

The Artist as Phenomenologist

Do you think I know what I am doing?
That for one breath or half-breath I belong to myself?
As much as a pen knows what it's writing,
or the ball can guess where it's going next.¹
Rumi

Artists are natural practitioners of phenomenology. I include in that broad, generic term artist, those who paint and sculpt, dance and write poems, compose symphonies and shoot video. And phenomenologists, because we intrinsically do what Edmund Husserl suggested: we bring our attention to the thing itself.²

While I am aware that there are as many creative processes as there are creative people, I believe that there are some gross generalizations that can be made about engaging in the making of art. Whether we work from nature, from a felt sense, a concept, a historical influence or from a dream, as artists it is incumbent upon us to turn to the source of our work. We focus on the dream image, the orchid before us, the sound of the torrential rain on the clay roof, the meaning of justice. With all of our attention and care, we look at the source of our inspiration and we wait. We wait for it to reveal itself. We wait to see, to hear what it will tell us about itself. If we are wise, we don't try to mold it precipitously into some preconceived shape or outline; we let it take the shape of its choosing. And we can only do this if we are willing to take the time to let it be, as it is, in our presence. This is our practice.

This attention alone won't make us great artists. But without it we should only be executing our craft. Without attention, care, and patience, we would only find ourselves squeezing a preconceived peg into its corresponding hole, not making art. When I set about to draw a tomato, if I don't bring my attention to the object, but instead rely on a habit, a visual code that I have used to shorthand this object, I miss entirely the experience of the tomato itself. I miss what it might offer me, what it might, unexpectedly

¹ Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne

² Levin, David Michael, *The Philosopher's Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment*, University of California Press, 1999, p. 21.

reveal. I reduce it to a sign or a symbol, a re-presentation of its attributes: round, red, with a prickly green stem. If I approach the tomato with the attitude, “I know this thing. I have seen it a hundred times before,” then I not only run the risk of not seeing this particular tomato as it discloses itself, but I also am closing myself off to the experience of that very moment. I am choosing the easy, handy, habitual “mental image,” which, by being codified, keeps me from seeing the plump, scarlet fruit before me.

Those of us who struggle to make “art,” struggle to be open to what appears before us. Contrary to the postmodern rejection of the claim that anything is “immediately given in experience,”³ the artist can even turn her attention to what is being mediated, to the sign itself, and find in that given experience the source of her art.

In bringing my attention then, to the practice of art-making, I have stumbled upon some ideas that reside somewhere in the intersection between art and philosophy. These two have often been pitted against one another as, since Plato’s time, the philosopher has been defined in opposition to the poet.⁴ To Plato, the poet was by definition the antithesis of the philosopher. Plato attempts to give us an *accurate*, i.e., clear, discrete, known, *picture* of a philosopher by outlining what it is that a philosopher *does*—makes an argument—as opposed to what a poet *does*—allows a space for the sense of wonder.

When we inhabit this space in-between poet and philosopher, we blur these discrete borders. This is the space out of which the philosophical concept of Aletheia emerges and in which we can see the practice of an artist is intrinsically as an Aletheic one.

In order to get the ancient Greek concept of Aletheia, we need to take a moment to appreciate to what it is an alternative. Over the centuries many Western thinkers have come to understand the nature of “Truth” based on the “truth as correspondence theory.” Sort of like the X-Files. The truth is out there. How we get to this truth is by deducing, by analyzing, by quantifying. When we find something “true” we are also given, by default,

³ Cahoone, Lawrence, Ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p.10

⁴ Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, 1999.p. 370

a false that tags along, accompanying a long string of dualisms: outside or inside, thinking or sensing, finding or making, reality or appearance, objective or subjective.

In fact, as soon as we turn our attention to our attention, we immediately become aware of what appears to be an intrinsic split. We momentarily cease being in the activity, we remove ourselves and we observe. This occurs whether we are looking at looking, at thinking, at language, at painting, at the way we dance the lindy-hop. The split between our observing selves and our doing selves, between what we see and how we say it, comes along with a fondness for clear boundaries which harden and constrict experience; a fondness for what we see as black and white. Black and white has come to stand for truth: it was all there in black and white, we say, and generally we prefer this to the fuzzy lack of clarity inherent in shades of grey. So what we really mean when we say black *and* white is black *or* white. Black or white flattens, removes all subtlety and gradation, all dimensionality. Black or white gives us the sharp edges and clarity that are so revered. Black or white erases the blurriness, the indistinctness that gives us pause.

John Dewey gets to what I suspect is at the core of this bifurcation. “Oppositions, he says, of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh all have their origin, fundamentally, in fear of what life may bring forth.”⁵ We are afraid. We are afraid of appearing ignorant. We are afraid of being out of control. We are afraid of not knowing, of being wrong, of being different, of not belonging. To assuage these fears we grab at the handiest way of making sense of the chaos around us. We cling to notions of black and white. Confronted by a crazy, mixed up world, there is strong motivation for creating order, for making meaning. We buy into the notion, challenged and then reaffirmed over the centuries, that sense, our sensations, what we see, what we hear and particularly what we feel, opposes rational thought, and therefore is not to be trusted. To staunch the flow of our fears, we grasp at the eithers and ors. As soon as we are convinced that we know what “this” is, what it will look like, feel like, sound like, we no longer need to be open to the experience of the “this.” But as artists, if we were to approach our paintings, our short

⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Perigee Books, 1934), 22., Emphasis added.

stories, our choreography, already knowing in advance what the finished work would be, what would the point of making art be after all?

So we have this black or white, these dualisms, which map to the notion of “truth as correspondence” on the one hand, and the concept of Aletheia on the other. Even the ways we arrive at these two kinds of truths have totally different qualities. In order to understand truth as correspondence, we rely on propositions for example, those of Aristotle’s: to say that that which is, is, and that which is not, is not, is true!” To arrive at the meaning of Aletheia, however, we need to know a story.

A-Letheia is an ancient Greek word that literally means “not Lethe.” Lethe is one of the rivers that flows through Hades, the underworld of Greek myth. Whenever souls arrived in Hades, they were made to drink from the river Lethe, or Oblivion, in order that they forget they had ever walked on earth. A-letheia, then, embodies a not-forgetting, or coming out of hidden-ness. Paul Crowther defines it as “the wondrous apprehension of thinghood...”⁶ And Martin Heidegger wrote extensively about Aletheia in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.”

I wanted to give you a taste of the aletheic way Heidegger uses language to describe aletheia:

That which is, is that which arises and opens itself, which, as what presences, comes upon man as the one who presences, i.e., comes upon the one who himself opens himself to what presences in that he apprehends it. Rather, man is the one who is looked upon by that which is: he is the one who is—in company with itself—gathered toward presencing, by that which opens itself. To be beheld by what is, to be included and maintained within its openness and in that way to be borne

⁶ Crowther, Paul. "Experience of Art: Some Problems and Possibilities of Hermeneutical Analysis." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 3 (1983): 356.

along by it, to be driven about by its oppositions and marked by its discord—that is the essence of man in the great age of the Greeks.⁷

Now of course this is translated from the German, but still...If we bring our attention to Heidegger's words we notice that we are stopped in our tracks, by their apparent circling back on themselves, by their circuitousness...Heidegger exemplifies in how he uses language, what he wants us to do with our experience: to let go of our habitual way of approaching it, stop and let it presence; He wants us to let ourselves inhabit the space between, to experience the strife or discord between oppositions like making and finding, inside and out, and to allow this oscillation, this movement to occur and not be forced to choose between our eithers or ors, our blacks or our whites.

While the Greek concept of Aletheia has been a touchstone in thinking about how works of art reveal themselves to us, my personal experience arose while sketching a tomato and at the same time stepping back to examine myself as I did so. I became aware of a process, a numinous movement which I'd describe something like this:

Removing the tomato from its plastic wrap, there are no words. Just it. Just me. Just "tomato-ness." Impulse bubbles up and locates itself in my hands. I "see" the tomato, as I set about to draw. But I don't ask why. I don't ask, to know the tomato? To be with it? To understand? To capture, preserve or hold the moment of apprehension? To re-present this feeling of wonder? Of awe? To communicate my experience? I don't ask these questions, but they are there, and the answer to each is "Yes."

When I begin to sketch, I see what I always see, what I assume everyone sees. I see red, I see round, I see a tiny green stem remnant. Tomato. I think, that I already know this tomato. The point of my pencil finds the paper, and arbitrarily chooses a place to begin. On one occasion, I might start with an outline, the product of my imagination, as if I could mark the spot where tomato stops and air begins. On another occasion I begin

⁷ Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology* (Perennial, 1982), 131.

where the tomato bottom rests on the cutting board, or where the wizened leaf attaches to its stem. Some days I sketch in bold strokes a general shape. I look again, more carefully this time, and I see that it is not really round after all. Flat where its bottom casts a shadow along the cutting board, the top of the fruit has ridges, valleys and hills. The longer, the closer I look, the more I see. Color shifts from red to red orange to light yellow to greenish-brown to deep crimson.

Light crosses the tomato's sleek skin. Greenish black shadows mirror dried stem leaves and roll across the fruit's surface. The tomato is a world and I travel its terrain. Marks find the paper and joy finds me: the delight in sensing "tomato." What I see deepens over time, as if, now, secure in the knowledge of my interest, the tomato decides it is safe to show me more. The more I see, the more my comprehension changes; with this new understanding I begin to see anew. My sensing/knowing grows, layer upon layer.

In his essay, "The Experience of Art," Paul Crowther suggests that "Aletheia" "hinges ultimately on a sense of wonder at the unique existence of specific things, and at their potential or hidden aspects which the artist has revealed." "The philosopher can describe it but only the artwork reveals it."⁸ The dance, the poem, the ceramic jug points to that sense of wonder. But it is in the aletheic practice of the artist that the wonder is experienced and oppositional boundaries are erased in the making. By bringing her attention to the object of her inquiry, tomato, an impulse, a gesture, an emotion, or a historical trend, the artist reinvigorates a tired and habitual mode of seeing and thinking, and moves instead towards a kind of looking that connects instead of separates, flickers instead of fixes.

Heidegger suggests that when we are able to let go of thinking that we always already know in advance what we will experience, that we may have the opportunity of "being

⁸ Paul Crowther, "Experience of Art: Some Problems and Possibilities of Hermeneutical Analysis," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 3 (1983): 356.

beheld by what is, being included and maintained, within its openness.”⁹ Instead of needing to choose one of a pair of oppositions, we move back and forth between the opposing poles. In this movement, we are looking at the tomato, *and* being beheld by it; when we bring our attention to this present moment, we are see-ing the object of our attention, we see ourselves see-ing, we are inhabit-ing the space between, and we are becom-ing aware of its “pres-encing...” with an emphasis on the ing, an on-going, ever-changing impermanence. This is also the nature of the Buddhist practice of *vipassana*, translated as “seeing clearly,” seeing things as they are: whether it is the arc our arm draws as it moves through the air, the idea as it blossoms and grows, the story as it unfolds. When we bring to our work this patience and attention, we are rewarded with the numinous experience of aletheia.

Disrupting and undoing foundational dualisms, the artist blurs the borders between, even as she is aware of them: she makes as she finds, she approaches the object subjectively, she brings her insides out for all to see. For the artist, appearance is reality.

Crowther, Paul. "Experience of Art: Some Problems and Possibilities of Hermeneutical Analysis." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 3 (1983): 347-62.

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*: Perigee Books, 1934.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Age of the World Picture." In *The Question Concerning Technology*, 115-54: Perennial, 1982.

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, 1999.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology* (Perennial, 1982), 130.