “coin-thinking”, may still be seen as a way around the problem of radical polarity in Adorno’s conception. Meanwhile, new problems arise in trying to get a clear understanding of what the two characters consist of.

Derrida’s thinking in terms of a *picture frame* metaphor can be a more satisfactory way of thinking about the autonomous artwork and its double character: While it still leaves open the question of a final telos for the artwork, thinking in terms of “the frame” does not undermine itself out through radical polarity. Moreover, Derridian “frame-thinking” does not ignite the receiver’s hopes of identifying two distinct characters, as is the case with Heidegger. By deploying this metaphor, we can dispel the notion of a morally disengaged judge, which is generally thought to be an option reserved for thinkers who reject the double-character approach to artworks.

## INTRODUCTION

I take it as an axiom that metaphors are not merely poetic or rhetorical devices, but that they impact the way we perceive, think and act. What is thought to be the case about a studied object may be relational to the metaphor underlying it: a master-metaphor. Although such master-metaphors are a part of what generate problems for the way one perceives the study-object, and while changing the metaphor can dissolve some of the problems, such a change will probably generate different problems.<sup>1</sup>

Focusing on the artworld, one of the master-metaphors undergirding Modernism’s paramount notion of the ‘autonomous artwork’ is *the container*. Under Modernism’s regime, it is as if the artwork is assumed to be inside a container—the artwork’s proper domain. Some sorts of judgments also belong inside the container; e.g., judgments of taste, (beauty and the sublime) and formal judgments, the work’s aesthetic features, its composition, colour-harmony, how well the work is executed. Then there are external judgments—outside the container—that are beyond what is legitimate for “properly” explaining, understanding and valuing artworks. These external judgments may focus on moral and teleological concerns (for example, artworks are bound to a final telos or to the artist’s intentions), and to Modernism’s way of thinking, they should be relegated to other domains such as that of the social sciences. This way of thinking, which came to the fore in the reception of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790), became a standard dogma for Modernism in the twentieth-century. In contrast to Modernism’s container-thinking, the pre-modern (and now also the late-modern) way of thinking about artworks tends towards there being but *one continuum* of artworks — works are bound to a telos or purpose of some sort, although it may be indeterminate; they are morally and politically enmeshed, both in their creation, what they express and in their reception; the artist’s biography and his or her claimed intentions are relevant for understanding, interpreting and valuing the work — these are just some of the ways one continuum-thinking comes to expression.

An ongoing strife persists between these two ways of thinking — the *container* and the *one continuum* — over the question of which judgments are valid for the artwork, with regard to its proper explanation, interpretation and value. Insofar as the container metaphor is maintained at all, the artwork is deemed autonomous. Now there are multitudes of ways of construing ‘the autonomous artwork’,<sup>2</sup> and it is not the task of this paper to go into them all, but suffice it to say that, at one end of the spectrum of today’s artworld, advocates of Modernism could make the following general statement:

The autonomous artwork’ remains an important expression for the artworld; it denotes something independent of determinate knowledge, if not moral constraints, and it is not directly instrumental (bound to a final telos). ‘The autonomous artwork’ is crucial for ensuring the artist’s freedom of expression and art’s contribution within advanced capitalist societies.

At the other end of the spectrum, one who has discarded the container metaphor, could reply:

The autonomous artwork’, in most of its interpretations, is wishful thinking. If anything about the artwork were considered autonomous today, it would be to the detriment of cultural life generally. Artworks are directly instrumental and inter-relational with epistemological and moral concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> This way of thinking about metaphors is famously presented by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980): *Metaphors We Live By*.

<sup>2</sup> The many understandings of ‘the autonomous artwork’ is the subject of my hovefag thesis: *Towards a Justifiable Conception of ‘the Autonomous Artwork’ in Today’s Artworld*, Bergen: University of Bergen, 2005.

One example of these competing voices is Lucy Lippard and Hilton Kramer: In a catalogue text for the exhibition entitled *Art & Ideology*, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, (1990) Lippard wrote the following: "All art is ideological and all art is used politically by the right or the left."<sup>3</sup> To this Hilton Kramer replied: "[...] this movement toward the politicization of art in this country is an attempt to turn back the cultural political clock to the Stalinist social consciousness of the 1930's."<sup>4</sup>

The incident above indicates something about the New York artworld, but the same conflict exists in Norway: Spring 2005, the director of Bergen Art Museum and the curators of the National Art Museum in Oslo and Trondheim took part in a conference which addressed the following question: *How should museums funded by tax-payers hang their permanent (basis) exhibitions?* At one extreme, Oslo curator Vibeke Pettersen claimed that the task of the National Museum of Oslo was "to discipline people, teach them how to behave."<sup>5</sup> Pettersen went on to argue that Modernistic exhibitions—those mounted according to taste, chronological historical epochs, and formal concerns—ignore the fact that museums wield power by educating and grooming citizens. Artworks should therefore be hung thematically, and with focus on the museum's own awareness that it has the power to set up hierarchies for valuing works. Consequently, in one gallery-room of Oslo National Art Museum, the theme *the vulnerable human being* is written in large letters on the wall, and a contemporary photographic portrait of an AIDS sufferer is juxtaposed with Eiliff Peterssen's oil painting *Christian II Signs Torben Oxes' Death Sentence* (1876). The curator's intention is to teach citizens that the AIDS sufferer is also "condemned to death"; we are supposed to be challenged to inquire of ourselves: Where does my responsibility for AIDS sufferers lie? Is it me who has condemned them? Am I my brother's keeper? By contrast, Audun Ekkof, The Bergen Art Museum director, took the container-metaphor-based autonomist position. He claimed that the museum's mandate is to provide an opportunity for the visitor's insightful reflections, feelings and experiences in their meeting with artworks in the collection: "It is not the art museum's task to discipline citizens, but to give them the possibility of themselves surveying the artworks. Acculturation for sake of creating citizens who can be their own authority, as Kant would have said."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the artworks should be mounted according to formal similarities, and with sensitivity to aesthetic taste.

To try to deal with the seemingly intractable problems between the autonomist and instrumentalist positions, (the container vs. the one-continuum), such as they come to light in these two practical example, some aesthetic philosophers have tried to view the artwork as being like a *two-sided coin*. Using the coin metaphor, they do not try to surmount the conflict about what is internal or external to the proper domain of the artwork's judgment, but they accept and maintain the paradox; they see it as a tension inherent in the artwork. Theodore Adorno and Martin Heidegger, albeit quite different in their understandings, have both thought of the artwork as having some sort of *double character*, which, I argue, is based on the coin metaphor. Yet this new metaphor, while being able to account for the strife between the autonomist and instrumentalist positions, brings with it some new problems.

## ADORNO'S DOUBLE CHARACTER: RADICAL POLARITY

For Adorno, the one hand, the artwork is *powerless* to be effective in society. On the other hand, the work is a *social fact*, a product of the social labour of spirit.<sup>7</sup> The artwork communicates by taking up a determinate attitude to what it seals itself off from. Adorno describes it as "a windowless monad":<sup>8</sup> from its internal dynamism, it seems as though it should be effectual, but nothing can go out or come into it. 'Windowless' could be the antithesis of Alberti's 'window on the world'; it is a product of society that has discarded the *illusion* of being-for-society.<sup>9</sup> Adorno's double character maintains the dilemma: On the one hand, the artwork risks becoming "committed", i.e., becoming fully instrumental; on the other hand, it risks lapsing into *l'art pour l'art*. And Adorno provides no solution: There is an unresolved dialectical tension in an artwork that responds to socio-historical conditions.

What is the problem with this way of thinking the double character? First, in spite of all the insights of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, it may be argued that Adorno's explication of the artwork's double character undermines itself through its radical polarity: the artwork is described as both independent and dependent on society; it is internally consistent as well as inconsistent; it both has and lacks its own identity; it follows its own laws but the laws are found in the surrounding society; the work is a windowless monad but it expresses the social totality; its social function is to have no function, but autonomous artworks function as market commodities and fetishes.<sup>10</sup> When Adorno claims something, he generally renounces the claim a bit later, and this leads some of his reader to feel that the double character cancels itself out. It undermines itself through its radical polarity.

## HEIDEGGER'S DOUBLE CHARACTER: WORLD AND EARTH STRIVING

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.uic.edu/classes/ad/ad382/sites/AEA/AEA\\_05/AEA\\_05a.html](http://www.uic.edu/classes/ad/ad382/sites/AEA/AEA_05/AEA_05a.html)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.uic.edu/classes/ad/ad382/sites/AEA/AEA\\_05/AEA\\_05a.html](http://www.uic.edu/classes/ad/ad382/sites/AEA/AEA_05/AEA_05a.html)

<sup>5</sup> This is quoted from my personal transcript of her lecture.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from "Kronikk", Bergen Tidende, 8 April, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno, 1997, p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 178. Adorno borrows this from Benjamin, who borrowed it from Leibnitz. Whether or not Adorno thought of the 'windowless monad as the antithesis of Alberti, I do not know, but it is an interesting contrast.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., pp. 236-238.

<sup>10</sup> Adorno, 1997, pp. 236-241. (The Mediation of Art and Society.)

‘The double character of artwork’ is not an expression Heidegger uses, but it can be described in his essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art”.<sup>11</sup> But Heidegger warns us: He wants to avoid describing the artwork in terms of the double character of form/content: *an object or thing with a form on the one hand, and an allegorical, symbolic content on the other*. The artwork, he says, is not a material thing or object, albeit the museum’s cleaning woman may think so.<sup>12</sup> “This incontestable fact [that there is a form and a content] proves neither that the distinction of matter and form is adequately founded, nor that it belongs originally to the domain of the artwork [...] The prevailing thing-concepts obstruct the workly character of the work”.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the subjectivized and aestheticizing experience of the work’s formal character (in other words, the Modern approach to artworks that is based on the container metaphor) is the element in which art dies,<sup>14</sup> “and we know nothing at all of what we really and solely seek: the workly character of the work of art.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, before delving into how he conceives of the artwork as having two characters, a few words must be said about its ‘workly character’.

#### *The workly character of the artwork*

By ‘workly character’, is Heidegger trying to point to what the artwork does—it’s labour? Does the artwork grab its lunch pail and slaunch off to work like the rest of us every morning? If we turn to *Sein und Zeit* §15, ‘work’ refers to the Greek term *pragmata*. This would indicate that Heidegger thinks of the artwork as an action (like a verb rather than a noun) that is more than self-reflection; as *pragmata*,<sup>16</sup> it is always already ensconced in meaningful contexts of use. Therefore, what the receiver broaches *first* is a meaningful, useful artwork, and only at a later stage can the receiver countenance its thing-ness and materiality. Hence in stark contrast to thinkers such as Walter Pater and others of an aestheticist (container) persuasion, the work’s formal qualities and physical materiality are not primary, but must be thought *out from* the work’s *workly being*, not the other way around. But what is this workly being of the artwork?

For Heidegger, the artwork is a *location* where a meaningful event takes place—*Aletheia*—the unconcealedness of beings, what is given to view<sup>17</sup>: “The work being of the [art]work is the *setting up of the world* and a *setting forth the earth*.”<sup>18</sup> Heidegger’s idiosyncratic language is too strange to understand without further ado: By being confronted with an artwork, say the van Gogh shoe painting, he claims that the being of the equipment—shoes—is made available. The artwork *gives us* the shoe’s truth—the equipment approaches us just as it is. This is, for Heidegger, the reason why the artwork can be conceived of as a putting-into-work-the-truth-of-being, and not as a representation of an already given telos or a production of the judgment of beauty, purely aesthetic and formal for a judgment of taste. This putting-to-work-of-truth happens only under the condition of the artwork participating in the *world*, which Heidegger denies lies in the Modern understanding of the work’s autonomy, and in all the institutions that sustain that notion. If either the artwork is placed in a museum or treated as an object for historical research, it is robbed of its *essential room—a world*. In contrast to great art of the pre-modern era, modern autonomous artworks are placeless. In other words, they are torn from any specific context and therefore cannot set up a world. Of course there are problems with this, since van Gogh’s shoe painting is indeed modern, but anyway, in order to show the artwork’s “worlding” function, and in contrast to the modern artwork’s “placelessness”, Heidegger presents the Greek temple-artwork as setting up *a world* upon *an earth*.<sup>19</sup> It seems to me that this conceptual pair can be thought of as an alternative way of construing the double character of art. But what precisely is *a world* and how does the artwork set it up? How is it different from earth? Is the world sort of like Adorno’s *fait social*-work, and earth sort of like his windowless monad? Does world refer to the work’s content, and earth to its formal characteristics?

#### *A double character for the artwork: world and earth striving*

To “open up a world” means that the artwork “opens a space” for Da-sein<sup>20</sup> to meaningfully live and act. The world is the entire structure of meaningful relations that constitute our experience as Da-sein, that range of possibilities—that “horizon

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, 1964.

<sup>12</sup> Op cit., p. 652. It may be argued that Heidegger is tendentious in this remark.

<sup>13</sup> Op cit., p. 661.

<sup>14</sup> Op cit., p. 701. He says this in the epilogue.

<sup>15</sup> Op cit., p. 665.

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, 1996, p. 64. I have strategically chosen to rely upon *Sein und Zeit* in order to clarify a concept that is rather obscure in *Origin*. Meanwhile, I grant that this is problematic in light of Heidegger’s thought having changed focus after he wrote *Sein und Zeit*. *Origin* was written after *Sein und Zeit*, during a phase where he was on the way towards what has been called his ‘late thinking’. This change of focus entails, briefly, that he became more concerned with *being* rather than *beings* or *Da-sein*. The change is also perhaps implied in *Origin*, inasmuch as Heidegger is most concerned with the artwork and not, to the same degree, the artist or the receiver. (Meanwhile, this is highly disputable, since the work his artwork is—the event of *Aletheia*—could hardly self-subsist unless the receiver-preserver was not already deeply involved.) Relying on *Sein und Zeit* to clarify concepts in *Origin* is also problematic in that there is no guarantee of a direct gradual progression of change between the early and the late Heidegger.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, 1964, p. 677.

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger, 1964, p. 674, 676. My italics.

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, 1996, §14-18. Catholics would find it is easy to think of their local parish church, all the pilgrim churches and St. Peter’s Basilica and square, in the way Heidegger describes the world set up through the Greek temple.

<sup>20</sup> Dasein is Heidegger’s term for human being. In German, Da (here, or also there) and Sein (being, to be), “there-being” it is deployed to indicate the kind of existence self-conscious human beings uniquely possess. Stated simply, Dasein is concerned, it cares about being in the world. Self and world need each other, for they function together, inter-dependently. Dasein’s being is actively engaged with its own unique world.

of disclosure”—within which Da-sein lives as a purposeful human being, rather than simply as an animal or inanimate object. It is the nexus between existence’s different dimensions—political, religious and existential. Simultaneously as the artwork sets up a world, it also *sets itself back in the earth*, the side of the artwork that likes to hide. The world is *an openness* that rests on the stable, enduring all-sheltering earth. More will be said to try to explicate earth and world, but suffice it to say, at this point, that through the pragmata-labour the artwork does, we experience the creative “strife” of world and earth, and investigating this strife is central to Heidegger’s analysis of the artwork’s *work*.

In the artwork, the earth and world strive or battle with each other. What immediately springs to mind is a sort of Hegelian dialectic, neither side favoured. This striving is not bad, for earth and world need each other, as two partners in battle need each other to battle at all, and the task of the artwork is to provide a location for battle: The earth, of its essential nature, seeks to hide itself, and the world to bring into the open, to set forth what *is*, namely truth—*Aletheia*, the unconcealedness of beings, what is given to view.<sup>21</sup> *Aletheia*, which can be interpreted as *not forgetful*, emphasizes that the Open and Available must always be grasped from out of the dark, hermetic earth. Heidegger refers back to a comment made by Albrecht Dürer, which Heidegger interprets as holding deep significance: “art lies hidden within nature, he who can wrest it from her, has it”.<sup>22</sup> To “wrest”, Heidegger surmises, means to draw out from nature; a *rift* in nature opens up and art is drawn out. Hence, when Heidegger claims that the artwork sets to work *Aletheia*, this is not ‘truth’ understood as coherence, pragmatic success or correspondence with some external telos; Heidegger’s art-truth is disclosure, non-propositional; the artwork gives to things their look. It is an entwining of doing and making (*praxis* and *poiesis*); material comes into the “Open” of the work’s world.<sup>23</sup> Heidegger talks about the temple revealing the nature (physis) around it. Perhaps he means that if we had not been confronted with the temple juxtaposed with nature, we would not have noticed nature; if the columns were not there, we would not notice the stone. This is an instigation of a knowing outside theoretical knowing. The world *rests* on the earth, and the earth (the stone of the column) *juts through* the world. Crudely put, the already meaningful temple (world) rests on stone (earth), and its materiality juts through, or makes itself noticeable, because when we look at the temple, we notice the earth in the materials.

But what about the Modern artwork? In stark contrast to containerly thinking, the van Gogh painting is not an object of use that resides “outside the container”, like temples or hammers. Yet Heidegger presents it as more useful than just for the preserver’s<sup>24</sup> self-reflection; Dasein’s *contact* with the work, the experience of it being *here*, binds Dasein and the work together in the creation of history, and this expands culture. At this point, it is also worth pausing to consider the ready-made artwork, even though Heidegger himself did not reckon it in his essay: The ready-made could possibly be the most exemplary work from a Heideggerian perspective, since it opens up a field around the every-day object and makes it circumspect. To open up a world and introduce time and history, to allow something to emerge “into the unconcealedness [truth] of its being”,<sup>25</sup> to allow an understanding of “what shoes are in truth”—this is a considerable list of tasks for a modern artwork to achieve, and one might conclude that Heidegger’s conception of the artwork renders it highly instrumental, in line with the ‘one continuum’ way of thinking. So how does Heidegger’s artwork express the autonomous aspects of the double-charactered artwork? There are at least four ways: The artwork is *self-subsistent*, *the earth withdraws and is self-occluding*, *the world of the artwork withdraws when it is treated as an object of study*, and *the work remains unknowable*.

#### *The work subsists in itself*

Although Heidegger clearly admits that the artwork is preconditioned upon a creator<sup>26</sup> and a receiver (a preserver), and thus is not independent from them, he explains that, in the unity of earth/world, the artwork exudes an “uninterrupted plain thrust”, which constitutes “[...] the steadfastness of the work’s self-subsistence”.<sup>27</sup> The distinction between what the artist can take credit for and the work’s self-genesis remains unclear, “this thrust, this “that it is” of createdness, emerges into view most purely from the work”.<sup>28</sup> Heidegger ponders the work’s self-subsistence, its “closed, unitary repose of self-support”.<sup>29</sup> The work seems to “cut all ties to human beings, the more simply does the thrust come into the Open [...]”<sup>30</sup> Compared with the artwork, the artist is inconsequential, “[...] almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge”.<sup>31</sup> Although the creative act is performed by the artist, the nature of the work is not determined by the artist, but by the nature of the work itself.<sup>32</sup> It is not *N. N. fecit* (so and so has made this), but *factus est* (it is made).<sup>33</sup> Such

<sup>21</sup> Op cit., p. 677.

<sup>22</sup> Op cit., p. 693.

<sup>23</sup> Op cit., p. 674.

<sup>24</sup> “Preserver” is Heidegger’s term for the receiver or the judge.

<sup>25</sup> In Heidegger’s description of the peasant shoes, he says the shoes belong to the earth, not the world, but the world of the peasant woman protects the shoes. This distinction plays a central role in Heidegger’s discussion of art.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Preconditioned’ does not mean that the creator is the origin, for, as Heidegger says in his introductory paragraph, “art is the origin of both artist and work”. p. 650.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, 1964, p. 689. My italics.

<sup>28</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Op cit., p. 675.

<sup>30</sup> Op cit., p. 690.

<sup>31</sup> Op cit., p. 669.

<sup>32</sup> Op cit., p. 685.

<sup>33</sup> Op cit., p. 689.

assertions as these underscore the claim in the second paragraph of his essay, that “art is the origin of both artist and work”.<sup>34</sup>

*The earth withdraws, occludes itself*

The artwork is autonomous in the sense of *unknowable, withdrawn, undisclosed or severely limited knowledge*. How so? Heidegger uses the term *earth* to indicate what is already there, the absolute ground from which worlds are constructed. Earth is the nature that is in plain view (rocks, dirt<sup>35</sup>). Since the artwork, of its essential nature, is self-occluding, this means it will seek always to remain on the side of the earth. “The earth is the “spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing.”<sup>36</sup> Earth, bearing and jutting, strives to keep itself closed.<sup>37</sup> Earthiness resists administration; we are not “at home” with it on account of its preservation of otherness. We never can know it, except in a very minor way, not even through technical mastery. When we try to produce knowledge about the earth, say by cutting a rock open, it still “does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been disclosed.” And when we weigh it, “the precise determination of the stone remains a number, but the weight’s burden has escaped us.”<sup>38</sup> Focusing on the artwork then, this passage could be interpreted to mean that when we focus on formal, material aspects (e.g., colour harmonies, the geometrical division of the pictorial field) the sale-price, or the work’s historical context, the workly character of the artwork will have eschewed us. Although the artwork fixes in its form that which springs from the earth, the receiver and artist’s experience of its earthy character is one of mere exposure, of apprehension without comprehension.

Yet the work’s autonomy is described in terms of another kind of concealing or refusal; the “clearing” or “lighted area” the artwork sets up simultaneously conceals as it reveals:

But concealment, though of another sort...at the same time also occurs within what is lighted. One being places itself in front of another being, the one helps to hide the other, the former obscures the latter, a few obstruct many, one denies all. Here concealment is not simply refusal. Rather, a being appears, but it presents itself as other than it is. This concealment is dissembling.<sup>39</sup>

‘To dissemble’ means to hide under a false appearance. To try to explain this, recall that, as well as revealing what is around us, light can be blinding. If I hold a mirror in my lap, it will reflect light into my face from below, and will counteract other directional light sources that reveal my wrinkles. An easy face-lift, a false appearance. We start to get an idea of the tremendous extent to which we do not notice what is there in front of us all the time but still out of sight.

At this point it is possible to get the impression that, after all, *earth* is just another name for material: Has Heidegger, despite his resolve, fallen into a double character of *raw material and formal characteristics/meaningful content* after all? If we try to come to this conclusion, Heidegger pulls us back: “What this word [*earth*] says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere...”<sup>40</sup> This may be an aporia; it is hard to see how earth can be anything but a mass of matter, but maybe it is just Heidegger’s way of trying to emphasize that the meaningful artwork is what *Da-sein* encounters *first*. For he says, “After the world is set up, the earth emerges as native ground.”<sup>41</sup> “[...] the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, the firmness and pliancy of wood, metal, colour, and colour harmony.”<sup>42</sup> The meaningful artwork is there first, and because it is, materiality and thingliness also are there.

*The world is unknowable*

There is yet another conclusion to which Heidegger will not let his readers jump: to think that he has set up a duality between *earth as autonomous/world as instrumental and heteronymous*. This conclusion is impossible because the work is historical and the world a work sets up will also be unknowable and withdrawn: About the Bamberg cathedral and the sculptures in the Munich Glyptothek, Heidegger says, “[...] the world of the work that stands there has perished.”<sup>43</sup> World withdrawal and

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<sup>34</sup> Op cit., p. 650.

<sup>35</sup> It may very well be that this is too vulgarly put, since Heidegger says “What this word [*earth*] says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere...” But just before this sentence (in the English translation), he says “It clears and illuminates, also, that on which an in which man bases his dwelling.” Heidegger is, I feel, quite ambiguous on this point (Heidegger, 1964, p. 671). It is also worth noting that in *Sein und Zeit* 15, Heidegger speaks of “nature” in such a way that it seems to be synonymous with earth in *Origin*, for he says, “As the ‘surrounding world’ is discovered, ‘nature’ thus discovered is encountered along with it [...] But in this kind of discovery of nature, nature as what ‘stirs and strives,’ what overcomes us, entrances us as landscape, remains hidden. The botanist’s plants are not the flowers of the hedgerow, the river’s ‘source’ ascertained by the geographer is not the ‘source in the ground’.” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 66) From this, it seems that earth includes all of nature, both what can be empirically known and what can be ascertained indirectly. And it can include the metaphysical.

<sup>36</sup> Op cit., p. 676.

<sup>37</sup> Op cit., p. 687.

<sup>38</sup> Op cit., p. 674.

<sup>39</sup> Op cit., p. 680.

<sup>40</sup> Op cit., p. 671.

<sup>41</sup> Op cit., p. 671.

<sup>42</sup> Op cit., p. 674.

<sup>43</sup> Op cit., p. 669.

world-decay are permanent. We cannot recall the past since it is overtaken by tradition and conservation. Problematically then, one wonders why the world of the peasant woman who walks the earth<sup>44</sup> is available to us, since the painting is preserved in a museum — an apparently inauthentic place. Curiously therefore, while the work is meaningful and sets up a world, that world is historical, fragile and never an object that “stands before us and can be seen. It is the ever-non-objective to which we are subject as long as we live”.<sup>45</sup> Da-sein and the artwork’s world are bound together, but the world is not an object for circumspection. Thus Heidegger seems to assert that the workly character of the artwork cannot be an object of knowledge. If we treat the artwork’s world as an object of study, it will escape our attempt at conceptually determining it. Therefore, on the one hand, the workly character of the artwork is available to the preserver in the act of preserving, in the act of taking part in the event of truth, but on the other hand, as soon as the preserver tries to analyse the workly character, treat it as an object of study, it skirts away.

*Some problems with Heidegger’s double character earth/world*

At first glance, the strife between earth and world may appear to be a double character where earth is autonomous and world is instrumental, but no: both earth and world have instrumental aspects, and this may dissolve the problem of radical polarity found in Adorno’s conception. Meanwhile, both earth and world are also described in relation to some of the traditional hallmarks of autonomy: the work is self-subsistent; the artist is like unto a mere conduit for the work’s self-creation. The earth’s hiding lends association to some descriptions of the artwork as unknowable, and the world—as soon as we treat it as an object of study, skirts away. Heidegger’s explanation of how the artwork conceals simultaneously as it brings into the open, is an innovation in the history of describing the artwork’s autonomy. Or is it a recurrence of Plato’s scepticism about artworks in *Republic X*? If what is brought to light nevertheless conceals itself, then is this partial appearance an instance of what is false, given that it is not in the Open? But if it is partial, and thus false, appearance, how can Heidegger assert that it is Truth—*Aletheia*? This aporetic appearance now is a way in which the artwork is understood as autonomous—its full unconcealment is un-available, and its world remains unaccounted for. It seems that, for Heidegger, the conceptual counterpart to truth is *to be concealed*, not *falsity*.

Another problems with the earth/world double character is that Heidegger sets his readers up to expect a clear delineation of the characteristics of earth and world, and their strife. But are they clearly distinguishable from each other? Holding in mind his claim that “Nowhere in the [art]work is there any trace of a work-material”,<sup>46</sup> lets start with *world*: The world is a constructed, limiting domain, a giving of form. This certainly sounds like it would have to have some sort of work-material about it because, if it is, as he claims, a *space* where things have a place (“The world is the governing breadth and path of all essential destiny.”<sup>47</sup>), and if the world is the decisions made by people, is historical, and gives to things their look, this seems to imply that material belongs to the side of the world, because as soon as you have some form, material is necessarily present. Moreover, if, as Heidegger claims, the world-side of the artwork is non-propositional disclosure, this could support the view that form and matter both belong on the side of the world. Furthermore, where does such a claim leave propositional disclosure? That, we must assume, resides in a domain outside of both earth and world. But what about the *earth*? Earth is the nature that is in plain view, he claims: “The Greeks called this emerging and rising in itself and in all things *phusis*. It clears and illuminates that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the *earth*.”<sup>48</sup> But what is this event? Rocks and dirt? Light? It might be, inasmuch as Heidegger uses rocks and dirt as examples. But since he describes the earth as unknowable, self-occluding, undisclosed, resisting administration, it really seems to be a term pointing to stuff in the universe about which we can only indirectly know, say some natural phenomena physicists study. On the other hand it is hard to confirm this assumption, since Heidegger claims it is unknowable, undisclosed. Finally, unknowable is also the artwork’s world; as soon as we try to study it, it eschews us. Hence, if earth and world cannot be disclosed, how does Heidegger know to tell us of them? He seems a bit like Moses sitting atop Mt. Sinai, in a cloud. The artwork, in its two characters, descends into the cloud and proclaims itself to him.<sup>49</sup>

As I see it, the problem is as follows: How can you have a meaningful artwork there first? And then have the *phusis/earth* come into the Open for the very first time after you have already found it meaningful? We would be finding the artwork’s meaning before we did any formal analysis of it. But is not some formal analysis usually quite critical in order to delimit the work? This also seems to conflict with our everyday experience of the world. It is possible to agree with Heidegger, that earth is a mystery; it can simultaneously be in plain view and occluded (the mirror example). The columns of a Greek temple could set off the blue sky such that it appears like a colour-field painting ala Yves Kline. This is the case with James Turrell’s sky sculptures.<sup>50</sup> But could not we just lie on the grass, look up at the sky and have it come into the Open that way? It seems imprudent to say that artworks have to be there before earth can be encountered. Because

<sup>44</sup> Heidegger imagines a peasant woman has worn the shoes he sees in the van Gogh painting.

<sup>45</sup> Op cit., p. 673.

<sup>46</sup> Op cit., p. 675.

<sup>47</sup> Op. cit., p. 676.

<sup>48</sup> Op. cit., p. 671.

<sup>49</sup> “And Moses went up into the mount, and a cloud covered the mount.” (Exodus 24: 15) “And the Lord descended into the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord.” (Exodus 34: 5)

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.henryart.org/skyspace.htm> “The isolation and intensification in the spaces Turrell has planned for the Roden Crater Project are pure acts of art, and they fundamentally change our perception of sky color. They collapse the familiar clichés so often used to describe beautiful twilights. As Turrell puts it, the light has its own ineffable quality: “What takes place while looking at the light in a Skyspace is akin to wordless thought. But this thought is not at all unthinking or without intelligence. It’s just that it has a different return than words.” It is a place where artificial spaces merge with nature and art melds with the affective spaces of individual consciousness.

Heidegger has already decided beforehand that he is not interested in object-knowledge (substance-ontology), this creates a problem in distinguishing the earth and the world as two distinct sides of the same artwork, two sides doing battle. It sets up an expectation that understands *earth* as, at least in part, material and *world* as meaningful content. And this can be argued from his statement that “The work gives to things their look and to men their outlook.” Earth would be the stuff we look at, and world would be the way we look at it — our ‘outlook’. But this is not what Heidegger himself claims to mean. Heidegger seems like he is trying very hard to be clear about what he means by earth and the world, but since he claims to have rejected *material plus form* / *meaningful content through concepts*, he ends up saying things that lead the reader to conclude that this has to be the distinction he is making after all. As such, earth/world end up being rather incoherent, at least mystical. If one is going to have an earth and world strive with each other, it seems like one should be able to say more or less coherently what belongs to each of the striving sides.

## DERRIDA’S FRAME-METAPHOR AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE DOUBLE CHARACTER

In his book, *The Truth in Painting*, in the essay entitled “Parergon”, Jacques Derrida displaces the *coin metaphor* with the *frame metaphor*. I would like to argue that, in doing so, he succeeds in surmounting the autonomous-instrumental artwork’s most pressing problems: namely, with the incomprehensible double character; the need, as presumed by many modernists, for ‘the ontological priority of aesthetic features’; and the need presumed by Heidegger, for having the meaningful world there first, before the material or earth. The frame metaphor achieves this by simply dismissing the need to distinguish two characters. It instantiates the *artwork’s undecidability*: Sometimes it seems to have a double character, but as soon as the judge makes this decision, the floodgates of doubt open. What was the impetus for Derrida to use the frame metaphor, and how exactly does it affect the way he understands the nature of the artwork?

‘Parergon’, it may be recalled, was a term used by Kant to refer to *the supplement*, décor or frame that limits and protects the artwork; whatever comes in addition to the ergon, the pure artwork itself.<sup>51</sup> A good example of the Kantian understanding of the frame as being *not* part of the *work proper*, is where museum conservation departments shift out frames in accordance with the fashion of the era. Conversely, the frame understood as *part of the work proper* leads museum conservation departments to recover original or period-frames, or to create reproductions of such.

Derrida however, takes a simple painting of *Lucretia* by Cranach.<sup>52</sup> In the course of scrutinizing it, he is struck: From one vantage point Lucretia’s flimsy see-through veil is not essential because it provides no coverage, nor is the frame or decor around the central motif essential to the work. It is just something that comes in addition to the centre of interest. But if these things are unnecessary, then why are they there at all? The *parergon* (frame, décor) must be useful for something. And if useful—perhaps the veil accentuates her nudity, or the passé-partout or frame adds depth to the picture, or maybe it has a colour that accentuates the main focus of the motif—then another vantage point emerges: The parergon would not really be optional anymore, but would become internal to the work of art.

Hence the borders of the ergon unravel. The judge is unable to settle on what belongs to the bona fide artwork itself, she cannot locate an outer perimeter, but follows some constantly mutable edge like the movement of a wave. As a shape that dissolves itself, the parergon is sublime; it is the thing that frames, finishes, completes and perfects an artwork. Yet in perfecting, it melts with the work and then melts with the external context, the hermeneutic circle, or contexts around the work. Thus the distinction between the object and of the field of aesthetic judgement is blurred:

But this frame is problematical. I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work. And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper, and that Kant calls *parergon*, for example the frame. Where does the frame take place? Does it take place? Where does it begin? Where does it end [...]?<sup>53</sup>

As such, *all* judgments we could make about an artwork could be counted as relevant. *Undecidability* appears in all the relations, be they directly present to view or not. Problematizing what is “inside the frame” vs. “what lies outside of it” dissolves the finality of form, not just of the artwork as an empirical study-object for art history, but also for the social sciences. Yet applying the picture frame metaphor has two other important consequences: First, the Kantian judgement of beauty is rendered impossible to make; only a sublime sort of judgement remains.<sup>54</sup> And, as was the case for Kant’s sublime judgment, so also with Derrida’s — the sublime is in us. Second, whatever judgement one makes, it could always have been otherwise, and it is never settled once and for all. This second consequence may be explicated more clearly in *Limited Inc.*, where Derrida states that every judgement, in order to be a judgement at all, has to be unprogrammable; it has to pass through the “experience and experiment of the undecidable”,<sup>55</sup> which a struggle where more than one possibility remains open. If it were a matter of a foregone conclusion, there would be no judgement, and the judge would not be exercising their ethical duty.

<sup>51</sup> C. J. §14. A contemporary instantiation of the Kantian understanding of the frame as being *not* part of the *work proper* is where museum conservation departments shift out frames in accordance with the fashion of the era. Conversely, the frame understood as part of the work proper leads museum conservation departments to recover original or period-frames, or to create reproductions of such.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, p. 58-72.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, p. 59.

<sup>54</sup> C. J. §25, 26.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, p. 116. (Quoted from Lucy, 2004, p. 149.)

Thus it seems to me that if one exchanges the two-sided coin with the frame metaphor, some of the problems with Adorno and Heidegger's conceptions of the artwork's double character dissolve: The double character of art remains, and it is still inegmatic, but at least we are not given the hope of distinctly distinguishing the two characters from each other. Nor must we struggle with the question of which character should be given priority, or which character was there first. This is a considerable achievement: Throughout the history of Modernism, theorists of an aestheticist persuasion been arguing that, because of the ontological priority of aesthetic features, the artwork must remain outside the realm of moral judgments. Meanwhile, neither can instrumentalists feel thoroughly vindicated in their views, for when examining the artwork in light of the picture-frame metaphor, one cannot resolve, in a final sense, any of the questions concerning the explanation, understanding, interpretation or value of the artwork. Whatever we decide, we decide knowing full well that we could have chosen otherwise.

That said, the frame metaphor does not exclude thinking in terms of *two sides of the same coin*; after all, Derrida's "double reading" method can be said to preserve it.<sup>56</sup> The undecidable frame takes account of Derrida's insight that we cannot make a distinction between domains for representation on the one hand, and for real things on the other. Thinking in terms of the frame, there is no inference that outside the artwork, a context can be found where things *just are*, that these things no longer refer in their turn to other things, or that such is irrelevant to the proper understanding, interpretation or evaluation of the artwork.

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<sup>56</sup> Space does not allow a discussion of Derrida's "double reading". Suffice it to say that in the first reading, the *text* (all artworks are text) is found meaningful and referential, returnable to a referent. In the second reading, we find the ways in which it is impossible for the text to mean, refer or be returnable to a referent.