“Art vs. Design: Saving Power vs. Enframing, or A Thing of the Past vs. World Making”

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This paper is a dialogue, a slice of ongoing dialogue, a kind of fight in progress. Some background material:
1. Mark is a practicing artist. Cameron is a design theorist. Mark is committed to the significance of art, Cameron to the significance of design.
2. Mark and Cameron were for a long time colleagues in a School of Design. Design is a relatively recent profession and not yet a discipline. Design Schools tend to be either the technical, commercial embarrassments of Art Colleges, or the soft, aesthetic embarrassments of Technology Institutes. Because of its precarious emergent status, design has a defensive enmity with art.
3. The School of Design where Mark and Cameron taught and researched was part of an Art School before its incorporation into the University of Technology, Sydney.
4. What brings Mark and Cameron together, and puts them in dispute, is Heidegger and post-Heideggerian thinking. Both Mark and Cameron find in Heidegger a relational post-aesthetics of ‘making think-work’ \(^1\) that clarifies and furthers their attempts to respond to the dominion of technological metaphysics. It is just that Mark believes that this ‘remembering-clearing’ lies on the Art side of the Art/Technology line whereas Cameron believes that it lies on the Technology side.

The following dialogue is a vehicle for us to propose some of the ideas that we are working on, for Mark, “Making Expanded Painting”, for Cameron, “Making Engaging Things”.

Apart from these pragmatic institutional issues, what is at stake in our debate? Perhaps everything; that is to say, if you believe Heidegger, the future of human being in the face of technology’s cessation of history.

The issue that always troubles readers of Heidegger on technology is: if the essence of technology is its totalising nature, how are we to respond? If all causal reactions to technology remain technological, what is to be done?

We begin with the assumption that Heidegger is misinterpreted when cast as an apologist for acquiescence, a quasi-spiritual giving in to, or waiting for the end of, techno-being. When Heidegger does risk this sort of rhetoric, for example, around the term *Gelassenheit*, it must be remembered that such ‘releasement’ requires much effort, that one must be active in becoming passive. Less extreme, but more common, is Heidegger’s valorisation of thinking itself as a response to techno-being – in particular the sort of thinking associated with questioning. As is often noted, the opening line of the “The Question Concerning Technology”, italicises the verb

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\(^1\) This phrase is a modification of the title of Mike Hale’s book *Living Thinkwork: Where do Labour Processes Come From?* London: CSE Books, 1980.
‘questioning’: “In what follows we shall be questioning concerning technology. Questioning builds the way.” (3) And the essay concludes, “The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become. For questioning is the piety of thought.” (35)

However again, on these occasions Heidegger’s concern is still for a thinking that is ‘in action’. Such questioning is not a removed inactive contemplation, but rather an engaged responsiveness. It is, as we will argue, very much with, and of the process, of making. This is precisely the point: Heidegger is trying to retrieve a form of making, of thoughtful making, of making thoughtful, that is no longer merely technological; he is not trying to exit completely the activism of technology, but find within it more authentic forms of revelatory action. This is why the closing sentences from “The Question Concerning Technology” that we just cited, occur in the context of a discussion of art. Let us cite at length, because this is a passage that we will fight over:

Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art. But certainly only if reflection on art, for its part, does not shift its eyes to the constellation of truth after which we are questioning.

Thus questioning, we bear witness to the crisis that in our sheer preoccupation with technology we do not yet experience the coming to presence of technology, that in our sheer aesthetic-mindedness we no longer guard and preserve the coming to presence of art. Yet the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes.²

The appropriate response to technology is therefore not just philosophising, but thinking in and around the making that we call art. Such making think-work, according to Heidegger’s analysis, appears to be a non-technological way of negotiating technology.

What is at issue between Mark and Cameron is how literally Heidegger should be read here. Does ‘art’ mean Art, works for the institution of art, or the ars of Design, products for the economy of design? Which is less unthinking in its making, which is more thoughtful or thought-provoking? But also which is the more appropriate action in response to technology, which is nearer the potential for swaying the way of the world and therefore more able to accomplish a turn in our experience of being?

What is at issue in this fight between Mark (hereafter M) and Cameron (hereafter C) over Heidegger for this paper, and for the debate about practice-based research in which it is taking place, is the role and nature of making in such thinking. Is the

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² Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”, in The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, Harper, NYC, 1977, p35. References to this text from now on will be made by page numbers in brackets in the main body.
questioning of art that Heidegger is calling for a considered analysis of the artefactual outcome, the finished artwork or design product; or is it a critical reflection on the process of making? If the outcome is an artwork for interpretative reception rather than a design for enactive use, how does this affect the question-worthiness of the process of making? For surely, if the process of making is a type of research, a way of discovering knowledge, then it is thoughtful in a way that ignorant technology dangerously is not. Such research-ly making reveals exactly where technology conceals. To work out how making is a bringing-to-knowledge is to identify not just why there should be a validation of practice-based research, but also, in the context of Heidegger, to identify a non-technological form of making. This is why we are fighting over which form of making – art or design – the making of which form of things – the useless or the useful – is the most significant, as research, and as the saving-power within the eclipsing empire of technology.

C: What is most common in Heidegger’s range of articulations of what is to be done is the constellation of techne, poiesis, physis and aletheia. The essence of technology derives from its origin in the Ancient Greek sense of techne, the know-how associated with poiesis, which Heidegger believes is a mode of revealing, aletheia, compatible with the model for revelation, physis.

This is in some ways the first half of “The Question Concerning Technology”: poiesis is the “four ways of occasioning... [that] let what is not yet present arrive into presencing... It is of utmost importance that we think bringing-forth in its full scope and at the same time in the sense in which the Greeks thought it... Physis also, the arising of something from out of itself, is a bringing forth, poiesis. Physis is indeed poiesis in the highest sense ... The Greeks have the word aletheia for revealing... Techne is a mode of aletheueuin... Technology is a mode of revealing... And yet the revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology does not unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of poiesis. The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging.” (10-14)

The second half of “The Question Concerning Technology” suggests that a response to technology involves recovering the poietic techne that remains with/in technology as challenging-forth.

So if the techne of poiesis affords a way of being with, without succumbing to, techno-being(lessness), how are we to translate these Greek terms? Should we understand the techne of poiesis to be the making associated with artwork or designing?

M: My side of the argument is perhaps more straightforward since Heidegger does explicitly and frequently suggest that techne be translated by ‘art’, for example in “The Question Concerning Technology”:
“There was once a time when it was not only technology alone that bore the name techne. Once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called techne. Thus the poiesis of the fine arts was also called techne... Could it be that the revealing lays claim to the arts most primarily, so that they for their part may expressly foster the growth of the saving power, may awaken and found anew our look into that which grants and our trust in it? (34-5)

Heidegger makes it clear in “The Origin of the Work of Art” that there are two aspects to art’s way of revealing that keep it different from technics. The first is that the work that works of art accomplish is the founding of worlds. Technology reveals, but reveals things to be in a profoundly unworldly way. What art works reveal are precisely other worlds, other ways of being, other clearings in which humans can dwell. Artworks do not just reveal these worlds temporarily, they found them, that is, both find them and establish them in a sustaining way. By contrast, technology finds nothing but a generic something to be transformed into anything — it heeds no prior essence that might be holding sway, not even the outcomes of its own manufacturing, which it will recycle as an energy source just as soon as they are completed.

More significantly, what keeps art from being subsumed into technics is that what art reveals are concealments. What art brings to the world is what Heidegger calls Earth, that is, that which precisely resists being brought to the world. Earth ‘shows’ itself to be inherently self-secluding. Art points to what cannot be revealed; or rather, it points out that there is the unrevealable; it does not reveal these secrets so much as reveal that there are secrets, and so they must remain.

These concealments are material, and historical; they are what you sense as lying beyond, as other possibilities. They have to do, quite precisely, with the making of the artwork, the origin of the artwork, from which the artefact springs or breaks out. These earthly qualities are what cannot be completely accounted for in any reflection on practice, what one glimpses only when one does attempt to carefully and thoroughly articulate the materialist history of any artwork’s making.

This is why, I would suggest, Heidegger insists that these hints of a hidden ‘always more’ arrive only as “strife”, as a conflictual resistance to the drive toward open disclosure that Heidegger calls the World.

In aesthetic terms, Earth and World are very similar to notions of form and content but are each developed in an extended phenomenological sense in their application to art works. Earth identifies both the material aspect of the work, what

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3 This phraseology is derived from Jean-Luc Nancy’s version of Gestell, ecotechnics. See for example “War, Law, Sovereignty – Techne” in Vera Andermatt Conley ed. Rethinking Technologies Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

4 A clear Heideggerian explanation of the essential relation between the techne of making and the consumerism of the ersatz is the Chapter on “Work” in Hannah Arendt’s The Human Condition Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958.

it is made of, and a certain tendency within earthly natural things to withdraw, to hide, to be elusive for understanding and articulation. Similarly world is not just the totality of objects and events but is closer to an environment that surrounds us as a matrix of meaningfulness. Nor can earth and world be considered separately, each is inextricably woven into the other. Earth must come through world to appear at all, and world must rest on the earth and be constituted by it. Both are aspects of disclosure, are part of an uncanny showing, the creation of an open space where something, some thing, can come to be. In their strife each tries to absorb or eclipse the other, world tends to forgetfully consume earth and ground, while earth draws the world back into its own entropy, to de-historicise and de-contextualise. Their conflict is irresolvable and leaves a permanent open wound, but this wound, this scar is the very pre-condition for a gestalt, a shaping, that brings the work as a work into presence.

In the work of art we first catch sight of earth through the material presence of the art form, whether it be the colour of paint, the heaviness of marble or the sound of music. Similarly by virtue of the conflictual union the background nature of the world is brought forward and opened up, world is disclosed. Revealed world is an historical world, delimited by the kinds of decisions and inchoate possibilities that each age defines for itself. Heidegger suggests four ages, Greek, Medieval, Modern and Planetary. Planetary is dominated by technology and would coincide to some degree with Postmodern Globalisation. As Heidegger suggests, the essence of technology is nothing technological, its essence is technicity, a mode of relations between beings of all kinds that reduces all to mere resources for production, machination and consumption. Yet technicity is not to be rejected out of hand, since it contains the enduring riddle of our age. It is this riddle that art reveals, indicates and instantiates. Art’s enduring strangeness, its uncanniness in the midst of the demand to be instrumental, is the revelation of a riddle.
To make this more concrete I would like to discuss an example of my own work, In Moraine (2006) a wheelbarrow spills a load of flowers onto a white carpet. The work was conceived in the context of a series of paintings that were made by pouring or spilling paint onto a horizontal sheet of aluminium. The aluminium works were made as explorations of alternative materials that could be used to make a painting. Specifically, canvas is replaced by metal, brushes by cake mixing bowls and images by aleatory events. The play of ongoing substitution was extended through the cake mixing bowl and paint to the wheelbarrow and a load of flowers. Wheelbarrow and bowl, paint and flowers, carpet and canvas are syntagmatically connected and ultimately perform the same function of delivering a load of colour to an impenetrable surface.

The work exists in an unusual tension between what it is and what it is not. Painting is present as an absence, a visual absence substituted by smells, fragrances, metaphors of painting. The work literally smells of fresh flowers, almost tactile when entering the gallery. The flowers, like a painting, are intensely colourful, and in this case synaesthetic, giving sight and smell. Synaesthesia becomes a metaphor for interdimensionality in the work, an overflowing of aesthetic and physical boundaries.

The earthiness of the flowers and the technological products of wheelbarrow and carpet come up against each other on the basis of a spill, an industrial accident, a loss of utility, and ultimately a spontaneous display of colour. The wheelbarrow, like a broken tool separated from the smooth flow of usefulness suddenly stands out, showing the unusual shape of all its all elements, the difference between its rubber handle, metal legs and plastic tray. We notice the carpet is unusually placed to
receive the entire spill, none has gone over the edge. The spill as an event of chaotic proportions is curiously aesthetic in its relation to all the other elements. Yet both the barrow and the carpet are distillations of earthly materials, now curiously exposed in the artificially lit interior and the conceptually lit domain of art.

The flowers on closer inspection are a mixture of fresh flowers, synthetic flowers and native flowers that have been tinted to intensify their natural tones. All the flowers are heads, severed from their storks and any obvious supply of sustenance. As they die and wilt they demonstrate their liveliness as opposed to the static endurance of the barrow and carpet as techno presences.

C: Whilst what M has said about Heidegger is clearly true — like a good romantic, Heidegger does invest much faith in art as powerful respondent to technology — it is important to acknowledge that there are at least three caveats that Heidegger himself puts in place.

1 The Ancient Greek arts “were not enjoyed aesthetically. Art was not a sector of cultural activity.”6 The art that is being spoken about is ontological precisely to the extent that it refuses our current “sheer aesthetic-mindedness”7. M’s self-description of Moraine and its making clearly demonstrates the extent to which his work explicitly engages with, if not depends utterly upon, a certain ‘aesthetic reception.’ I will come back to this.

2 The art that would be adequate to the challenge of technology, that can found worlds by drawing on concealed material creative forces would be not just any art work, but only Great Art. Again, M touches on this when acknowledging the centrality of history to Heidegger’s understanding of art. And it can also be seen in the extent to which Moraine involves in its making and intended reception, an agon with the history of art. Though the question remains whether these elements manage to push beyond institutional place-markers (in which case they would be susceptible to the previous critique of the ‘culture industry’) in order to found or at least attest to a wider new ‘way of the world’.8

3 If techne-as-art can only be understood as Great Art, there is more than a chance that such Art is a thing of the past, something that existed “perhaps only for that brief but magnificent time.”9

This is why Heidegger does not say that art is the appropriate response to technology, but only that it may be: “Whether art may be granted this highest possibility of its essence in the midst of the extreme danger, no one can tell.”10

Because of these caveats and doubts, I think that it is important to consider what other pathways to dealing with technology might exist. Perhaps what Heidegger means by techne is better conceived as the sort of making associated with Design.

I am obviously on the back foot in arguing this way since this latinate term [Old French dessein – to draw; Latin signare – to mark] is one that Heidegger does not

6 Heidigger, op cit p 34
7 ibid
8 On Heideggerian ‘making history’ understood as practicable ‘world making’ rather than ‘world history politics’, see Charles Spinosa, Hubert Dreyfus and Fernando Flores Disclosing New Worlds [ Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997].
9 ibid
10 ibid p35
and would not use. Heidegger does use terms that can be productively translated by the English word design, but he is referring to a more abstract process of laying out possibilities or throwing forth [Entwurf] rather than the process of planning the making of things of use.

My side of the debate therefore depends on a kind of more-Heidegger-than-Heidegger type argument.

I will mention two main aspects of this argument both of which are usefully captured by Heidegger’s famous use of Holderlin toward the end of “The Question Concerning Technology”:

“The same poet from whom we heard the words
But where the danger is, grows
The saving power also
says to us:
...poetically dwells man upon this earth.”

Let me start with the second fragment first. Exegetes usually emphasise the adverb, poetically, when discussing Heidegger’s use of this phrase. This aligns the saving power with language and thought, concerns of the later Heidegger and philosophy in general. However, drawing attention to the verb, dwelling, not only fits with Heidegger’s later work, but also his earlier existential analytic of dasein. It also locates the saving power in the things of everyday life, in the pragmata and chremata of living day-to-day. This is the much less metaphysical locale of design, of designed things and design interactions with things.

It is important to remember that things are the ontological indicators. Ontologies are defined by how things manifest, by what counts as a thing to the peoples dwelling with and through those things. This is why the “Question Concerning Technology” was originally the third of four lectures, the first of which is “The Thing”. Read together, these lectures indicate that the crux of technics is its denial of things in their thingliness. The most famous expression of this is Heidegger’s account of nuclear weapons: “The atom bomb’s explosion is only the grossest of all gross confirmations of the long-since-accomplished annihilation of the thing: the confirmation that the thing as a thing remains nil.”

This argument is developed most extensively in Heidegger’s interpretation of Rilke:

“The object-character of technological dominion spreads itself over the earth... Not only does it establish all things as producible in the process of production... the thingness of things [is] dissolve[d] into the calculated market value...

The frailties of things [are being replaced] by the thought-contrived fabrications of calculated objects... produced to be used up... the more quickly they are used up, the greater becomes the necessity to replace them

11 ibid p36
even more quickly... [so that all that remains] constant in things produced as objects merely for consumption is: the substitute — Ersatz.”

It is precisely this “injurious neglect of the thing” that one realises in the moment of insight into the essence of technology that is “The Turning.” The appropriate response to technics therefore lies with

“unpretentious... modestly... and inconspicuously compliant... thing[s]...
Just as it is a part of our unshieldedness that the familiar things fade away under the predominance of objectness, so also our nature’s safety demands the rescue of things from mere objectness. The rescue consists in this: that things, within the widest orbit of the whole draft, can be at rest within themselves.”

Design then, the design of everyday things, is a fitting response to techno-being. Art, as the “Origin of the Work Art” makes clear, also manifests as things, but for essential reasons, as no ordinary things. Artworks are very precisely more-than-things, things that transcend their thingness allegorically. This pretentiousness or immodesty means that art’s response to technology is always excessive. It is rather “here and now and in the little things that we may foster the saving power in its increase.”

Let me try to make this clearer by taking up M’s self-description of his artwork. It is fairly clear from his account of Moraine’s making and presentation that M was at all times seeking some sort of revelation from this constellation of products; by which I mean, not all at was he seeking some sort of representation. Moraine is not the depiction of anything. It would be quite inadequate to say (though M’s talk of metaphors that make painting presently absent do risk this) that it is a representation of painting, or even just M’s painting process, in non-paint media. The rug is not a sign for the canvas, nor do the flowers represent the smell of drying paint. These things are not signs because they reveal too much of themselves to be merely referential. They singularly and together become presences, showing themselves to be, each in different ways. What comes through the work as whole, or overcomes its ability to be read merely as ‘an installation-based portrayal of painting’ is a question about how things manifest. There is clearly something ontological going on here.

However, to what extent is this ontologicality circumscribed by occurring as art? Are the questions that come to those who view M’s work, concurring with M’s own account, questions that will to any extent trouble those viewers? Do these moments of insight into ‘how things are’ that do seem to be involved in understanding Moraine have any sustenance? These are very designer-ly questions of effectivity but they are crucial if we are to take seriously what Heidegger says about the

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14 ibid
The historical nature of the revelations needed in the face of technics. Does M’s work world beyond the artworld? Is there sufficient Earthness to the way this installation has been staged in a gallery setting, for the questions that the work is asking to become questions of other things elsewhere? Or is this work just turning such revelations into a game, an amusement, a distraction? Is not this making-being-appear-pretty-and-witty quintessential Gestell – not in the sense of making all available for use, but more seriously in the sense that Gestell is the frame that excludes all other ways of being present? If this work does draw attention to a non-productivist-being-there, doesn’t it do so precisely in the sort of way that says that such being-otherwise is now only the remit of a museum, a marginal domain of practice soon to be a thing of the past? Doesn’t it attest to the abandonment of being to questions of ‘is this or is this not art?’

Surely all that M has revealed of this work’s making would have been better incorporated into a commercial product-of-use. A flower-coloured wheel-barrow, a wheel-barrow impregnated with the smell of flowers, for sale in a hardware store, or even more so, in us on a building site, would be far more uncanny and question-worthy than an art piece. In its everyday use, in use in work-a-day settings, it would be much more powerfully (and not just much more frequently and pervasively) uncanny. Getting it sold would be quite properly a design problem, but successfully resolving that design problem would have more direct and longer lasting world-making outcomes. No longer delimiting itself to questions of art history, it would be freed to afford wider history making.

M: I take C as posing the idea of marginal objects that are not quite art and not quite designed things of use. Marginal objects furtively seek to survive in sequestered spaces somehow outside of global capitalism and the levelling effects of Gestell. But for the moment Design unlike Art is not empowered to produce the marginal, since it lives only in the harsh light of instrumental production and consumption. In such a context design is the very discipline that completes the withdrawal of things. The thing, or any object of production, disappears in the hands of a consumer because its soft embodied presence is completely eclipsed by the productivism of use. Design as a professional practice only came into existence with the flourishing of the machine age at the beginning of the 20th Century. The task of design since that moment has been as the slick facilitator and mediator of gritty production and consumption. Design is nothing more than the sugar coating of technicity, the cool cosmetic layer that conceals the ‘set up’ and makes destructive things apparently digestible and the disappearance of things intensely desirable.

Alain Findeli captures the essence of design as being

“determined by instrumental reason, over-emphasising the material product, as having an aesthetics based exclusively on material shapes and qualities, an ethics originating in a culture of business contracts, a cosmology restricted to the marketplace and a sense of time limited to the cycles of fashion and technological innovation.”

16 Rethinking Design Education in the 21st Century, Design Issues Vol 17, No 1 Winter 2001 p 6
While art must also function in the market place and is inevitably dealt with as a commodity, its thingliness is always in play. As a thing it continually reminds us of the *work* of the work of art, which is the ongoing eventful strife between earth and world.

“Art as an aesthetic object .. is obviously formed and produced and thus already predisposed for commodification but as a forcework it opens the different modality of an event, irreducible to product”.

The history of the avant garde and contemporary art of the last century has been the reduction and abolition of arts status as a commodity and foregrounding of its nature as an event, from Futurism and Dada, to Happenings, Fluxus, Conceptual art, Installation art and Relational art.

“The shift from object to event necessitates a reconsideration of art’s relation to commodification and exchange: since art resists or ‘objects’ specifically by refusing to be an object, the most important aspect of art’s social relation is the dissolution of the related logics of the aesthetic object and the commodity.”

The art market tends to counteract this process but that is as it should be. The art market continually reminds the artist of the tension between economic productivity and the disclosure of worlds.

C: Heidegger is very explicit about the fact that *poiesis* not be translated by a manufacturing term:

“What is decisive in techne does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in the aforementioned revealing. It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that techne is a bringing-forth.”

Consequently techne is not manufacturing, what Heidegger in ‘Contributions to Philosophy’ calls more generally “machination”. But this point usefully clarifies what I mean by design, as distinct from fabrication. In the quote cited, the ‘aforementioned revealing’ refers to the following:

“Whoever builds a house or a ship or forges a sacrificial chalice reveals what is to be brought forth, according to the perspectives of the four modes of occasioning. This revealing gathers together in advance the aspect and the matter of ship or house, with a view to the finished thing envisioned as

18 ibid, p 105
20 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: (From Enowning)*. (GA65). Translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999
completed, and from this gathering determines the manner of its construction." \(^{21}\)

This Platonic-Aristotelian account of *techne* is in fact a rich description of design, or designing as thoughtful forethought or foresight. This is precisely why design is a mode of revealing, a mode of revealing in the lineage of Ancient Greek *techne*, within the heart of modern manufacturing.

And for the same reason, I am unconcerned by M’s suggestion that design might be at the very heart of technology. Here I am returning to the first of the two Holderlin quotes to make my second main point about why design might be best response to technology.

For, the quote indicates not that the danger lies near the saving power, but that the danger is itself the saving power. In a way typical of Heidegger, the very acknowledging of technology as a danger, is the way of saving oneself from the danger. The turning is a turning within technology, not against it, or outside it. Heidegger is advocating a kind of homeopathic remedy, more of the same, once one realises that there is a difference within that sameness, the difference between design and machination, between *techne* and technology. Design is the way that moments of insight can be prompted where technology is most at home, small turns within sheer instrumentalism that afford questioning, if only now and again.

Art by contrast is not similar enough to technology. It involves a very different comportment, an un-use-ual disposition. Art, art today, is to my mind still too bound to aesthetics, to the aesthetic mode of reception. It still requires a Kantian disinterest to be made, to be understood and to have valence. This is what disengages it from the danger, placing it at a remove, especially, but not only when, it exists only in the protected economy of the gallery.

To this extent art remains a thing of the past.

**M:** Even Heidegger allows for the possibility that one day great art might return and that such a return would constitute a saving of the world.

Though Heidegger once said “Great Art is a thing of the past”\(^{22}\), it cannot be extrapolated to suggest that the present age is entirely artless. ‘Great art’ has a very specific meaning, referring to art that played an overtly fundamental role in the life of a culture. Great art defined cultural rituals in early societies and social hierarchies in pre-modern societies. The socially determining aspect of art disappeared with the Greeks for Heidegger, and somewhere between post medieval art and pre-modern art for others.

Great art is equated with pre-modern art and anything after that is lesser art, art that is simply designed to generate a personal aesthetic experience. However from modernity onwards, Art becomes something more indefinite and elusive, something that proceeds by silence rather than public proclamation. In “Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger discusses a work of modern art, a painting by Van Gogh. In that essay


\(^{22}\) as is argued by Heidegger in reference to Hegel in the Epilogue to “The Origin of the Work of Art” in Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings, David Krell (Editor), Routledge, London, pp204-6.
he proposes that a work of art discloses a world. The question remains whether all art has the potentiality of disclosing a world or whether only ‘great art’ can perform that function.

Krystzof Ziarek in his book The Force of Art, substitutes ‘great art’ for ‘radical’ art. He concedes that art has lost its “force and importance”\(^{23}\), and appears to have been replaced by the “entertainment industry and information technologies.”\(^{24}\) “Artworks when compared with social, political or even physical forces lack any effectiveness in changing reality.”\(^{25}\) The powerlessness of art to effect change outside of its own limited domain appears conclusive. But ‘power’ is defined in the limited terms of technicity. Arts power, its power to reveal, its ‘forcework’, is neither powerful nor powerless, but powerfree.

“Art discloses an alternative to the paradigms of production, mobilisation and technical manipulation... The ‘less’ in the adjective ‘powerless’ when attached to art does not necessarily mean lack of power but instead indicates an alternative economy of forces... Though art like everything else is produced and regulated within the power driven economy of modern being, art can become disencumbered of the governing configuration of power and open an alternative modality of relations.”\(^{26}\)

Ziarek’s term for this kind of power is ‘aphetic forcework’, aphetic from aphesis meaning releasing, letting be, letting go.

“Art can have such a transformative effect only in a specific kind of reception, when the artwork is encountered as a work, that is, non aesthetically, which means that, beyond its aesthetic commodity form art is allowed to work. Thus the transformative work is itself a relation, an encounter with an artwork in which this work transforms the web of social political and cultural relations with which both the work and its reception take place. Art’s transformation works not on the level of objects, people or things but in terms of the modality of relations, which in the forms of perception, knowledge, acting or valuing, determines the connective tissue of what we experience as reality.”\(^{27}\)

C: I have this suspicion that the model power-free artwork for Ziarek, and perhaps Adorno, would be one in a vault, concealed from view. It is of course typically instrumentalist to ask after ‘bum’s on seats’, but Ziarek’s aphetic artworks attest to the possibility of a world outside eco-technics, only if testifying before someone. I worry that it is not just great art that is a thing of the past, but art itself, contemporary art being invisible except to those with appropriate levels of cultural capital to make it their past-time. Given the giganticism of techno-being’s

\(^{23}\) Ziarek, op cit, p 1
\(^{24}\) ibid p 1
\(^{25}\) ibid, p3
\(^{26}\) ibid, pp3-4
\(^{27}\) ibid, p 28
imperialism, surely the appropriate response needs to be more strategically located if not pervasive.

Let me give a short example to compare with M’s account of his own work. In the 1990s, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby developed a series of designs as articulations of research into electromagnetic radiation. These were relatively simple pieces of furniture, such as a coffee table with compasses set into it that would map electromagnetic fields and fluctuations in a house. These devices in quite obvious ways drew attention to a key infrastructure of de-thinging technics. Electricity is the quintessential Bestand or standing reserve. It is something that results from converting any sort of matter into energy (mostly via combustion, but even nuclear decomposition), and that can then in turn be used in the fabrication of any product – electricity is the alchemical medium that allows any thing to be turned into any thing else, a medium therefore in which there are no things at all. This is no more dramatically evident than in the electromagnetic radiation emanating from any electrical device, though without designs such as Dunne and Raby’s this evidentiality is not evidenced.

What is crucial for this argument with M, is that the work that these designs do, the revelations they accomplish, can only take place in-use. These are not museum pieces, but pieces that only work when lived with. These then are exemplary things to my mind, things that reveal injurious neglect of things that is technology, but only by being in our midst, used each day, but every so often turning us to the essence of our situation.

\[\text{Dunne and Raby}^{28}\]

\[\text{M: C’s commitment to agency is really a form instrumentalism, a version of economic rationalism that justifies itself in terms of a readily measurable mass audience and appropriately calculable outcomes. He is compelled to manipulate a situation to get the most number of people in the shortest time to practice consuming in a certain way. This is absolutely essential in certain functional situations such as creating a sustainable practice for industrialised societies. However it is counter productive to establishing an ethics or an ontology.}

\[\text{One of the definitions of art is that it has no practical use or is functionless. It is the uselessness of art that makes it immune to the instrumentalism of technicity.}

\[28\text{Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects Berlin: Birkhauser, 2001.}\]
“By crystallising in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as ‘socially useful’ it criticises society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it.”

Within the art world even the instrumentality of contemporary economics ceases to function. Most artists continue to make their work at a loss and finance it by cleaning, teaching, labouring. There is something of a pre-industrial gift economy at play here. Most governments validate the gift economy by accepting the special nature of art as something that needs to be preserved outside the market economy. They do this by nurturing art through ‘gifts’ from funding bodies and grant programmes. Paradoxically, art also functions as a valuable commodity bought and sold on a global scale. There is a differential dynamic between art, artists, contemporary art, investment art, the art world and the art market that defies the imperial drive of techno-rationalism.

It is its uselessness that makes art useful.

“Art becomes socially ‘meaningful’ precisely when it breaks with aesthetic and political functions that society establishes for it, when it alters the power formations that regulate society and that the society wants to stamp or project on to art works. Instead, what art inaugurates is a different force work, a different disposition of forces, which means that the relations they produce become disposed into a different mode of revealing and as a result the world unfolds differently...The poietic force of art would consist, then, in an alternative, non-violent disposition of forces, which does not mean that art becomes blind to the ‘real’ world or that it ends up in an escapist, aesthetic limbo, but rather it instantiates the ‘same and only world ‘otherwise’ “

C and M: This debate between us is no doubt founded on an unsustainable binary opposition, if not asking the wrong question altogether. M’s critique of design targets the least interesting commercial designing and C’s critique of art targets the least interesting institutional artworks. If there is a responsive action to technics, it clearly lies in something like artful design or designerly art. The valence of the examples that both C and M use derive precisely from the interpenetration of art and design, M’s artwork with a wayfinding design, and Dunne and Raby’s designs with expanded artworks. And of course the ‘and’ in these kinds of ‘art and design’ should be the Same ‘and’ that lies between World and Earth, in other words, an ‘and’ signalling the belonging together of what is necessarily in strife.

However, this too easy conclusion should not be considered glib. These couplings are placeholders for some significant questions to which our debate has hopefully drawn attention.

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29 Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, quoted in Ziarek, ibid, p 41
30 ibid, pp 41-2
Firstly, there is the issue of *aesthesis*. If Heidegger’s historico-materialism is a post-aesthetics that can be exemplified in artful design and designerly art, it is not therefore a non-aesthetics, especially if aesthetics is taken in its original sense, as referring to the meaningful experience of things. If technology annihilates thingliness, then whether it is art or design, the point is for us to recover an ability to sense things, to make sense of things. *Aesthesis* is therefore at issue, precisely because, thanks to Heidegger’s “Origin of the Work of Art,” it is no longer concealed beneath the metaphysical philosophy of aesthetics. A guide to responding to this question is the work of Jean-Luc Nancy.

Secondly, there is the issue of use. If art’s uselessness is nonetheless useful in revealing the technological condition, and if the use of a designed thing does not only lead to the withdrawal of that thing into ready-to-handedness but to the revelation of thingness itself, then we must develop a much more nuanced understanding of use. Heidegger indicated as much toward the end of his lecture series *What is Called Thinking*, but it remains only a hint.

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