

Photography As Art in Heidegger's Philosophy

Chris Greenwald
Carleton College

Heidegger claims that truth is a revealing that is concomitant with concealing, and thus, the nature of truth is "untruth." In art, and specifically in painting, truth in its full essence is "won" through the simultaneous presentation to the observer of a revealing and a concealing. For Heidegger, this simultaneous revealing and concealing occurs when the "world" of a painting is revealed through a self-concealing medium. Photography is another form of revealing through a self-concealing medium, and thus it meets Heidegger's standards as a work of art.¹ In addition, photography seems to meet more effectively than painting Heidegger's characterization of a work of art, and one can argue on this basis that photography has rendered painting archaic and outdated as means for attaining truth in the Heideggerian sense. Contrary to this argument, Michael Zimmerman claims that Heidegger condemns photography as a false and anthropocentric means of representation. Heidegger's condemnation, however, fails to conceive the nature of photography in light of Heidegger's own philosophy of technology, and when photography is examined in such a light, this condemnation of photography appears misleading.

Truth and Art

Truth in Heidegger's philosophy is unconcealedness, and Heidegger likens truth to a kind of lighting by which beings are revealed. With each being that is revealed, however, another being is concealed. As Heidegger states, "Concealment... occurs within what it lighted. One being places itself in front of another being, the one helps to hide another, the former obscures the latter" (OWA, p. 175). Because truth is revealing, and because all revealing involves a concealing, Heidegger claims that "[truth] in its essence, is un-truth" (OWA, p. 176). Heidegger further illustrates the essence of truth as a "primal strife" in which beings reveal and conceal

¹ It should be noted that here and throughout the paper, I will be using the term "photography" to mean "representational photography." I realize that with advancements in the technology of film development, one can create very abstract photos that bear very little semblance to reality.

themselves. It is through the representation of this “primal strife” that truth can “happen” or be “won,” and in his essay entitled “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger demonstrates how such a representation is possible in art.

In setting out his argument in the essay, Heidegger first considers art’s “thingly” nature. He asserts that because there is no one human interpretation of the nature of things that is applicable to art, the “thingly” character of an artwork should be viewed as indeterminate. In order to understand the “thingly” nature of a work of art, Heidegger believes that all traditional interpretations of the nature of things should be held in abeyance in favor of an investigation that examines the “Being of beings.” Such an investigation should examine art merely as it presents itself and focus on what Heidegger calls “[art] work’s workly nature” (OWA, p. 166). Only through such an investigation can one discover the essence of art, and when this essence is understood, one may then return to the question of the undetermined, “thingly” nature of art. The investigation of the essence of art must therefore presuppose that the nature of things is indeterminate.

After making this presupposition, Heidegger begins explaining the way that art “works” by introducing the concepts of world and earth. World corresponds to revealing, and a world is the social and historical realm of reality that is revealed by a work of art. The world of an art work creates in the mind of the observer a broad range of possible decisions and scenarios in what Heidegger calls “the destiny of a historical people” (OWA, p. 172). Though world is non-objective, it defines the very being in which we conceive the objects of a work of art to exist.

Earth, on the other hand, corresponds to concealing and is what Heidegger calls “that which rises up as self-closing” (OWA, p. 177). Though Heidegger does not explicitly link the indeterminate concept of “thingliness” with the idea of a self-concealing earth, Sandra Lee Bartky argues that Heidegger’s confusing language hides a subtle yet crucial link between the two concepts. Bartky claims that just as the nature of a thing is indeterminate, the earth is self-concealing and ambiguous. The nature of earth, like that of all things, can not be fully defined either as a scientifically analyzable substance or as a useful piece of equipment (Bartky, p. 260). As Heidegger states, earth is neither “a mass of matter deposited somewhere [nor] the merely astronomical idea of planet” (OWA, p. 167). Bartky believes that Heidegger is indirectly yet primarily concerned with the thingly aspect of a

work of art when he refers to earth in "The Origin of the Work of Art." In addition, as Bartky notes, the concept of earth both encompasses and supersedes the concept of thingliness. Thingliness, whose nature is indeterminate or concealed, is merely a part of "earth," which is ultimately the larger concept of a "sheltering agent" or the self-concealing of Being in general (OWA, p. 169). It does seem that Bartky is correct in thinking that Heidegger conceives of a subtle yet crucial link between the concepts of thingliness and earth simply because when one keeps this link in mind, Heidegger's argument about the nature of art is much easier to understand.

For Heidegger, art is the simultaneous representation of the two diametrically opposed forces of world and earth. World is presented in any true work of art, and he states that "[to] be a work of art is to set up a world" (OWA, p. 178). The world, however, can only be set up for the observer through some kind of medium or thing such as the pigments and colors of a painting or the stone of a statue. When a thing is "examined" or analyzed on its own, it is, like all other "things," undetermined and self-concealing. Heidegger believes that a thing reveals its true nature only when all preconceptions of thingliness are dropped and one experiences the thing by "letting it Be." Such a "letting Be" is accomplished in art simply because the medium or "thingliness" of the art work is not analyzed by the observer. To use Heidegger's example of the Greek temple, the rock which serves as the material or "thingliness" of the temple, when analyzed on its own is seen as equipment which can be used. Viewed in this manner, the rock, as Heidegger states, "disappears into usefulness" (OWA, p. 171). But it is precisely in a work of art, such as the Greek temple, that the rock is not viewed as a piece of equipment. Rather, in the Greek temple, the rock is left to Be, and its true nature, "the massiveness and heaviness of stone," is revealed to the observer. Similarly, in a painting the true nature of color "comes to shine forth." The colors of a painting are not analyzed but rather simply present themselves free from human interpretation by creating the image of the painting in the mind of the observer. Heidegger's argument is somewhat weaker in the case of painting in that the medium of color, unlike the stone of a statue, is not a piece of equipment and arguably not even a "thing" at all. The important point, however, is that though an image is created by the various colors in a painting, the colors themselves do not occupy the observer's consciousness. They are simply experienced and laid bare to the observer in their true, unadulterated nature.

Keeping Bartky's linking of earth and medium in mind, one can see the larger process of self-concealment, or "earth," as being "set forth" and revealed to the observer in a work of art. As Heidegger claims, "In setting up a world, the work [of art] sets forth the earth" (OWA, p. 171). World and earth, though diametrically opposed in their essences, are thus inextricably linked in a work of art, and as Heidegger states, "World and earth... are never separated. The world grounds itself in the earth, and earth juts through world" (OWA, p. 172). Heidegger refers to the opposition of the natures of world and earth as strife and believes that by simultaneously "setting up a world and setting forth the earth," a work of art instigates this strife (OWA, p. 173).

For Heidegger, truth is "won" by a work of art through the instigation of this strife in that truth in its full sense, as both a revealing and a concealing, is simultaneously presented to the observer. In a work of art, not only is a world revealed to the observer, but the self-concealing earth is revealed as well. Thus, as Heidegger states, in a work of art, because "beings as a whole are brought into unconcealedness and held therein,... the unconcealedness of beings as a whole, or truth, is won" (OWA, p. 177). As Bartky very eloquently explains, "The struggle of world and earth, of expression and materials, in the artwork is one way in which the revealing but simultaneously concealing world-event may occur" (Bartky, p. 267). To use an example, an image is revealed to the observer of a painting. This revealing occurs, however, only through the observation of the colors of the painting. But in experiencing the painting and realizing its image, the observer is unaware of the colors themselves. The colors, though presented to and experienced by the observer, are concealed to the observer's consciousness. Thus, in seeing the image of a painting, the observer simultaneously experiences a revealing and a concealing. Through this experiencing of a revealing and a concealing, truth is not necessarily intellectually comprehended, but rather, as Heidegger states, truth simply "happens."

Art And Photography

In photography, a simultaneous revealing of a world and setting forth of a self-concealing earth also occurs. A photograph reveals a historical and social world and in so doing presents the observer with the realm of possible beings and decisions of a particular historical epoch. In Dorothea

Lange's famous photograph entitled "California," a world is revealed to the observer (Pollack, p. 352). The photograph reveals the world of the migrant farmers in California during the Great Depression in all of its despair and hopelessness. The power of the photograph lies in its ability to transport the observer into the world of the migrant workers and reveal the realm of that particular historical epoch in all of its possible beings and decisions. This revealing of a world, like painting, is also grounded in the medium of color.² Like the experiencing of the image in a painting, the observer of a photograph is unconscious of the colors that comprise the image. The colors of a photograph, though experienced, are self-concealing. Thus, photography, like painting, reveals a world by setting forth the self-concealing earth, and truth "happens" in the Heideggerian sense of the term.

Not only does truth "happen" in photography, but it happens in a much more effective way than it does in painting. Upon close examination, the medium rather than the image of a painting can dominate one's concentration. When one stands very close to a painting, one notices the cracks due to age or the brush strokes that the painter used, and suddenly the colors that comprise the image can occupy one's mind. In examining a painting in such a way, the image created by the painting slips into oblivion, and the world created by the painting is transformed in the mind of the observer into merely an array of various pigments meshed together on a cloth canvas. The painting simply becomes a self-concealing thing, no different in nature from the self-concealing frame which surrounds it or the self-concealing wall upon which it hangs. The world of the painting disappears and thus the fragile strife between world and earth is broken.

When viewing a photograph, however, while the possibility of breaking the strife between world and earth cannot be denied, the strife is much more difficult to break. Upon close examination, the photograph remains an image and the world revealed by the photograph is not lost. The fact that the image is merely an array of dots on photographic paper is almost impossible to observe from simply looking at the photograph, and the photograph stubbornly refuses to be seen as anything but the image itself. This stubbornness of the photograph is what one refers to when claiming that a photograph is "realistic." The strife between world and earth is so acutely

²I am not using the word "color" here to mean the opposite of black and white but rather simply to mean a visual sensation of some shade of any color including black and white.

captured by the photograph that the untangling of this strife through careful observation becomes almost impossible. It is true that one could break the strife by closely observing a photograph through a magnifying glass and thus uncovering the medium underlying the image. However, much more effort is needed to break the strife of a photograph than that of a painting. An almost conscious determination to unravel the strife of the photograph is required. Because of this fact, photography is much more effective than painting in its ability to maintain the strife that for Heidegger is so necessary in order for truth to "happen." In this sense, photography is a higher or more advanced form of art than painting.

One might object to this claim by arguing that a photograph, unlike a painting, lacks the ability to reveal an object's "equipmental" nature and thus remains inferior to painting. This objection might stem from Heidegger's claim that the act of imagining or seeing an actual object can in no way capture what he calls the "equipmental being of the equipment." Heidegger believes, however, that by observing a painting such as Van Gogh's depiction of a pair of peasant's shoes, one can come to experience the full equipmental being of an object in its myriad of uses. Heidegger describes Van Gogh's peasant's shoes as follows:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls (OWA, p. 163).

Thus, in his depiction of the shoes, Van Gogh's creative freedom allows him to emphasize or add certain qualities of the shoes and thus reveal their full equipmental being in a way that would be impossible by simply presenting the observer with an actual pair of peasant's shoes. By claiming that photographs are mirror images or copies of actual objects, one could thus conclude that photographs, like the objects themselves, cannot reveal an object's true equipmental nature.

This objection, however, is based upon the false assumption that equates the photographic image with the object itself, an assumption that simply disregards the creative freedom of the photographer. By placing

photographed objects in certain contexts and under certain lighting conditions, the photographer also exercises the artistic freedom which allows him or her to capture the full equipmental nature of equipment. A good example of this freedom is exhibited in André Kertész's depiction of a pipe (Kertész, Plate # 71). In the photograph, Kertész captures the simplicity and grace of the pipe's equipmental nature by placing it in a context which evokes in the mind of the observer the pipe's various uses. The glasses just below the pipe reveal the smoking of the pipe in a time of study or contemplation while the overturned glasses to the left reveal the comfort afforded by the pipe in a time of worry or distress. The careful positioning of the pipe in the bowl suggests the pipe as a status symbol, a sign of education and wealth and the source of pride in the mind of its owner. Thus, the photograph does not simply reveal an actually present pipe to the observer. Rather, the photograph, like Van Gogh's painting, captures the observer's imagination of the pipe in a myriad of uses and significations and consequently reveals the equipmental being of the pipe.

Photography And Technology

While Heidegger does not himself directly address the issue of photography, Michael Zimmerman argues that Heidegger believes photography to be an expression of the false notion of the modern era that humans are the ultimate ground of reality. Zimmerman claims that Heidegger chose the title "The Age of the World-Picture" with both film and photography in mind. In the modern age, Heidegger believes that humans, or what he calls "Dasein," view objects as being dependent upon themselves in order to exist. As Heidegger states, "What is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by Dasein, who represents and sets forth" (Heidegger in Zimmerman, p. 87). According to Heidegger, instead of letting objects Be and experiencing them in their true sense, the modern outlook places humans within any world-picture and consequently fails to recognize the fundamental ground of beings in Being.

Zimmerman argues that Heidegger thinks that photography is an aspect of what Zimmerman calls "the technological drive to make everything wholly present, unconcealed, available for use" (Zimmerman, p. 86). According to Zimmerman, the camera has a "point of view" which is, as

Zimmerman states, "the position taken on things for the purpose of making them reveal themselves in ways satisfactory to the one doing the representing" (Zimmerman, p. 87). Thus, Zimmerman claims that Heidegger believes photography to be the epitome of the modern mind-set. The photographer picks and chooses his or her reality as he or she sees fit. Reality is viewed as a ready-made object, and in deciding what to photograph, the photographer chooses which reality he or she should recreate. The reality presented in the photograph is thus dependent upon the photographer's discretion, and this subject-dependent view of reality reflects the very mind-set of modernity that wrongly assumes that human consciousness is the fundamental ground for the existence of other beings. Thus, according to Zimmerman, Heidegger argues that the subject-dependent perspective of photography ignores the truth that all beings, including Dasein, are ultimately grounded in Being (Zimmerman, p. 87).

Heidegger's argument, however, ironically stems from the failure to view photography in light of Heidegger's own vision of technology.³ Heidegger believes that in the modern, technological age, Dasein has become estranged from its essence as the thatness of Being. Dasein views reality as a commodity at its disposal, and Heidegger refers to reality regarded as a commodity by the term "standing reserve." When reality is treated by Dasein as "standing reserve," Dasein sees the existence of reality as being dependent upon its own existence. Thus, as Heidegger states, in the current technological age, humans have lost touch with the truth that their essence is grounded in Being because "it seems as though [humans] everywhere and always encounter only [themselves]" (QCT, p. 308).

The solution, for Heidegger, is not to forsake technology but rather to adopt a new mind-set towards technology. Dasein must realize that it is Being and not Dasein's own creative resourcefulness that is the ultimate driving force behind the emergence of technology. Rather than regarding "technology as an instrument" by which Dasein has ingeniously gained control over its environment, Heidegger believes that Dasein must view technology as "the destining of a revealing" (QCT, p. 314). Technology is destined by Being as a way in which Being reveals itself to Dasein. Only by conceiving technology in this way can Dasein transcend the anthropocentric

³ By calling the argument against photography "Heidegger's argument," I am assuming that Zimmerman's presentation of Heidegger's views on photography is accurate.

view that it is the ultimate source of technology and that world is merely a ready-made "standing reserve" awaiting human command. With a different outlook toward technology, Dasein will retain its essence as grounded in Being without having to completely forsake the revealing of Being as well as the many practical benefits that technology provides.

Paradoxically, if one applies this conception of technology to photography, Heidegger's argument that photography epitomizes the anthropocentric mind-set of the modern age appears misleading. By adopting Heidegger's notion that technology is the destined revealing of Being, the camera is no longer viewed as an aspect of human genius by which human beings have mastered the ability to re-create reality. Rather, the camera's ground in Being is recognized. The camera is viewed as being destined by Being to reveal Being. Seen in such a manner, the photograph is not the recreation of reality by human beings. On the contrary, the photograph, in its essence, is produced by Being in that it is destined by Being. It can not be denied that humans play a role in producing the camera as well as the photograph, and Heidegger does not ignore the fact that humans, or Dasein as the "thatness of Being," are essential for the revealing of being to occur. However, Heidegger believes that Dasein and consequently the products of Dasein are ultimately grounded in Being. While it is true that a photographer selects the aspect of reality of which he or she takes a photograph, this selecting should not be equated with the creation of a reality. On the contrary, the selecting of an object to photograph should be viewed as being similar to what occurs when a painter decides upon the subject of his or her painting. The photographer selects but does not create, and the distinction between the two concepts is critical in avoiding Heidegger's misconception about photography.

Conclusion

Many would agree that photography has had a profound impact on the history of painting, but probably few would recognize the fact that photography has in fact rendered painting obsolete as a form of art. Now that reality can be so effectively represented by the photograph, modern painting has begun exploring different and more abstract ways of representing reality. Viewing art in the Heideggerian sense, one could argue that these new directions which painting has taken represent the confusion of painters

trying to salvage what remains of their archaic mode of representation now that its viability has been so completely shattered by the development of photography. Indeed, as Zimmerman indicates, Heidegger argues that modern painting in all of its concern with subjective interpretation is the unfortunate expression of the anthropocentric mind-set of the modern, technological era (Zimmerman, p. 237). What Heidegger does not seem to realize is that painting has not merely gone astray, but rather that it has been superseded by an art form which is far superior in its ability to capture the essence of truth. Not only would a new conception of technology make this fact more obvious, but conversely, through an understanding of the essence of photography as art, one may be making the first steps toward the new conception of technology that Heidegger believes to be so essential in Dasein's overcoming its estrangement from Being.

Works Cited

- Bartky, Sandra Lee. "Heidegger's Philosophy of Art," in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*. Thomas Sheehan, ed. Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1981. 257-274.
- [OWA] Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*. David Farrell Krell, ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1977. 149-187.
- [QCT] Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*. David Farrell Krell, ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1977. 283-318.
- Kertész, André. *André Kertész: Diary of Light 1912-1985*. New York: Aperture, 1987.
- Pollack, Peter. *The Picture History of Photography: From the Earliest Beginnings to the Present Day*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1963.
- Zimmerman, Michael E. *Heidegger's Confrontation With Modernity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.