Strife or Rhythm? Martin Heidegger and Giorgio Agamben on the Origin of Art

Lexi Eikelboom

University of Oxford, Regents Park College, Pusey Street OX1 2LB, Oxford, UK alexandria.eikelboom@regents.ox.ac.uk

The capacity of art to contribute to peace is dependent upon beliefs about its political contribution. This article demonstrates how two different theories about the ontological and political significance of art have different political effects.

Key words: philosophy of art / literature and politics / Heidegger, Martin / Agamben, Giorgio

Anyone wanting to know what art might contribute to peace must consider Martin Heidegger's thoughts about art and poetry, since his concern is precisely to elevate art from the realm of mere aesthetics to a political role. He argues that art has the capacity to establish and maintain a community in relationship to the place in which it is established and maintained. However, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has said of Martin Heidegger that "recognition of the importance of his thought – or indeed unreserved admiration for it – in no way excludes infinite mistrust. Not of the thinker himself but of what his thought entails or carries with it, what it sanctions and justifies." (14) He goes on to say that the primary reason for this mistrust is the political dimensions of Heidegger's thought and life. What Lacoue-Labarthe is here pointing to is the fact that, despite the attractiveness of Heidegger's theory of art, his primary essay on the subject, "The Origin of the Work of Art" falls in the most problematic period of his writing, namely during the period of his associations with National Socialism. The question of the association between Heidegger's ideas about art and his beliefs about National Socialism matters not only for reasons of history and interpretation, but because it raises the question of whether there is an inherent violence in "The Origin of the Work of Art" that would legitimate not only ideologies like National Socialism but other forms of oppression that might be more immediate for us today. If such were the case, we would not want to bring this concept of art into our politics. However, while "The Origin of the Work of Art" is Heidegger's

most explicit treatise on art, it is not the only one. This paper puts forward a vision of art that is not reduced to aesthetics, but that also avoids the violence in "The Origin," and that has its roots in some of Heidegger's later ideas about art and their extension in the work of Giorgio Agamben. I describe this alternative vision as "rhythmic." In other words, this essay is an example of how, with Lacoue-Labarthe, we can both admire and mistrust Heidegger.

"The Origin of the Work of Art": A House Divided

Commentators are divided as to whether or not the strife between earth and world that Heidegger puts forward in "The Origin," which is the happening of truth made manifest in art, is in fact violent. Some, including Heidegger himself, insist that it is not. Heidegger says

The opposition of world and earth is strife. But we would surely all too easily falsify its essence if we were to confound strife with discord and dispute, and thus see it only as disorder and destruction. In essential strife, rather, the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their essential natures. ... In strife, each opponent carries the other beyond itself. Thus the strife becomes ever more intense as striving, and more properly what it is. The more strife, for its part, outdoes itself, the more inflexibly do the opponents let themselves go into the intimacy of simple belonging to one another. (174)

Thus Heidegger describes strife much like a healthy sparring or competition that brings out the best in each party and creates intimacy – rather like a healthy marriage. The term he uses for this sort of strife is Heraclitus' word *polemos*, which he often translates as *Auseinandersetzung*, literally "setting apart from one another." Conflict establishes the unique identity of the forces by distinguishing them from one another while also making intimacy possible.

As such, some argue that violence, in the sense of domination, is precisely what Heidegger is here trying to avoid. The artist does not dominate or control the earth like technology does. Rather, she is a passageway for the forces of earth and world to establish themselves in the work. Art transports us out of the world of domination and control and into truth (Ziarek 21). Heidegger is concerned here to encourage a way of being through art that is not based in a metaphysics that equates being and reason thereby allowing us to circumscribe and control the world, but one that presupposes that we are already in the middle of things and therefore requires us to be open to their happening. In his critical commentary,

Karsten Harries notes the significance of the placing of the essays "The Origin of the Work of Art" and "Time of the World Pictures" next to one another in the collection called *Holzwege*. These are two alternative artistic approaches to the world, the latter an approach that makes a picture of the world and surveys it from the outside, and the former an aesthetics of dwelling in a building (60).

This emphasis on dwelling is associated with Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit* in his later work. *Gelassenheit* is a mode of poetic dwelling that means a "releasement toward things" (*Discourse on Thinking* 54), a letting be based on our recognition of Being's elusive, self-concealing, and mysterious character. This is in direct opposition to the attempt of metaphysics and technology to objectify, dominate and exhaust nature. Jennifer Anna Forencei-Gossetti associates *Gelassenheit* with Heidegger's phenomenological concerns, with his attempt to allow Being to present itself. "The Origin of the Work of Art" manifests these concerns insofar as it attempts to counter the violence of the subject in its control and domination generated by pictorial-metaphysical accounts (42-49).

However, Gossetti goes on to say that Heidegger re-inscribes this violence in the form of an ontological struggle (50), which is the source of a certain ambivalence in Heidegger's thought. Gossetti notes that "... Heidegger's discussion of poetic founding takes on qualities that he associates elsewhere with the 'will' and the destructiveness of the subject" (51), which he wants to eschew. For example, he speaks positively of art as enframing, while the idea of enframing later becomes a negative approach to the world associated with technology (Gauthier 61). Thus, attitudes that he elsewhere condemns with respect to persons, he here lauds with respect to ontology. There is a conflict between the phenomenological aims of Heidegger and the ontology that he sets up, leading to two different threads: one of Gelassenheit and one of originary violence, both of which are present in his discussion of the artwork. ¹ against women and the Moreover, the nature of art as strife is not tangential or inconsequential to Heidegger's thought, but is a manifestation of his ontology more generally. We can see this already in "The Origin of the Work of Art" in that the character of truth itself is strife. Insofar as art is the happening of truth, it must manifest strife because the essence of truth is primal strife. Art is the site of strife because it is where Being is revealed. Heidegger's use of essential strife is unsettling precisely because it is essential. The essence of art is the instigation of an ontological battle that is necessary for the identity and function of the truth of Being. To understand why the essence of truth is primal strife, we must turn to Heidegger's An Introduction to Metaphysics, in which he tells us more about Heraclitus' polemos.

The *polemos* names here is a conflict that prevailed prior to everything divine and human, not a way in the human sense. The conflict, as Heraclitus though it, first caused the realm of being to separate into opposites; it first gave rise to position and order and rank. In such separation cleavages, intervals, distances, and joints opened. In the conflict a world comes into being. (Conflict does not split, much less destroy unity. It constitutes unity, it is a binding together, *logos*. *Polemos* and *logos* are the same). The struggle meant here is the original struggle, for it gives rise to the contenders as such; it is not a mere assault on something already there. It is this conflict that first projects and develops what had hitherto been unheard of, unsaid and unthought. The battle is then sustained by the creators, poets, thinkers, statesmen. Against the overwhelming chaos they set the barrier of their work, and in their work they capture the world thus opened up. (62)

This excerpt brings two things to light for our purposes. First, conflict prevailed prior to everything. This explains Heidegger's assertion in "The Origin of the Work of Art" that there is no higher objective of harmony or unity beyond strife. The objective is intimacy in strife – *logos* and *polemos* are the same. Thus, there is no *telos* and no principle of being higher than strife. Strife is the immanent law of the *cosmos*, of Being itself. Indeed, Heidegger talks about it here like a myth of creation. It is that which generates identities and order. Opposition *is* identity (*Metaphysics* 113).

Second, notice the role of the artist. Artists and politicians are called to continue the struggle against chaos and capture the world. Elsewhere in An Introduction to Metaphysics, Heidegger says that "The violence of poetic speech, of thinking projection, of building configuration, of the action that creates states is not a function of faculties that man has, but a taking and ordering of powers by virtue of which the essent opens up as such when man moves into it." (157) Heidegger shies away from identifying the artist as wielding violence directly, but instead says that he enters into and orders the larger forces of violence at work. Likewise, while there are descriptions in "The Origin of the Work of Art" of the artist as receiver and passageway, there are other sections in which Heidegger says that truth must happen as something created because it is through the process of creation that "the open region is won" or art is "wrested from nature" (185, 189; Gauthier, 61). While it may be the case that the creator is a passive passageway for the forces of creation, those forces are nevertheless violent and the artist in some way participates in that violence through the act of creation. Whenever humanity creates, violence occurs. However since this is not the direct product of the will of the artist, Heidegger absolves the artist of culpability. Violence is thereby justified and legitimated.

Based on the foregoing observations regarding Heidegger's *poesis*, the strife between world and earth is violent for at least two reasons, one ontological, and the other ethical. First, the primordiality of strife means that

strife or conflict in art or politics is justified and legitimated as following the natural ontological pattern and truth of the cosmos. Struggle is the essential foundation of being. Thus, violence is not tragic. It is fundamental. Notice that I do not think that the association of struggle with art is problematic per se. There is a strife and wrestling that goes on both in the making of art and in being confronted with it. Moreover, this may even be the purpose of art, to pull us out of our brokenness and blindness, necessitating painful struggle. However, Heidegger does not say that the necessity of artistic struggle is due to our human tendency to live blindly and selfishly against the grain of goodness and harmony, requiring struggle against ourselves to bring us back into this goodness and harmony. Rather, the grain of the universe is inherently one of struggle and our human endeavours must participate in this in order to be true, and in order for us to truly dwell in the universe. The truth and being against which our creative endeavours ought to be measured is strife itself. Conflict is ontologically primary.

This takes us to the implied ethical violence. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has convincingly argued that there was an artistic dimension to National Socialism, an attempt to fashion the state as a work of art, and that Heidegger's blurring of the lines between artist and politician was a manifestation of this tendency. This is at least evidence that a theory of art can be in the service of political aims. Theories about the ontology of art are related to how art in fact functions in the political and culture imagination, the objectives that it serves. As Gauthier remarks, "Considered with respect to certain manifestations of the founding act – such as thinking and poetry – the possibility that the creative process will engender ontic brutality is remote. But viewed in light of the explicitly political aspects of the founding act – the founding of states – the question of violence takes on a new urgency." (66) Regardless of its associations with National Socialism, these texts remain ethically problematic because the dualistic struggle between earth and world could very easily support more immediate forms of political domination. One of Levinas' major critiques, for example, is that Heidegger's emphasis on the creation of the polis and its rootedness on the earth privileges the abstract whole of the state as an object of creation over the encounter with particular persons, and sets up a dichotomy between the native and the foreigner (Gauthier 109, 117). This becomes particularly significant in light of critiques that compare Heidegger to those who essentialize and totalize differences between black and white by associating the African with a pure return to nature over-against European technology (Moten 131-2).

Consider, moreover, a possible ecofeminist critique. The idea of an essential strife can be used to give credence to certain kinds of relational strife

based in essentialism. There has been a historical tendency to associate feminity with nature and the cycles of the earth, and masculinity with culture, history, and a transcendence of nature, such that the conflict between humanity and nature is borne out in the conflict between man and woman. This association is a social construct that legitimates both the domination of women and of nature, and it is ominously close to Heidegger's strife between the two forces of earth and world. The idea of an essential strife between the world set up by man and the earth with which woman is involved could legitimate any violence against women and the earth.²

Thus, while the theory of art put forward in "The Origin of the Work of Art" is an attempt to draw attention to the significance of art as establishing and maintaining a way of living in the world that is receptive and participatory rather than dominating, its assumption of ontological violence makes it an insufficient way of conceptualizing what art might contribute to peaceful dwelling.

Agamben: A Rhythmic Ontology of Art

Nevertheless, the *Gelassenheit* strand in Heidegger's thought provides a way of conceptualizing an alternative ontology of art that does not involve essential strife. Heidegger's later work drops the concept of *polemos* and instead uses the categories of earth and world as two principles in his more peaceful description of reality in terms of the "fourfold." Heidegger drops the concept of truth as primal conflict and replaces it with truth as *Ereignis*, a term that suggests, among other things, a more passive or serene "happening," rather than a battle (*Young* 64). The happening of truth in Heidegger's later thought emerges out of the fourfold – two sets of polarities between earth and sky, and mortals and divinities. Each is expropriated to the others in a kind of mirror-play or round-dance (*PLT* 177). Being is still described in terms of opposites, but this is now the rhythmic cycle of the opposites of day and night and of the seasons. The fourfold represents truth as a rhythmic movement of revealing and concealing, rather than strife.

This depiction of dwelling has been extended to the ontology of the work of art in Giorgio Agamben's book *The Man Without Content.*³ Many of Agamben's concerns in the book are similar to those of Heidegger. For example, Agamben rejects the aesthetic interpretation of art in favour of understanding art as a more essential and originary dimension of our experience in the world. He identifies two sides to the problem of aesthetics: that of the passive spectator/critic and that of the creative genius. Much of

the book traces how these two constructs have reinforced each other, and how they have together obscured the originary structure of the work of art.

Towards the end of the book, Agamben begins to rethink the nature of art, most notably in the chapter titled "On the Originary Structure of the Work of Art," a clear reference to Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art." He argues that *poiesis*, the principle of art, is not a principle of creativity. Art is not a product of will, but of *techne* - a mode of truth that "...produces things from concealment into presence." (73) Agamben says that

Only by starting from this situation of man's relationship with the work of art is it possible to comprehend how this relationship – if it is authentic – is also for man the highest engagement, that is, the engagement that keeps him in the truth and grants to his dwelling on earth its original status. In the experience of the work of art, man stands in the truth, that is, in the origin that has revealed itself of him in the poietic act. (101)

Notice the similarities with Heidegger. The work of art is the site of the origin of dwelling on earth and of truth. Both Heidegger and Agamben understand *poiesis* as that which opens a world for common human dwelling. The aesthetic appreciation of form does not comprehend this political dimension of art. In rejecting aesthetics, Agamben challenges the bifurcation between creative genius and passive critic-spectator. In the work of art, "artists and spectators recover their essential solidarity and their common ground." (102)

Agamben also picks up on the ecstatic and temporal dimensions of Heidegger's work. In arresting us into a more original space, our being is given an ecstatic dimension, because it is taken out of the regular flow of time. When we are in front of a work of art, there is a stop in time, an interruption in the regular flow of instants. We are ecstatically arrested into a more original time (99). In this way, Agamben connects up Heidegger's description of the work of art as origin, as a space for human dwelling, with Heidegger's thoughts in *Being and Time* about the temporal nature of being as ecstatic. Art opens an original space for human dwelling precisely because it makes the ecstatic nature of the temporality of being available. "By opening to man his authentic temporal dimension, the work of art also opens for him the space of his belonging to the world, only within which he can take the original measure of his dwelling on earth and find again his present truth in the unstoppable flow of linear time." (Agamben 101)

What is noticeably absent in Agamben's description is any reference to struggle or strife. Instead, in relating the originary structure of the work of art to time, Agamben suggests that rhythm is the originary principle of the work of art. The chapter "On the Originary Structure of the Work of Art," is a reflection on the meaning of Hölderlins phrase "all is rhythm." Agamben concludes that this phrase is not a reference to any aesthetic dimension of the work of art but to the fact that in the work of art, the structure of humanitys being-in-the-world is at stake. Art is the site of dwelling because it introduces into time a split and a stop, thereby cultivating time into a fruitful rhythm. Rhythm, for Agamben, is centred on what he here calls the *epoche*, and elsewhere calls the caesura, which is both a giving and a holding back. He says that "Rhythm grants men both the ecstatic dwelling in a more original dimension, and the fall into the flight of measurable time. It holds epochally the essence of man..." (100).

Agamben nowhere gives any indication that the two movements of giving and holding back are in strife with one another. This does not mean that Agamben does not recognize opposition at all. He is acutely aware that ontology has historically operated according to opposition and division, such as between actual and potential, human and non-human, or immanence and transcendence. However, these divisions are not fundamental, nor are they essential and truth-generating.4 It is difficult to pin down their ontological role, since Agamben nowhere establishes a new ontological system. His agenda is rather to push at the oppositions and paradoxes on which our ideas about ontology are founded in order to deactivate them. He seeks to open up a more originary space between these divisions, thereby "dividing the division" and rendering the dividing force inoperative. This more originary space is one in which the two opposing terms are indistinguishable. These spaces are variously known throughout Agamben's work as the caesura, remnant, infancy, potentiality, the coming community, to name but a few. Notice that Agamben does not seek to violently overthrow division, but to suspend it. As with the epoche, this originary space is ambiguous. It both gives distinction and suspends it, blurring the lines between opposing terms. In other words, there is something more ultimate and more originary than opposition for Agamben In his description of rhythm, Agamben claims that Aristotle describes rhythm as a "something else" that causes the whole to be more than merely the sum of its parts, and that as such "...it must be something that could be found only by abandoning the terrain of division ad infinitum to enter a more essential dimension." (97) Agamben does not define any further what exactly this more ultimate ontological force or space is because it is an attempt to name a double-sided movement rather than an essential principle. It is an attempt on the part of Agamben to hold things open, bringing to our attention the fact that the representations by which we comprehend the world are not all of reality (Dickinson 90). No relationships of opposition are absolutized.

This leads Agamben to an ethics that is reminiscent of Heidegger's emphasis on *Gelassenheit*. Agamben says that "The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize." (*Community* 42) Committing ourselves to one essence or vocation binds us to certain tasks appropriate to that essence or vocation, while true ethics requires us to work at holding our potentiality open. This is not the destruction or overcoming of essence and vocation, but learning to dwell within it while at the same time allowing it to be suspended (*Time that Remains* 23-4). It means holding onto one's categories lightly. Likewise, ethical communities are not built upon any essential or categorical criteria for belonging, but simply on belonging itself, on "being with" another, what Heidegger calls "*Mitsein*".

This brief sketch demonstrates that Agamben's ontology, or at least his problematization of ontology, lends itself to an ethics that attempts to eschew the sorts of essentialist categories that sanction binary oppositions which all too often lead to dominating structures such as patriarchy and colonialism, and instead simply does the hard work of *Gelassenheit* – of letting things be. Agamben's vision of the work of art as that which momentarily suspends us from the everyday categories and divisions that determine most of our lives so that we can simply belong together articulates a vision for a political role of art that might be amenable to the more peaceful, later Heidegger.⁵

Conclusion

Thinking about the way in which art might contribute to peace requires us to first ask about how peaceful a theory of art is. If art is considered politically significant because it manifests forces in strife, then its contribution to peace is dubious. If, however, art is politically significant because it is capable of lifting persons out of the divisions and strife of everyday life into a realm in which they are together, not as citizens or members or even humans, but just together, then it is conceivable that those persons will go back into everyday life differently, more aware of its division and strife and perhaps more willing to question them. Art's ontological contribution to peace is the configuration of being as a rhythm, a stop-and-go form that enables persons to question otherwise entrenched divisions before submerging themselves back into the fray of political action.

The way in which Heidegger and Agamben conceptualize the work of art as the truth and originary dwelling-place of humanity leads to some significant insights regarding their ideas about ontology and the resulting ethical implications. While both agree that art has the potential to be central to how it is that humanity can live in the world in a way that is meaningful and truthful, "The Origin of the Work of Art" makes this dependent on strife while Agamben makes it dependent upon an alternation between flow and suspension. Yet it is Agamben's description that is based in Heidegger's earlier association of being with ecstatic temporality and lends itself to an ethics of *Gelassenheit*. In other words, we might say that when it comes to understanding the ontological significance of art, Agamben takes Heidegger more seriously than Heidegger takes himself.

NOTES

¹ This also emerges as a vacillation in OWA between the terms *Schaffen* (make, achieve) and *Schopfen* (reveal) as descriptions of the role of the artist.

² There is arguably even an element of this patriarchy in "The Origin of the Work of Art" when Heidegger dissociates truth from the ordinary, historically considered the sphere of women. Truth is not gathered from the ordinary (196, 200), but is in strife with the ordinary (201). Despite Heidegger's own silence surrounding issues of sex, he has been appropriated by certain feminists, including Trish Glazebrook's "Heidegger and Ecofeminism." Nevertheless, this is more an appropriation of certain ideas within Heidegger, rather than an interpretation, and the above argument is evidence that Heidegger can equally be appropriated in ways that are not amenable to ecofeminism.

³ While commentators such as Young and Pattison have argued that Heidegger himself changed his understanding of the ontology and politics of art in his work on the poet, he nowhere else gives as theoretical a description about the function of the work of art itself such that OWA remains the work that most people consult when attempting to understand Heidegger's ideas about art. Nevertheless, as will become clear in this section, Agamben describes the ontological and political significance of the work of art in ways that are consistent with Heidegger's concerns, such that we can reasonably see this as a description of how Heidegger himself could reasonably think about the work of art. Nevertheless, one important difference is that while for Heidegger, the more originary dimension, which he also describes as the Holy or the Nothing, is equated with the fourfold. Agamben however is more apophatic. He does not attempt to identify or describe the more originary dimension, but describes it simply as a stop, something that is other than reality as we experience it. For Heidegger then, to describe the work of art as rhythmic is to describe the nature of the fourfold, while for Agamben the rhythm of the work of art is the rhythm between time and its stop rather than an oscillation between things within a whole.

⁴ As well as eschewing a division between the creative genius and the spectator, and between earth and world, Agamben also rejects the division between art and technology to which Heidegger adheres as something that is likewise a part of the aesthetic approach to art that seeks to distinguish between works that are reproducible and those that are the singular products of genius. This, in turn, spells an exclusion of art and the artist from the commonplace (73). In this Agamben goes back to Aristotle, for whom *techne* is the necessary calculating, teachable and reliable dimensions of craftsmanship which, while not *poiesis* itself, is the necessary potentiality for the presencing of *poiesis* to take place. Without this intellectual virtue, there can be no *poiesis*, only mis-making. *Techne* is therefore necessary,

and it is this very necessity, rather than the artist's will, intentions, or creativity that makes *poiesis* possible. In fact, any diminishment of necessity through intention is precisely what Aristotle does not want. For this reason, while believing it necessary, Aristotle has rather a low opinion of *techne*. Since it does not contribute anything to the agent, it has no place in the good life. Furthermore, since *techne* is a potential, or a capacity, rather than an actual good, he considers it inferior. Nevertheless, commentators have noticed Aristotle's ambivalence towards *techne*, particularly when he begins to talk about the *techne* of politics or medicine, because while these crafts do not have the good of the doctor or the politician in view *qua* doctor or politician, they do serve the good of both the healthy or peaceful man in general as well as particular patients or cities. This demonstrates that while Aristotle does not believe that *poiesis* contributes to the good of the individual, it does contribute to the public good. This is the dimension of *poiesis* in Aristotle that both Heidegger and Agamben attempt to bring out – *poiesis* as the opening of a world for common human dwelling.

⁵ Some critics, including Levinas, argue that Heidegger's philosophy remains problematic and even potentially violent due to its continued emphasis on the totality of ontology and on continued nationalistic-tendencies made possible by Heidegger's emphasis on paganism. While I am sympathetic to many of these critiques, Agamben himself does not fall into either of these problems since (1) he does not set up any ontology, but only questions existing ontological assumptions and (2) does not conceptualize the space for common dwelling as any particular place on the earth but as a particular kind of comportment towards beings. Thus, Agamben draws on the best of Heidegger's concepts without succumbing to the problems of Heidegger's philosophy taken as a whole.

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Spor ali ritem? Martin Heidegger in Giorgio Agamben o izvoru umetnosti

Ključne besede: filozofija umetnosti / literatura in politika / Heidegger, Martin / Agamben, Giorgio

Martin Heidegger je ugotavljal, da ima umetnost – v nasprotju z njeno običajno degradacijo v estetiko – lahko tudi politični pomen. Kakšen ta pomen je, je odvisno od našega razumevanja tega, kaj umetnost je in kaj počne, oziroma od njene ontologije. V članku je prikazano, kako je misel o ontologiji umetnosti, ki jo je Heidegger v obdobju, ko je bil član nacistične stranke, predstavil v eseju »O izvoru umetniškega dela«, mogoče uporabiti za upravičevanje nasilnih političnih praks, kot sta okoljska neodgovornost in patriarhat. V skladu s to mislijo je umetnost pomembna zato, ker sodeluje v prvobitnem sporu med silami zemlje in sveta. Avtorica primerja Heideggerjev esej z esejem Giorgia Agambena »O izvirni strukturi umetniškega dela«, ki temelji na drugih, miroljubnejših razsežnostih Heideggerjevega dela. Po Agambenu lahko umetnost kot prostor, v katerem so razpete drugačne vezi in odnosi, pelje k miru, s tem ko ustvarja kraj, na katerem lahko kritično motrimo nesoglasja in spore, v katere smo sicer vpleteni. To kaže, da sta politični pomen umetnosti in njena zmožnost ustvarjanja miru povezana s teoretičnimi vprašanji o ontologiji umetnosti in da to, kako razmišljamo o obstoju umetnosti, ni nič naključnega. Pomembno je za to, kako umetnost dejansko deluje v družbi.

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