AESTHETICS OF DEFAMILIARIZATION
IN HEIDEGGER, DUCHAMP, AND PONGE

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Aesthetics of Defamiliarization in Heidegger, Duchamp and Ponge

Abstract

Victor Shklovsky’s of ostranenie, estrangement or defamiliarization, may be useful for understanding a broad range of artistic strategies in twentieth century art and aesthetics. Heidegger’s theory of art, when read in light of his existential ontology in Being and Time, which is also a social theory, can be understood as providing a philosophical account of defamiliarization as having significance for both an ethics and an aesthetics. Duchamp’s “readymades,” with their interrogation of the idea of art and the institutions and practices to which it belongs, derive their critical and experiential force from their effectiveness in rendering unfamiliar or strange a quotidian object that is industrially fabricated; in Duchamp’s case, this raises a multiplicity of questions. While Duchamp negates the aesthetic notion of art, Ponge defamiliarizes everyday objects in order to consecrate them, and with them, the everyday life in which they are embedded, through an aesthetic gaze. These examples are useful in the effort to theorize defamiliarization and contextualize it historically as a politically as well as ethically significant tendency. An historical perspective on the theory of Heidegger this dissertation imputes to Heidegger suggests that this theory is a theory of crisis rooted in an experience of a crisis of modernity that was especially acute in Europe between the wars. In particular, Heidegger situates human existence between two absolutes: that of an organic community that is prior to all difference and all thought, and that of a heroic subjectivity, who may well be an avatar of the Kantian artist as a genius who is not bound by any rules, impossibly deworlded and desituated, metaphysically homeless.
I. INTRODUCTION. A Perspective on Defamiliarization

The concept of defamiliarization was first introduced into literary study and named as such by the Russian formalists, in particular Viktor Shklovsky, who coined the term ostranenie in 1917 in his essay “Art as Technique,” and defined defamiliarization as a process of making the familiar and everyday appear strange with the purpose that the work of art is the renewal of perception, the seeing of the world suddenly in a new light, in a new and unforeseen way (Jameson 52). In a literary context, defamiliarization causes the audience to confront an object on a different level, elevating and transforming it from something ordinary or practical into something extraordinary, which is considered art.

According to Shklovsky:

In our phonetic and lexical investigations into poetic speech, involving both the arrangement of words and the semantic structures based on them, we discover everywhere the very hallmark of the artistic: that is, an artifact that has been intentionally removed from the domain of automatized perception. It is “artificially” created by an artist in such a way that the perceiver, pausing in his reading, dwells on the text (Shklovsky, 12).

In Shklovsky’s view, art—while always a matter of conventional devices—demands that the artist resist automatic recognition and employ defamiliarization to make some unconventional employment of one or more of the artwork’s devices.

The aim of defamiliarization is to set the mind in a state of unpreparedness, to put into question the conventionality of our perceptions. By “making strange,” the artist forces the reader or viewer’s mind to rethink its situation in the world. Shklovsky states that poetic language is fundamentally different than the quotidian, colloquial language of everyday particularly because it is more difficult to understand:

Poetic speech is framed speech. Prose is ordinary speech—economical, easy, proper, the goddess of prose is a goddess of the accurate, facile type, of the “direct” expression of a child (Shklovsky 20).
This difference is the key to the coming into being of art (as defamiliarization) and the prevention of “over automatization,” which causes an individual to react to images, objects, and stimuli according to preconceived notions and assumed perceptions.

Shklovsky’s definition of art as an inherently defamiliarizing agent finds echoes in the works of Heidegger, Duchamp, and Ponge. According to Shklovsky:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (Shklovsky 16).

Heidegger emphasized the truth is defamiliarizing, and that is above all through artworks that it is revealed.

Duchamp, whose most notable works for the purpose of this study were produced during and directly after World War I—several even before the publication of Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique”—can be said to have pioneered in the modern art world the “technique of art [to] make objects ‘unfamiliar,’” pushing his audience to question: What is an object when its utility is removed? Does it become aesthetic? Can it still be utilitarian without its original function? Why can’t it be “art?” What is art?

Chronologically and philosophically following Heidegger and Duchamp, Ponge builds upon Shklovsky’s definition of art as something that prolongs perception, primarily through his novel technique of prolonged but unadorned description of the seemingly mundane. His poems, which utilize prose—“ordinary,” “economical” speech to Shklovsky—to achieve an aesthetic effect, force the reader to really perceive the object being described in a way that a description composed of previously known and internalized facts would not, because Ponge’s long, and often personified, descriptions or narrations of objects push past initial presuppositions and assumptions about the nature of
that object through pure length and depth of examination.

Heidegger

The concept of defamiliarization provides a useful rubric for understanding Heidegger’s thought. In *Being and Time*, the story of how things become visible as present-at-hand objects when there is a breakdown in our otherwise purely instrumental, utilitarian relation to things (which Heidegger associates with inauthenticity), can be read, against the grain, as a story of how something like aesthetic perception becomes possible. In Heidegger’s later work, it is art that takes the place of the broken tool in making a changed perception possible.

We may ask, what does it mean for a work of art to be true, or even to present a truth? When we say that such a representation or presentation is true, or that a work of art is effective, it may mean that it provokes us to see the world and ourselves in a different light. Hence, works of art have a rhetorical aspect; if they work, they persuade us to see differently how things are or how they might be. It may be then that what is presented or revealed has some intelligible and significant relationship with some aspect of our lives, and the work of art thus causes us to see our lives differently; then we construct a different fiction, and if we believe it, if it makes enough good sense of our experience, we say that it is true, and that we have learned something.

Heidegger rejects what is known as the correspondence theory of truth, which is based on the model of the representation of objects. In “What is Called Thinking?” Heidegger says of the traditional view of thinking:

> Is there anyone among us who does not know what it is to form an idea? *When we form an idea of something*—of a text if we are philologists, a work of art if we are art historians, a combustion process if we are chemists—*we have a representational idea of those objects*. Where do we
have those ideas? We have them in our head. We have them in our consciousness. We have them in our soul. *We have the ideas inside, these ideas of objects,* (ibid. 39, emphasis mine).

Heidegger critiques not just representation, but the representational model of truth. As John McCumber notes, Heidegger seeks “to free philosophy from the domination of the present, and from its concomitant subservience to ‘truth’ conceived as some correspondence relation holding between two entities which somehow exist simultaneously” (McCumber 1991, 512). To the representational model of thinking Heidegger counterposes the mode of presentation particular to works of art. Thus, poetry becomes the model of thinking in later Heidegger. Truth is not essentially a correspondence of proposition and state of affairs; it is essentially a making present. In art, whose essence is poetry, “language brings what *is* as something that *is* into the Open for the first time” (ibid. 694). The essence of truth is “unconcealment” and this is effected principally by art.

According to the account in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” a work of art, in disclosing or revealing “a” world, and thereby also revealing “the” world in a new light, makes possible and intelligible new ways of being, understanding, living, and doing things. “*Art . . . is the becoming and happening of truth*” (Heidegger 1971, 69, emphasis mine). Heidegger understands the work of art in terms of truth, truth as partly a matter of how the “new” comes about, and the work of art as the medium for bringing that truth to light. For Heidegger, a work of art involves “the disclosure of the particular being in its being,” and, in fact, discloses objects, equipment, and the world itself—the latter as the context in which objects and equipment appear.

An artwork both presents the entity in question explicitly or ‘thematically’ and it
also presents the context in which that entity is significant (McCumber 130). In making the world (in the ordinary sense) that we live present in a certain way, it presents a distinct world in the sense peculiar to works of art (the world constituted in and by the work) and in the sense of a meaningful totality in terms of which the things that appear in the world make sense. Central to Heidegger’s argument is the understanding of the latter in terms of the former. Because artworks constitute worlds, it is the work of art that enables us to understand what objects and equipment are and how they are significant for us.

To disclose a truth is to illuminate a previously unknown or unfamiliar realm. That the work of art is the event or “happening” of truth, as Heidegger says, implies that that which makes truth present is, in a certain way, wholly new, existing in a discontinuity with the understanding that preceded its appearance, and thus presenting things that are unfamiliar or presenting familiar things in an unfamiliar light. Truth is, for Heidegger, essentially novel and extraordinary. “The setting-into-work of truth thrusts up the unfamiliar and extraordinary and at the same time thrusts down the ordinary and what we believe to be such” (Heidegger 2001, 72).

Thus, in the revealing of truth, the very nature of the work of art is to reveal a “world.” This “world,” which includes all the things that show up, is brought “out of inconspicuousness and into salience, and place[d] ‘on display’” (Young, 38). However, the revelation or presentation of a world only happens in such a way that this world necessarily interplays with what Heidegger calls “earth,” which essentially conceals itself or resists appearing and is always “ever-concealed, ever-enclosed, and always withdrawn in itself” (King 71). “Earth” includes the material of the work of art—the paint of the
painting, the stone of the sculptor, the words of the poem, etc. (Stulberg 261) The situation of world-disclosure in relation to earth is partly a consequence of the finitude of our understanding. “There is much in being that man cannot master. There is but little that comes to be known. What is known remains inexact, what is mastered insecure. What is, is never of our making. . . ” (ibid., 51). Thus, it could be said that earth and world are equally unfamiliar: earth because it resists the present understanding, world because it transcends it.

What is clearly presented or disclosed through art as the “world” is always embedded in the “earth,” or what resists all presentation and representation, such that world and earth, according to Heidegger, are engaged in a struggle in which the open and unhidden world tries to surmount the hidden earth, and the earth tries to draw the world into itself. That is to say, there is always a tendency towards revelation and clarification and a corresponding “conservative” tendency that is part of the way things show up, the way things that are present resist being made present, which has to do with the essential opacity of materiality (language for the poet, marble for the sculptor, etc.), without which appearance and meaning would not be possible. Thus, as McCumber puts it, the words a poet uses have a “pre-significance” which consists of “the meaning they had before the poet actually put them to work in the poem, i.e., the sum total of the information they convey, of their denotations and connotations, or of their possible uses in the language,” (McCumber 134). This “pre-significance” is an unrepresentable totality of actual and possible meanings that do not and cannot themselves appear in the poem.

By definition what is not concealed—later Heidegger often identifies truth with “unconcealment,” as he does in “Origin”—depends on the possibility of its being, or
having been, concealed. This means that the conditions of possibility of presentation are also conditions that limit it. Thus, “[t]ruth is un-truth, insofar as there belongs to it the reservoir of the not-yet uncovered, the un-uncovered, in the sense of concealment” (ibid., 58). In elucidating the world/earth distinction, McCumber uses the example, taken from Heidegger, of a marble statue:

A given piece of marble, in other words, may have the Pietà in it … Since that statue, once carved, remains a thing of marble, it never loses its dependence upon a domain inherently undisclosable. There is always a tension between the marble or the site, and the statue or the building; and the essay goes so far as to call this tension a “strife,” (McCumber, 133).

Thus there is no work of art that does not rest on and contain a “material” aspect that resists resolving itself into a clear representation. The world, according to Heidegger, serves to uplift and to open the hiddenness of the earth, and the earth serves to ground and protect the transcendent, intangible realm of the world. And, together, the world and earth serve to set forth the unity that we have called the work of art. We can never obtain perfect clarity because there is always a residue of the concealed/concealing.

As Young notes, the interplay between the earth and the world forms an interaction that is at the heart of the work of art as Heidegger understands it. Art’s power of innovation with respect to the world(s) it presents, represents, and even creates is rooted in the dependence of world on earth. Heidegger uses the example of a Greek temple to elucidate the relationship between earth and world: “The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground” (Heidegger 41). The work makes earth appear and be present, and at the same time it presents it precisely as something that is resistant to becoming manifest.
We might think of this in terms of language in a poem or color in a painting: a work of art not only uses language or color, but in a curious way makes present the materiality of language or color, which it thematizes. World and earth are two essential features of the work of art, and they belong together, in the “unity of work-being” (ibid. 46). “[W]orld and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth and earth juts through world” (ibid. 46).

What is concealed is essentially subject to presentation and being brought to light, to elucidation and interpretation, yet at the same time what reveals itself is essentially opaque and resistant to interpretation or presentation, and the fact of this opacity is also presented. That is, the resistance to disclosure which is earth can itself be made to appear, but then what appears is not the “essence” of the “material” that resists disclosure but the fact of its existence and persistence. What is presented is not only “by nature undisclosable,” but this unpresentability is presented.

To elucidate how both world and earth are made present through the revealing by the work of art of a truth, it is worth mentioning an example that Heidegger gives, a pair of peasant’s shoes in a painting by Vincent Van Gogh. Heidegger’s analysis of peasant shoes in Van Gogh’s painting foreshadows a technique that Duchamp will later employ in a very different way. If one were to encounter a peasant’s shoes being worn in a village, they would not be considered art. The shoes then exist in a particular context in which a set of meanings is attributed to them connected with their use. However, Van Gogh, by painting them, takes the shoes out of their normal context of use, and it is partly through this recontextualization that it becomes possible for us to look at the shoes and the world that the shoes are part of in a way that could not be understood in their
“earthly” context. And it is that understanding that constitutes the meaning of the painting as a work of art, that makes it a work of art.

The portrayal of the shoes in the painting “discloses” how the shoes show up and are used in the life of the peasant, and, thereby, “[t]he art work lets us know what shoes are in truth” (ibid. 35). However, “the equipmentality of equipment first genuinely arrives at its appearance through the work and only in the work” (ibid. 35), because it is only through a work of art that we can explicitly come to understand how we use the things that are part of our everyday lives. The work of art reveals the “actual nature” or “being” of things and thus serves to unveil the “truth” (as “unconcealment”) of beings and of equipment.

That truth is unconcealment demands that truth happens against the background of what is concealed. In the familiar, everyday world, the true nature of things is not often understood, so truth must be an estrangement. A defamiliarized view of an object might lead us not to see the “truth” of that object in some sharper perception or special experience but to simply adopt a critical stance towards our usual ways of seeing or using that thing, which implies some kind of truth.

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**Duchamp**

The second chapter will analyze Duchamp’s works from the period of the first readymades, such as his “Bottle Dryer” from 1914 and his urinal entitled “Fountain” from 1917. With Duchamp, whose objects are defamiliarized by being rendered nonfunctional, the focus seems to be more on that nonfunctionality than on an unfamiliar beauty. Duchamp’s readymades are objects of utility (a snow shovel, a dog grooming comb) that are defamiliarized through recontextualization—taking an object out of its quotidian context and placing it in a museum or gallery. In this way, the objects are transformed so that they are nonfunctional, giving the work the quality of a commentary on or a reevaluation of conventional life. With the readymades, Duchamp chooses everyday objects as his subjects. He blurs the boundary between the material and the formal or ideal, between tools that we utilize for tasks and artworks on display in a gallery, by transforming one into the other. In the process, he forces us to look at objects that occupy a silent but important role in our lives.

The nonfunctionality of the readymades negates the organic artwork, with its principles of meaning and coherence, and the autonomy of art generally. As Peter Bürger demonstrates in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, a key feature of the avant-garde movement, of which the readymades were a part, is its negation of the separation between art and life, and therefore of the institution of art as a separate, and special, domain of activity—the autonomy of art. The autonomy of art, Bürger argues, following Adorno (1971) and Marcuse (1968), is a central tenet of bourgeois society. Beginning at the end of the
eighteenth century, “art [was] understood as an activity that differs from all others” (Burger, 42). Bourgeois society centered on work and business, whereas art was defined as the exclusion of work and utility. The readymades refused the separation of art and everyday life, by bringing everyday objects into art galleries without any additional beautification or aestheticization, and thereby called into question the autonomy of art.

Bürger further purported that in the bourgeois context “the autonomy aesthetic . . . contains a definition of the function of art: it is conceived as a social realm that is set apart from the means-ends rationality of daily bourgeois existence” (10). For the bourgeois, art was not art if it invoked the quotidian, the commercial, or the banal. It was necessarily not only separated from life, but also elevated. Objects like a men’s urinal (“Fountain”) or a coat rack (“Trap”) were not only heavily tied to daily life, but the baser utilitarian aspects of it. The objects did not even function for or hold contents of any elevated value, but rather served purposes tied to bodily functions of urination or homeostasis. To put such object on display in a gallery was so akin to a joke or an embarrassment that Duchamp’s contemporary artists could not even support the display of the “Fountain.” By creating the readymades, Duchamp pushed both the bourgeois viewer and the artistic community, through, what may in the case of some of his works be called a harsh or extreme version of, defamiliarization, to redefine the contemporary definition of and relationship to art.

The defamiliarization of the object in Duchamp can also be compared with the failure of equipment in Heidegger. As Heidegger points out in his analysis of equipment in *Being and Time*, when we use a tool we ordinarily are not thematically aware of it; it is inconspicuous. Using a tool as a means to complete a task normally involves a familiarity
with the tool and an adoption of conventions and norms connected with its use that we likewise do not notice and therefore do not question. Conventionality, familiarity, and inconspicuousness thus go together in much of everyday life, which is why Heidegger, following the romantic critique of modern alienation, called them “inauthentic.” According to the principles espoused in *Being and Time*, we only notice tools when they fail to be serviceable for some task, and then both the tool and its context become foregrounded as the object of our attention. Duchamp, however, draws our attention to tools that are nonfunctional not because they are broken or unserviceable, and thus need repair, but by purposely removing the context in which the tool is used—rendering it “functionally” useless by giving it a new aesthetic function that negates the task the tool was meant for.

**Ponge**

The third chapter will cover Ponge’s poetry from 1932-1937—in particular “L’Huître” (“The Oyster”), “Le Cageot” (“The Crate”), and “La Cigarette” (“The Cigarette”)—in which Ponge defamiliarized ordinary objects in a novel way. (Note that although the works are presented in Ponge’s *Le Parti pris des choses* which was published in 1942, they were first drafted between 1932 and 1937.) He effected a revelation of the ordinary as extraordinary without eschewing the ordinary, familiar, and useful character of an object by defamiliarizing ordinary objects not so much by viewing them in a different way as by simply looking at them very closely and intensely. Thus he aestheticized objects while, at the same time, refusing to aestheticize them, un concealing them—to use Heidegger’s terminology—without removing them from their “earthly” context. The fact that his prose poems are allegories of a close reading that eschews
interpretation while also eschewing metaphor in a phenomenological attempt at pure
description is part of Ponge’s refusal of the aesthetic as autonomous and auratic.

Ponge’s later self-reflective texts are a key to his intentions. From *Le savon*
(*Soap*), written during his time in the French Resistance during the German occupation,
onward, Ponge’s prose-poems moved from short, all-encompassing works seeking to
encapsulate both the passion and truth of an object in one perfectly descriptive package to
longer, more open forms exploring not only the object but the process of creating a
complete and truthful description of that object. These works spawned a new form of
writing referred to as “processual poetry,” recounting the poem’s own process of coming
into being. I will accordingly look at these texts, which are listed in the bibliography, in
addition to the discussion of Ponge’s treatment of things in *Le parti pris des choses*.

Though the manner in which Ponge made quotidian objects significant bears
comparison to what Duchamp did with his readymades, Duchamp made objects
significant through irony, provocation, and negation, whereas Ponge found genuine
beauty within the seemingly banal. Whereas Duchamp transferred ordinary objects into
aesthetic contexts not to call attention to their singularity and aesthetic beauty but to
negate the contemporary conceits of aesthetic value, Ponge conferring aesthetic value on
the most ordinary objects. The recurring motif of his poetry is that it is only the ordinary
that can be truly extraordinary, and only when it is looked at closely and understood
phenomenologically does the ordinary show itself as extraordinary. In comparison with
the view of Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological school that the essence of things
is constituted by their appearance, the way they manifest themselves, and the way they
are perceived by the viewer and not by something that underlies and causes their appearance, Ponge’s poetry can be called phenomenological.

Ponge’s poems can be said to give voice to objects, to let them speak for themselves. His images are generally not metaphors or symbols; they do not stand for anything, but manifest what is unique and interesting about the objects they name as the very things that they are. The images evoked in Ponge’s poems involve a hyper-realism, an aesthetic truth that is not a representation in which words and images are presented and objects referenced, but a presentation of objects themselves in their own nudity, a pure presence in which the objects have ceased to either mediate or be mediated by any idea distinct from themselves.

In this way, Ponge can be seen as playing both with and against the story that could be drawn from a reading of the shift that Heidegger describes in *Being and Time* as a shift in the way things are encountered from equipment to objectivity and from the idea of aesthetic autonomy (Bürger 1984) on which this story depends. The presentations of ordinary objects in Ponge’s prose poems confer, through a defamiliarization that is effected by the singularity of the presentations themselves, aesthetic value on the objects, while, at the same time, Ponge links the beauty of these objects not only to their everyday characters but to their everyday contexts, where they are not decontextualized but remain objects of use. The fact that these are prose poems that eschew metaphor in favor of a purely descriptive use of imagery formally emphasizes Ponge’s refusal of the autonomy of art and aesthetics.

For Ponge, the artist deforms the world that he sees and represents through a phenomenological strategy of presentation—intensely defamiliarizing in a paradoxical
way. His hyperrealist style presents things as they are but the concentration with which it

does so makes familiar things so remarkable and strange that the reader sees them as they

really are for the first time. This defamiliarizing (re)presentation of ordinary things,

described with almost no use of metaphor, is key to the Ponge’s hyperrealism, as

“L’Huitre” demonstrates:

L’Huitre

L'huître, de la grosseur d’un galet moyen, est d’une apparence plus

rugueuse, d’une couleur moins unie, brillamment blanchâtre. C'est un

monde opiniâtrement clos. Pourtant on peut l’ouvrir : il faut alors la tenir

ay creux d’un torchon, se servir d’un couteau ébréché et peu franc, s’y

reprendre à plusieurs fois. Les doigts curieux s’y coupent, s’y cassent les

ongles : c’est un travail grossier. Les coups qu’on lui porte marquent son

enveloppe de ronds blancs, d’une sorte de halos.

À l’intérieur l’on trouve tout un monde, à boire et à manger : sous

un firmament (à proprement parler) de nacre, les cieux d’en-dessus

s’affaissent sure les cieux d’en-dessous, pour ne plus former qu’une mare,

un sachet visqueux et verdâtre, qui flue et reflue à la vue, frangé d’une
dentelle noirâtre sur les bords.

Parfois très rare une formule perle à leur gosier de nacre, d’ou l’on
trouve aussitôt à s’orner.

(The Oyster

Roughly the size of a rather large pebble, the oyster is more

gnarled in appearance, less uniform in color, and brilliantly whitish. It is a

world categorically closed in upon itself. And yet it can be opened that

takes gripping it in a folded rag, plying a nicked and dull-edged knife,

chipping away at it over and over. Probing fingers get cut on it, nails get

broken. It’s a rough job. The pounding you give it scars the envelope with

white rings, a sort of halo. Within, one finds a world of possibilities for

food and drink beneath a mother-of-pearl firmament (strictly speaking),

the skies above settle in on the skies below, leaving only a rock pool, a

viscous greenish sack that ebbs and flows before the eyes and nose,

fringed with a border of darkish lace. On rare occasion the perfect formula

pearls up in its Nacreous throat, and we take it at once for our

adornment. [22])

Notable, of course, here is the prose style of the poem and the realistic—even

hyperrealistic—description of the oyster. There is a near-absence of metaphor (the only
real metaphor in the poem being that of the microcosm), in lieu of which Ponge merely describes the oyster’s appearance. It is notably here that he does not dwell on the pearl, pearls of course being objects whose utility derives from their being regarded as beautiful and not the other way around.

In “L'Huître” Ponge declares that the presentation of an object, and the revelation of truth that is essentially constituted by this presentation, is the presentation of a world, because “a l’intérieur l’on trouve tout un monde” [“within, one finds a world of possibilities”] not only for nourishment, but also implicitly for perception and understanding. In this way, the object’s presence-effects are key to its meaning-effects.\(^1\)

Indeed, in the “Introduction au Galet” [“Introduction to the Pebble”], he says: “Ce ne sont pas des poèmes que je veux composer, mais une seule cosmogonie” (80) [“I do not want to write poems, but a single cosmogony” (81)]. Ponge may have come to embrace Heidegger’s view that a single, totalizing view of the universe or the world of objects was impossible, but poems such as “L'Huître” suggest, if not a cosmogony, at least a microcosm.

The opening of a world of possibilities and the vision of a microcosm which instantiates this visually is made a consequence of literal, physical opening of the oyster with a knife. The beauty of the object is partly, but only partly, identified with the pearl that is revealed by the prying open of the oyster, which is also an allegory for the interrogation of the object that the poem performs. The conjunction of this opening and the revelation of presence and meaning with techniques by which the oyster is rendered

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\(^1\) I am referring to a distinction made by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*
useful combines functionality and aesthetics, use and appreciation. Ponge has resisted making the aesthetic autonomous and auratic by making the visible microcosm appear only after the knife has been used to open the oyster and introducing it by the idea of a “world of possibilities” that is in the first place not only sensual or physical but also linked to the satisfaction of needs—it is “a world of possibilities for food and drink”.

Exercises in how to see (and how to read), Ponge’s poems propose a certain relationship of thought between what is perceived and a kind of inquiry, but one that follows a logic peculiar to aesthetic presentation. In *The Principle of Reason*, Heidegger (1996) argues against rationalism in the form of Leibniz’s “Principle of Sufficient Reason,” according to which everything that exists or appears calls to have its existence explained and accounted for and thus justified. He shows that this project is incoherent because being and appearance as such, the fact not that a particular event happened in a particular place and time (which can of course be causally explained just as an interlocutor when asked can usually present a reason intended to justify his previous claim), but that objects as such exist and that we can see and touch them, is beyond explanation. This is a gaze (and a strategy of reading, for which it is also allegory) which interrogates (not by seeking the explanations or justifications for what has been posited or presented that has been refused by phenomenological presentation, but by seeking to identify previously disregarded details and uncovering what is implicit—unsaid but sayable—implicated, or folded within the object [or text]) by seeking not only to unfold its implications, but to find them by continued observation, not by inference or interpretation. The oyster’s “opening onto a world of possibilities” (the translator’s addition of the word “opening” is correct if not accurate, as Ponge merely states, “A
l’intérieur l’on trouve tout un monde”) as a consequence of bringing open physically by a knife is a metaphor for this rendering the object into a field for interrogation of the real, and of the possible as it is disclosed by the real.

Ponge’s ambiguous relationship with the concept of the autonomy of art is also demonstrated in “L’Huitre.” While on the one hand, the poem’s phenomenological objectivity and the location of beauty within the object implicitly contrasts non-aesthetic, habitual, or merely utilitarian modes of apprehension and thereby depends upon the autonomous and auratic character of modern art and aesthetics generally, Ponge actually resists this dependence by unifying the functional and the aesthetic, or at least making the former a condition of the latter.

In “Le Cageot” (“The Crate”) Ponge takes this dependence on functionality further and emphasizes the contingency of an everyday object on its fragility and limited lifespan as well as its dependence on a context of being not only used but used and then thrown away. The crate is oddly, even ironically, juxtaposed as appealing (Ponge says that “il luit alors de l'éclat sans vanité” (“it gleams with…unassuming luster”)) despite its very mundane context of being dumped as an waste object:

Le Cageot

A mi-chemin de la cage au cachot la langue française a cageot, simple caissette à claire-voie vouée au transport de ces fruits qui de la moindre suffocation font à coup sûr une maladie. Agencé de façon qu'au terme de son usage il puisse être brisé sans effort, il ne sert pas deux fois. Ainsi dure-t-il moins encore que les denrées fondantes ou nuageuses qu'il enferme. A tous les coins de rues qui aboutissent aux halles, il luit alors de l'éclat sans vanité du bois blanc. Tout neuf encore, et légèrement ahuri d'être dans une pose maladroite à la voirie jeté sans retour, cet objet est en somme des plus sympathiques - sur le sort duquel il convient toutefois de ne s'appesantar longuement.
(The Crate

Midway between cage and cahot, or cell, the French has cageot, a simple little open-slatted crate devoted to the transport of fruit that is such a way that after use it can easily be broken down, it never serves twice. Thus its life-span is shorter even than that of the perishable it encloses. So, at the corners of every street leading to the market, it gleams with the unassuming luster of slivered pine. Still brand new and somewhat aghast at the awkward situation, dumped irretrievably on the public thoroughfare, this object is most appealing, on the whole—yet one whose fate doesn’t warrant our overlong attention. [Ponge, 1979, 18])

Ponge highlights how its limited duration also limits its claim on our attention, but turns its fragility and disposability into an element of ephemeral aesthetic beauty. In stating of the crate, “Ainsi dure-t-il moins encore que les denrées fondantes ou nuageuses qu'il enferme” (“its life-span is shorter even than that of the perishable it encloses”), Ponge emphasizes its ephemeral character, which is in this case because of its function as a piece of equipment which is explicitly designed to be used and immediately thrown away. This frailty renders the crate is beautiful—or to be precise, sympathetic (“cet objet est en somme des plus sympathiques” [translated as “this object is most appealing”])—but “il convient toutefois de ne s'appesantir longuement” [“[it]doesn’t warrant our overlong attention”]).

“Le Cageot” expresses the kind of a democratic ethos that refuses to police the demarcation between beauty and ugliness, because ugly objects can be redefined as beautiful by the aesthetic gaze: “jeté sans retour, cet objet est en somme des plus sympathiques.” While the public considers the crate useless after its task has been completed, and thus of no value, the poet retrieves the object from wherever it has been thrown out (the translator adds an explanation of the fate of the tossed out object, presuming it to be “dumped irretrievably on the public thoroughfare”) and rehabilitates it
by replacing the functional value it recently had but lost with the aesthetic value that is constituted by an attentive gaze.

Ponge’s emphasis on the ephemerality of quotidian objects is also a central point in the aestheticization of the cigarette in “La Cigarette”:

La Cigarette

Rendons d'abord l'atmosphère à la fois brumeuse et sèche, échevelée, où la cigarette est toujours posée de tra-vers depuis que continûment elle la crée.

Puis sa personne: une petite torche beaucoup moins lu-mineuse que parfumée, d’où se détachent et choisent selon un rythme à déterminer un nombre calculable de petites masses de cendres.

Sa passion enfin: ce bouton embrasé, desquamant en pellicules argentées, qu'un manchon immédiat formé des plus récentes entoure.

(The Cigarette

First, let’s set the atmosphere, hazy yet dry, wispy, with the cigarette always placed right in the thick of it, once engaged in its continuous creation.

Then the thing itself: a small torch, far more perfumed than illuminating, from which, in a number of small heaps set within a chosen rhythm, ashes work free and fall.

Finally, its sacrifice: the glowing tip, scaling off in silvery flakes, while a tight muff formed of most recent ash encircles it” [Ponge, 1979, 20])

In “La Cigarette,” a functional object really does seem to undergo a shift of purpose from functionality to an object of pure aesthetic appreciation. Smoking a cigarette is not, of course, normally an object of contemplation, as a pearl in an oyster perhaps might be, the shift from equipmentality to aestheticized objectivity that is obscured in the two previously-discussed poems is brought to the forefront in “La Cigarette.” The principal object is recontextualized as something that may or may not remain in the hands and/or
mouth of the smoker but has passed entirely from something considered useful to an object of beauty and wonder.

The cigarette becomes an actor (as the translator says “then the thing itself”), which certainly represents a valid interpretation of Ponge’s phenomenological objectivity. Husserl had identified the task of phenomenology as the presentation of “the things themselves,” although “the thing itself” mistranslates “puis sa personne.” “Personne” here means personality, usefully defined by the Petit Robert not as the identity but rather the singularity of an individual, or what makes him or her unique: “Être humain considéré dans son individualité, sa spécificité” ("Human Being considered in its individuality, its specificity"). “The thing itself” does potentially suggest this singularity, but primarily it elides the dramatization of the object—a key part of the poem’s strategy of aestheticizing defamiliarization.

The cigarette is presented as a character in a drama, systematically presented and marked by a narrative logic: with the adverbs “d’abord,” “puis,” and “enfin” ("at first," "then" and "finally") in three stanzas or scenes in which first the atmosphere is set, then the character appears on stage, and finally he undergoes, “sa passion.” It is a one-man, one-act play whose title character’s role is essentially not to say, do, or refer to anything but simply to be there and manifest his own personality or persona. Thus, although it remains an ordinary object, it has become entirely present-at-hand for the poetic gaze. Indeed, it is situated in a context of involvements: “in the thick of it” as the translator again translates correctly as a general interpretation but incorrectly as a specific one, because the statement that “la cigarette est toujours posée de travers depuis que continellement elle la crée” in fact indicates a détournement away from its normal
context (*Le Petit Robert* renders “de travers” as “dans une direction, une position oblique par rapport à la normale” (Petit Robert). This shifting of context away from the normal or familiar, this defamiliarization through personification, is a consequence of the cigarette’s continual “creativity” as it transforms itself while burring.

The translator renders as “sacrifice” what in French is simply “la passion,” suggesting a metaphoric association with the passion of Christ that seems unlikely in the original, as the cigarette is undergoing a transformation but it is not clearly elucidated that the idea of passion here involves suffering (let alone sacrifice) so much as simply an experienced intensity, which is perhaps one way of understanding the Ponge’s idea of passion and why his descriptive poems are passionate. The theme of this poem and the way it is presented is also, as with the other two poems I have discussed, an allegory of its own poetic performance and of poetry in general as Ponge conceptualized it—another reason why Ponge’s descriptions are of inescapably aesthetic objects and don’t merely conveying documentary, factual information, why they are prose poems and not simply works of prose.

In each of these poems as we have seen there is an elevation of the ordinary to the extraordinary as part of the aestheticizing strategy implicit in Ponge’s project of phenomenological presentation. Although two of these poems seems to endeavor to efface the boundary between the useful and the beautiful by rendering the former the source of the latter, as was the case with Duchamp’s readymades, in “La Cigarette,” functionality is a source that seems utterly forgotten in a celebration of the autonomous character of intense, focused perception. Seeing is an act of interrogation because all of these objects are revealed as retaining their original identity but at the same time
becoming, under the poetic gaze, something more, and more complex, than what they appeared to be initially. Through defamiliarization, this reveals a structure of latency in which this interrogation invokes latent or unnoticed features of the object and brings them into visibility.
III. CHAPTER ONE. Heidegger

World, Earth, and Truth

The concept of defamiliarization provides a useful rubric for understanding Heidegger’s thought. In Being and Time, the story of how things become visible as present-at-hand objects when there is a breakdown in our otherwise purely instrumental, utilitarian relation to things (which Heidegger associates with inauthenticity), can be read, against the grain, as a story of how something like aesthetic perception becomes possible. In Heidegger’s later work, it is art that takes the place of the broken tool in making a changed perception possible.

We may ask, what does it mean for a work of art to be true, or even to present a truth? When we say that such a representation or presentation is true, or that a work of art is effective, it may mean that it provokes us to see the world and ourselves in a different light. Hence, works of art have a rhetorical aspect; if they work, they persuade us to see differently how things are or how they might be. It may be then that what is presented or revealed has some intelligible and significant relationship with some aspect of our lives, and the work of art thus causes us to see our lives differently; then we construct a different fiction, and if we believe it, if it makes enough good sense of our experience, we say that it is true, and that we have learned something.

Heidegger rejects what is known as the correspondence theory of truth, which is based on the model of the representation of objects. In “What is Called Thinking?” Heidegger says of the traditional view of thinking:

Is there anyone among us who does not know what it is to form an idea? When we form an idea of something—of a text if we are philologists, a work of art if we are art historians, a combustion process if we are chemists—we have a representational idea of those objects. Where do we
have those ideas? We have them in our head. We have them in our consciousness. We have them in our soul. *We have the ideas inside, these ideas of objects,* (ibid. 39, emphasis mine).

Heidegger critiques not just representation, but the representational model of truth. As John McCumber notes, Heidegger seeks “to free philosophy from the domination of the present, and from its concomitant subservience to ‘truth’ conceived as some correspondence relation holding between two entities which somehow exist simultaneously” (McCumber 1991, 512). To the representational model of thinking Heidegger counterposes the mode of *presentation* particular to works of art. Thus, poetry becomes the model of thinking in later Heidegger. Truth is not essentially a correspondence of proposition and state of affairs; it is essentially a making present. In art, whose essence is poetry, “language brings what *is* as something that *is* into the Open for the first time” (ibid. 694). The essence of truth is “unconcealment” and this is effected principally by art.

According to the account in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” a work of art, in disclosing or revealing “a” world, and thereby also revealing “the” world in a new light, makes possible and intelligible new ways of being, understanding, living, and doing things. “*Art . . . is the becoming and happening of truth*” (Heidegger 1971, 69, emphasis mine). Heidegger understands the work of art in terms of truth, truth as partly a matter of how the “new” comes about, and the work of art as the medium for bringing that truth to light. For Heidegger, a work of art involves “the disclosure of the particular being in its being,” and, in fact, discloses objects, equipment, and the world itself—the latter as the context in which objects and equipment appear.

An artwork both presents the entity in question explicitly or ‘thematically’ and it
also presents the context in which that entity is significant (McCumber 130). In making the world (in the ordinary sense) that we live in present in a certain way, it presents a distinct world in the sense peculiar to works of art (the world constituted in and by the work) and in the sense of a meaningful totality in terms of which the things that appear in the world make sense. Central to Heidegger’s argument is the understanding of the latter in terms of the former. Because artworks constitute worlds, it is the work of art that enables us to understand what objects and equipment are and how they are significant for us.

To disclose a truth is to illuminate a previously unknown or unfamiliar realm. That the work of art is the event or “happening” of truth, as Heidegger says, implies that that which makes truth present is, in a certain way, wholly new, existing in a discontinuity with the understanding that preceded its appearance, and thus presenting things that are unfamiliar or presenting familiar things in an unfamiliar light. Truth is, for Heidegger, essentially novel and extraordinary. “The setting-into-work of truth thrusts up the unfamiliar and extraordinary and at the same time thrusts down the ordinary and what we believe to be such” (Heidegger 2001, 72).

Thus, in the revealing of truth, the very nature of the work of art is to reveal a “world.” This “world,” which includes all the things that show up, is brought “out of inconspicuousness and into salience, and place[d] ‘on display’” (Young, 38). However, the revelation or presentation of a world only happens in such a way that this world necessarily interplays with what Heidegger calls “earth,” which essentially conceals itself or resists appearing and is always “ever-concealed, ever-enclosed, and always withdrawn in itself” (King 71). “Earth” includes the material of the work of art—the paint of the
painting, the stone of the sculptor, the words of the poem, etc. (Stulberg 261). The situation of world-disclosure in relation to earth is partly a consequence of the finitude of our understanding. “There is much in being that man cannot master. There is but little that comes to be known. What is known remains inexact, what is mastered insecure. What is, is never of our making. . .” (ibid., 51). Thus, it could be said that earth and world are equally unfamiliar: earth because it resists the present understanding, world because it transcends it.

What is clearly presented or disclosed through art as the “world” is always embedded in the “earth,” or what resists all presentation and representation, such that world and earth, according to Heidegger, are engaged in a struggle in which the open and unhidden world tries to surmount the hidden earth, and the earth tries to draw the world into itself. That is to say, there is always a tendency towards revelation and clarification and a corresponding “conservative” tendency that is part of the way things show up, the way things that are present resist being made present, which has to do with the essential opacity of materiality (language for the poet, marble for the sculptor, etc.), without which appearance and meaning would not be possible. Thus, as McCumber puts it, the words a poet uses have a “pre-significance” which consists of “the meaning they had before the poet actually put them to work in the poem, i.e., the sum total of the information they convey, of their denotations and connotations, or of their possible uses in the language,” (McCumber 134). This “pre-significance” is an unrepresentable totality of actual and possible meanings that do not and cannot themselves appear in the poem.

By definition what is not concealed—later Heidegger often identifies truth with “unconcealment,” as he does in “Origin”—depends on the possibility of its being, or
having been, concealed. This means that the conditions of possibility of presentation are also conditions that limit it. Thus, “[t]ruth is un-truth, insofar as there belongs to it the reservoir of the not-yet uncovered, the un-uncovered, in the sense of concealment” (ibid., 58). In elucidating the world/earth distinction, McCumber uses the example, taken from Heidegger, of a marble statue:

A given piece of marble, in other words, may have the Pietà in it … Since that statue, once carved, remains a thing of marble, it never loses its dependence upon a domain inherently undisclosable. There is always a tension between the marble or the site, and the statue or the building; and the essay goes so far as to call this tension a “strife,” (McCumber, 133).

Thus there is no work of art that does not rest on and contain a “material” aspect that resists resolving itself into a clear representation. The world, according to Heidegger, serves to uplift and to open the hiddenness of the earth, and the earth serves to ground and protect the transcendent, intangible realm of the world. And, together, the world and earth serve to set forth the unity that we have called the work of art. We can never obtain perfect clarity because there is always a residue of the concealed/concealing.

As Young notes, the interplay between the earth and the world forms an interaction that is at the heart of the work of art as Heidegger understands it. Art’s power of innovation with respect to the world(s) it presents, represents, and even creates is rooted in the dependence of world on earth. Heidegger uses the example of a Greek temple to elucidate the relationship between earth and world: “The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground” (Heidegger 41). The work makes earth appear and be present, and at the same time it presents it precisely as something that is resistant to becoming manifest.
We might think of this in terms of language in a poem or color in a painting: a work of art not only uses language or color, but in a curious way makes present the materiality of language or color, which it thematizes. World and earth are two essential features of the work of art, and they belong together, in the “unity of work-being” (ibid. 46). “[W]orld and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth and earth juts through world” (ibid. 46). What is concealed is essentially subject to presentation and being brought to light, to elucidation and interpretation, yet at the same time what reveals itself is essentially opaque and resistant to interpretation or presentation, and the fact of this opacity is also presented. That is, the resistance to disclosure which is earth can itself be made to appear, but then what appears is not the “essence” of the “material” that resists disclosure but the fact of its existence and persistence. What is presented is not only “by nature undisclosable,” but this unpresentability is presented.

To elucidate how both world and earth are made present through the revealing by the work of art of a truth, it is worth mentioning an example that Heidegger gives, a pair of peasant’s shoes in a painting by Vincent Van Gogh. Heidegger’s analysis of peasant shoes in Van Gogh’s painting foreshadows a technique that Duchamp will later employ in a very different way. If one were to encounter a peasant’s shoes being worn in a village, they would not be considered art. The shoes then exist in a particular context in which a set of meanings is attributed to them connected with their use. However, Van Gogh, by painting them, takes the shoes out of their normal context of use, and it is partly through this recontextualization that it becomes possible for us to look at the shoes and the world that the shoes are part of in a way that could not be understood in their
“earthly” context. And it is that understanding that constitutes the meaning of the painting as a work of art, that makes it a work of art.

The portrayal of the shoes in the painting “discloses” how the shoes show up and are used in the life of the peasant, and, thereby, “[t]he art work lets us know what shoes are in truth” (ibid., 35). However, “the equipmentality of equipment first genuinely arrives at its appearance through the work and only in the work” (ibid. 35), because it is only through a work of art that we can explicitly come to understand how we use the things that are part of our everyday lives. The work of art reveals the “actual nature” or “being” of things and thus serves to unveil the “truth” (as “unconcealment”) of beings and of equipment.

That truth is unconcealment means that it happens against the background of what is concealed. In the normal state of affairs, the familiar, everyday world, the true nature of things is not really understood. Truth then must be an estrangement. A defamiliarized view of an object might lead us not to see the “truth” of that object in some sharper perception or special experience but to simply adopt a critical stance towards our usual ways of seeing or using that thing, which implies some kind of truth. In Duchamp, whose objects are defamiliarized by being rendered dysfunctional, the focus seems to be more on that dysfunctionality than on an unfamiliar beauty.

**Estrangement and uncanniness in Being and Time**
But the roots of an aesthetics of defamiliarization lay in Heidegger’s earlier work, in *Being and Time*, which should be read as a background to “Origin.” Heidegger’s concept of the “unheimlich” in *Being and Time* is useful for understanding a poetics of defamiliarization and its experiential basis. It is not ascribed any aesthetic significance, since *Being and Time* is an existential ontology and in a certain sense an ethics, but not an aesthetics, though certainly it can be. The reason is obvious, and derives from the meaning of the concept. “Unheimlich” is translated in the standard English translation as “uncanny,” but Heidegger himself notes that it also has the meaning of “not-at-home-ness,” which is literally what it means since “heim” means home (*heimat* is homeland), un- is a negation and -lich makes it an adjective. Unheimlichkeit is not-at-home-ness. Hubert Dreyfus in his commentary translates it “unsettledness.”

“Strangeness” is also a possible translation, surely, because at-home-ness is familiarity, and the opposite of the familiar is the strange. Then if there is a movement towards the unheimlich it would be estrangement or, indeed, defamiliarization. So it is quite clear from these reflections that unheimlichkeit if it is a positive value, something good, and Heidegger is clear that it is, gives us the possibility for an ethics that is also an aesthetics.

Clearly, an absolute estrangement is as much an impossibility as an absolute familiarity. An encounter with an object that appears absolutely strange would be an encounter with something so unassimilable to our experience it surely could not be recognized, because recognition is assimilative, the root *cognoscere* having among its meanings “acquaintance,” a meaning that is preserved in the French *connaissance*. We can never know or become acquainted with what is absolutely strange or Other to us.

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“Strange” comes from extraneus, meaning “external, foreign,” from extra, “outside, without.” What is strange is what is outside, just as the stranger, the foreigner (in French a foreigner is an étranger), the alien, is one who comes from outside the territory proper to the “people,” the ones who belong. At the same time, it should be equally obvious that absolute familiarity, if it can be achieved, would at least destroy both creativity and experience, at least in a certain sense, because where everything is familiar nothing is new, and thus nothing really happens. Heidegger’s “average everydayness” does come close to an absolute familiarity in this sense.

Indeed, Heidegger does tend to assume the absolutely familiar and rooted character of the social practices that constitute everyday life. This may be a consequence of his resolutely anti-intellectual, anti-theoretical account of practice. And in a way when familiarity collapses and one finds oneself rootless and unsettled, it seems to be a kind of absolute strangeness. One moves from a condition where everything is so familiar that nothing is really noticed to one in which nothing is familiar. In the initial condition, everything is understood implicitly but nothing can be understood explicitly; there is already a latent estrangement in the conspicuousness of things when there is a breakdown in instrumental practice. In the final condition, nothing makes sense anymore: indeed, another name for unheimlichkeit is nonsense, because sense entails direction (sens), which means knowing if not where you are, at least where you are going: since practice is teleological, practical sense is knowing where « you are going with that »; a sense of purpose is a sense of direction because purposive action is teleological, it is directed at an end to be attained, and it is perhaps because practice has the linearity of orientation to a telos that stories have conclusions and not just stopping points and history, « the
story », is teleological. So the logic of the development of existential crisis in *Being and Time* is from inchoate sense to nonsense, and of course Entschlossenheit or resoluteness is nothing more than the lucid and courageous embrace of meaninglessness in which one can only validate one’s practice through the assertion of will or resolve (as in the English translation of Entschlossenheit, « resoluteness »). No doubt there are children of divorced parents and speakers of multiple languages who feel equally at home in two or more places. But it is not familiarity or at-home-ness but rather its impossibly presumed absolute character that renders Heidegger’s theory of practice so totalitarian that the alienated person can only experience and affirm his alienation from his society and then continue to play his assigned role with a consciousness of his alienation, as if its cause and meaning were that he has found himself outside not his society but outside « the world » in some metaphysical sense that can be detached from the society in its particularity. For it has no particularity. Indeed, in a way it has no finitude; if it did, it would be particular. Why doesn’t the defamiliarization of unheimlichkeit reveal the finitude, contingency, and particularity of one’s social practices? Indeed, Heidegger seems to think we have an intuition of contingency and Dreyfus argues that this (he calls it groundlessness) is what underlies and makes possible unheimlichkeit. In fact, Heidegger regards a society’s practices as both contingent and necessary: he seems to think they are sociologically necessary and metaphysically contingent. This assumption of sociological necessity condemns the individual with a consciousness of crisis to an understanding of this crisis and its meaning in purely metaphysical and anti-political terms.

Heidegger does not talk about the strangeness of the Other; his philosophy is
communitarian and seems to know only the “I” and perhaps a “we.” Nor is my becoming unheimlich for or to myself or my experiencing unheimlichkeit a reflection into my own experience of an estrangement that would come from what is foreign or transgressive of the boundaries of the proper. In fact, it does not seem to come from any kind of encounter, either with a strange person or a strange thing. To be sure, when he discusses the artwork in “Origin,” he attributes to it a strangeness; certainly it is remarkable and it has novelty, a notion which may derive from Kant’s analysis of genius in the third critique. But in Being and Time estrangement is essentially a departure, a leave-taking, from the normality, propriety, and familiarity of the unreflectively totalitarian sociality of das Man (the “they”), which gives Dasein its understanding of itself and its world. Since all of the possibilities for understanding come from the social practices one is habitually socialized into, there is no possibility for discovering something new or different that would appear enigmatic and provoke reflection or wonder, love or hate; the only way novelty or any other effect of estrangement could occur is through a modification of the understanding of the world and of oneself that one has in everyday life.

Unheimlichkeit is a disturbance, and what is disturbed or deranged is normality, and in particular the normality that derives from the normativity of the social practices that determine the individual’s understanding of the world and of what is to be done. They also are what make it possible for one to be, that is, to “feel” or to understand oneself as, at home in the world and thus comfortable. Heidegger speaks of “tranquilized familiarity”; normal everyday life has a familiar character that possess a tranquility or contentment that, from a defamiliarized point of view, can only appear as somehow artificially imposed or enforced, as if it were the effect of an ideological persuasion that
functions like a dulling intoxicant such as opium which renders one tranquil because pleasantly stupified, although in fact no conscious effort of any kind needs to be undertaken to make possible this tranquility, which is perfectly “natural” since it characterizes all conscious subjectivity that pertains to members of a collectivity into whose practices they are socialized. This follows from the non-reflective intentionality of practice for Heidegger, which is socially determined because in order to use a tool to accomplish something without explicitly representing either the tool or the task as an object that requires deliberation, the tool must seem to come with uses and purposes that are given, since otherwise they would have to be chosen and then the activity would be problematic and our practice would lose its taken-for-granted character. The tool can be taken for granted because we know what it is for. Meaning is given; the things that make up the world around us appear to us with uses and significations that are embedded in them. Culture therefore seems to be natural. The way we do things seems to manifest the way things are, or “how it is.” The origin of this given significance is the social practices that constitute the fabric of one’s life. And practices must be social; they must be part of and constitutive of enough of a community to allow for normativity, for there being a way in which things are done, and a right and wrong way to do what one is doing. Implicit in this normativity is the notion of an anonymous or collective subject whose role is to represent the norm: this is what “we” do, or what “one” does (das Man, translated in the Maquarrie and Robinson edition of Being and Time as “the they”). Of course, this normativity in itself is absolutely totalitarian, closed, and allows neither autonomy nor creativity nor thought, although it does not preclude intelligence or the successful accomplishment of tasks.
However, according to Heidegger there is something in the human condition that renders this type of closure imperfectly tenable. What frustrates the tranquility of the person who is perfectly at home doing what he has learned to do as a consequence of his effective enculturation and absorption in the familiar world of his community is the fact that the taken-for-granted character of practice dissolves and its groundlessness and unjustifiability becomes manifest as soon as there is some sort of failure or breakdown, and this possibility seems to be built into practice because of its fallibility. Purposive activity can succeed or fail, and it is because of this that there is always a concern to do things properly that is expressed in the normativity of practice. Since understanding is practical, existential breakdown is a subjective form of the breakdown or failure of a practice or activity. When this happens, one becomes anxious, and anxiety reveals the uncanniness of not being at home not in the sense of being in the wrong place but of being nowhere, of being deprived of the possibility of being situated, and deprived of the familiarity of “average everydayness.” Such an experience could perhaps lead in all sorts of directions—towards critical inquiry, towards a political consciousness, or towards an understanding that is best articulated through a work of art. Perhaps, indeed, encounters with artworks no less than crises in the “functioning” of everyday life might lead to this sort of experience of abnormality, disorientation, or alienation. Indeed, arguably this is what happens in “The Origin of the Work of Art.” In the latter work, experiential crises rooted in breakdowns in the activities of everyday life have lost their priority along with everyday life, and the idea that the “world” is given as the correlate of practice. Instead, what we can understand of the “world” we live in is what is presented or represented of it in the particular “world” of an artwork. The artwork is defamiliarizing in a different sense
than the quasi-religious experience of unheimlichkeit in *Being and Time*: it is just that it refashions our understanding and brings to the fore elements of our experience that were previously taken for granted. Heidegger seems to have carried forward from *Being and Time* the idea that presentation or visibility has in itself an uncanny or strange quality. This preserves the sense of wonder Heidegger elsewhere has said characterized the approach to experience of the Greeks. This idea is implicit in Heidegger’s understanding of practice in *Being and Time*, which renders the experience of wonder exceptional, as it is grounded in crisis. It is an essential feature of the human condition, but one whose emergence is extraordinary, and thus the revelation that Heidegger throughout his career identified with truth was understood as an “unconcealment” that can only develop on the background of a “concealment” that Heidegger thought characterized the normal understanding of everyday life. This is a tragic understanding of existence that effectively turns on the concept of tragic recognition precipitated by a crisis. When things are going well, in a curious sense things are noticed but nothing stands out, nothing is remarkable (or wonderful or enigmatic), and it is as if we see things but do not notice them. Heidegger calls this way of being aware of our environment “circumspection.” Since things that we are aware of but do not notice are familiar, when we do notice them, the experience is striking and can even be disorienting. The sense of the “uncanny” or the “unsettling” is the experience of a personal crisis occasioned by the strangeness of what appears in such a way that it seems very striking just because it is no longer so familiar as not to be noticed. The Heidegger of “Origin” thinks it no longer makes sense to even speak of a “world” where nothing is remarkable; only the artwork, which is remarkable, can present a “world” (and therefore an understanding), and therefore, since it “discloses”
a reality (a “world”), only an artwork can present a “truth.” But of course, behind the strangeness of worlds must lie a familiar understanding which objects of *aisthesis* may well reinforce (they cannot create it, of course, since it is already there); perhaps that is part of what Heidegger has in mind in the Epilogue to “Origin” when he denigrates “experience.”

**Nowhere man: from conformity into the anxious void**

One reason the artwork is impossible in *Being and Time* is that the account of the emergence of an experience of unheimlichkeit is a defamiliarization that leads nowhere. It cannot lead anywhere because there is no significance in the world of *Being and Time* outside of the normative character of the social practices of a community. And it has to be a community, and a singular, essentially homogeneous community, first because the world that « *Dasein* » in its character of « *Being-in-the-world* » is « in », in the sense of meaningfully involved in, is singular. But why must *Dasein* have the character of *Being-in-the-world* and not *Being-in-worlds*?

If one follows Hubert Dreyfus’s Wittgensteinian interpretation of Division I of *Being and Time* as locating understanding in the normative character of practice, the singularity of practice surely follows from its normativity: there can be only be a right and wrong way of doing things if there is in fact a way of doing things, and not a multiplicity of ways. (There are a multiplicity of things, and there are a multiplicity of things we can do with them, but there is one right way to do each of them.) This may follow from the fact that doing something is doing it in a particular way; there is no meaningful way to distinguish sharply between project and style, between the what and the how of doing something, and this indistinction is part of the very idea of a practice:
part of what it is do a particular thing is to do something in a particular way. The basis of the distinction is the distinction between nouns and adjectives, and based on this, substance and accident.

Heidegger defines projects in terms of intentions or purposes that are originally present non-thetically, and he names such an intention an « in-order-to ». The ultimate determinant of a project’s significance, and its ultimately causality, lies with a « for-the-sake-of-which » that these projects refer to, which is something pertaining to the identity of the individual (or collective subject) who has the self-understanding of « Dasein » and who, as such, is self-interpreting and has to be because he understands, dimly or lucidly, that what, who, why, or how he is can only be a question and not something given to be discovered, and is bound to be a question because existence is engimatic, including that of the world we live in and that of ourselves. Obviously, ways of doing things (for instance, hurriedly, hesitantly, or with great care) are just as much candidates for what one is doing as what one aims to accomplish in doing it, and ways of being what one is are just as much candidates for who or what one is as any other aspect of what we are doing. Indeed, it can be argued that style is where the significance of social practices are essentially located: after all, in every culture people eat and drink, but it is only in certain cultures that people eat with knives and forks or observe the table manners developed by the modern European bourgeoisie. Bourdieu has written about the significance of such practices as the injunction to « sit up straight ». In any case, a style of instrumental practice is as normative as any aspect of it we might suppose to be more directly determined by its implicit teleology, and this indeed speaks against or at least calls into question the teleological utilitarianism of Heidegger’s theory of practice, though not,
surely, the idea of the primacy of practice, the thesis that understanding is in its essence practical (and that practice involves an understanding: this is how it differs from behavior). If we are what we do, and if in some sense what we are doing constitutes, if not a totality, at least a unity, then we ourselves must be multiple or fragmented and not unitary. Mathematically, this would correspond to a set of elements that is a quantity but not a set, which is an absurdity; thus, there is certainly a multiplicity of things, but there is no thing that is multiple. (If there were only one thing there could be only one name, perhaps the name « Being » which names that which is in its Being or is-ness; but of course nothing could be said about it, though it might be an object of wonder. Attaining this state, which is the negation of multiplicity, is the object of any mysticism of the One. The stupefaction that this would entail is not a consequence of an attitude of wonder directed at existence, but of the refusal of articulation.) I can say, « There is multiplicity; there are many things. » Doubtless this is always true. There may be infinitely many possibilities (especially if the space, time, or world in which they are located is infinite), and in any case there are more things that are possible than are actual in any place and at any time. But there is a singularity in thought and speech and practice: A sentence expresses a single thought (Frege); in speech phonemes can only be emitted sequentially, one at a time; and it is only the text that is constituted as a fabric woven from a multiplicity of statements. And can one do more than one thing at a time? Yes, but there is in Heidegger’s idea that being (and thus practice) is “in each case mine” a reference to the subject of an “I” that, since it can only be unitary, confers an identity and unity on its practices.
Dasein is presumed to be singular. It is «in each case mine». It is the fact that practice is always meaningful to the practitioners ultimately because of a self-interpretation in terms of an identity or a possible way of being who one is (or who we are) that renders Heidegger’s theory of practice totalitarian, because it means that practices are explained in terms of subjects, individual and collective, and communitarian totalitarianism can be defined as the determination of the individual by the singular identity of the community. At the same time, the reason we can and do understand ourselves in particular ways that can be affirmed is precisely that who and what we are is not given but is problematic. Individuals and societies are self-interpreting; who and what we are is an issue, or an important question, because we are enigmas to ourselves, because being is enigmatic; indeed, because it is strange. Is this simply a particular cultural prejudice, which, along with the related idea of “wonder” that Heidegger finds as the essential attitude towards existence of the Greeks, constitutes the particularity of European culture? Or is it rooted, say, in human being’s premature birth? Or in the character of what I encounter as being “Not-I,” and, even before that, stuff that I somehow must deal with in order to survive? Perhaps because human beings lack familiar practices or habits that they are born with, or “instincts”? In any case, we can and surely all do «desire to understand», as Aristotle put it, because our existence is a question for us. Indeed, this presupposes an encounter with strangeness: our existence (and its meaning) can only be a question for us, and has to be, because we find it strange, curious, fascinating: unheimlich. Dreyfus interprets Heidegger as arguing that this is because it is groundless. Of course, that supposes that we are somehow naturally inclined to seek a «ground» of our existence, meaning perhaps not necessarily a justifying reason.
but at least some kind of explanation, story, myth, or other no doubt discursive statement that explains the enigma or that answers « the fundamental question » of existence, that of ourselves or of the world or of our existence in the world (« Being-in-the-world »), perhaps understood, as Heidegger argues it ultimately and originally always is, in terms of our practical involvements. To say as Heidegger does that our existence is an issue for us as well as a question is to say that it is a question that has profound importance and urgency. There is an implicit ethics in Heidegger’s ontology and it is one of questioning and problematization.

But Heidegger is neither a Cartesian nor a Platonist; this ethics is not one of Socratic dialectic or scientific inquiry. In fact, it excludes both philosophy understood in a traditional sense (as rational inquiry) and art. That is because there is no way for the unheimlich subject to move forward, and in fact there is nothing drawing him forward because the unheimlich experience in Being and Time is not an encounter with an Other, an event, an artwork, or a thought. It is the estrangement of one who has had his passport revoked without being able to relocate to a new land. It is a pure alienation that is not an alterification. One becomes rootless without becoming cosmopolitan. What happens is one suffers a kind of breakdown that causes one to feel anxiety, and the essence of anxiety according to Heidegger is unheimlichkeit: not being at home. One experiences the strangeness not of a new language but of one’s own. One becomes deterritorialized and unsettled without nomadic wandering; one stays at home but no longer belongs there. One stays at home, stays in his proper place, because there is no place to go, and there cannot be because the world is unitary, practice is unitary, the self is unitary, and one’s social world is unitary. This is because the normative social practices that constitute the
self’s understanding are those of a community, and community by definition is homogeneous. Being-in-the-world as Heidegger understands it is essentially homogeneous. And of course that is why most of the time there is nothing to be encountered, nothing happens, there are no aliens, and there can be no alienation. There is only the Same; the Other is only possible in this world as mit-sein, as one of us, as part of either das Man or some collective Dasein engaged in some collective project. The collectivity that is not homogeneous is not a community but a city, and arguably only a modern city.

Normativity is almost always defined by belonging, by what is proper, proper to myself, proper to ourselves: identity, community. Heidegger could not develop an ethics in *Being and Time*, beyond one of embracing alienation and then, since there is nowhere to go, in fact nothing to learn or discover, nothing new, because nothing can happen, there is only the ensemble of meaningful normative social practices that constitute one’s community and its traditions, returning to embrace one’s inevitable determination by what is given in the unique social world that one is part of, and embrace it with courage, determination, lucidity, and « resoluteness » (Entschlossenheit). In fact, the idea in « Origin of the Work of Art » of the work of art which discloses a, and/or the, world is surely intelligible partly as a response to this impasse. And it may be useful to connect the two works, retaining the outlines of the theory of practice in *Being and Time* as well as the account of unheimlichkeit; the result, I want to argue, is to enrich the account of estrangement by linking it at once to the becoming-problematic through a crisis of some kind of the social practices in which one is embedded and to the encounter with significant form in the creation or reception of a work of art. This encounter can certainly
be thought of as fundamentally a response to something enigmatical or strange (and not merely problematic, since mere practical problems have practical solutions and lead at best to political activism and not art or literature) in one’s experience, and this helps link the experience of estrangement or unsettledness to practices of interpretation or making sense of one’s experience; that is, unheimlichkeit is not only a consequence of the fact that Dasein is the being whose being is a question and an issue for it, but awareness of this existential fact is provoked by experiences of the unheimlich and essentially by them; indeed, it is they that provoke us to think as well as create (not just make things, but make artworks and through them, worlds and interpretations of worlds), and to think creatively. This means the world we live in has got to have in it at least one thing that the world of \textit{Being and Time} does not have: the artwork, and whatever it presupposes. The work of art is not possible in \textit{Being and Time}. In some sense neither is the person who speaks several languages and is equally at home in all of them. The world of \textit{Being and Time} is a premodern one. Where there is a totalizing unity of the social practices engaged in by practitioners, there must be a community to which those practices pertain, and it is this community that is named by « das Man », translated by Macquarrie and Robinson as « the they » and which Dreyfus suggests translating as « the one ». One does what one does, what everyone does: this indicates that one belongs to a community. A community is defined by what it has in common; the common is its substance; and these common things are precisely, its practices, its ways of doing things. Practices also constitute or have a tradition in so far as they endure over time, and the subject of these traditions is the community. Heidegger in « Origin » thinks that communities are founded by works of art and he longed for a new artwork that would be paradigmatic and authoritative for an
entire community which would be constituted by it: *e pluribus unum*. The American motto suggests that the modern republican constitution might well serve as such an « artwork ». Of course constitutions are texts are so can be considered literature as well as law, like all law (the West has derived from the Jewish tradition the idea of the practice of textual interpretation as the ideal way of understanding law), but Heidegger’s definition of the work of art as world-disclosive (and of disclosure as the essence of truth, which derives from his interpretation of the idea of phenomenology that what appears or is presented or manifest is what is real) causes him to tend toward championing any novel way of seeing because it is art. (This same tendency is implicit in Alain Badiou’s notion of the « event », which is indebted to Heidegger.) The theory of art that Heidegger developed in this essay, written between 1935 and 1937, is fully consistent with his 1933 endorsement of the Nazi party (and indeed offers a much better basis for it than the philosophically uninteresting essay « The Self-Assertion of the German University », in which that endorsement was declared). This is simply because « Origin » has no ethics or politics, only an aesthetics, though this is an advance on *Being and Time* which has none of these. And if art is the site of truth because it is the medium of world-disclosure, and if an ethics or politics worth the name is grounded in and expressive of a truth or set of truths, than an aesthetics is necessary to ground ethics and politics.

Implicitly the world of « Origin » is multiple; Heidegger’s communitarian longings led him to suppose that a truly effective work of art would exercise its rhetorical power over a collectivity that it would unify into a community that is united by its self-understanding as constituted by the singular artwork that serves as its constitution (I mean, that which constitutes it and gives it its identity). But there is nothing in the logic
of the work of art as Heidegger describes it that compels this direction. In fact, the logic of the artwork points in a contrary direction: a work of art discloses a singular world; it gives us the particular world of the artist. The plurality of perspectives is a necessary consequence of their particularity. If my perspective is particular to me, it is not general and certainly not universal. Is particularity possible? Dasein is « in each case mine », but are we all the same? This is the dream of community. It is the very idea of « the one ». And yet this dream seems to be implicit in the logic of practice: that is part of what Heidegger appears to show in *Being and Time*. And he also shows that it is untenable. And the root of this untenability is that, even as our understanding of the world and ourselves is inevitably determined by our embeddedness in normative social practices that we uncritically adopt and follow, we also are self-interpreting beings who are condemned to struggle with the fact that existence, our own and that of the entire world constituted by our practical involvements that constitute our existence, or the form and shape and character it has for us, and all of the possibilities that are or might be available to us, is strange. It belongs to us and we to it (how could it not? How could we not? Existence is « in each case mine »; I appropriate the practices that are given to me and understand them as the things that I do and that I want to do, and when my name is called I recognize myself as doing certain of these things and having them as mine to do or not do, affirm or protest). But our property and propriety are never secure; it is as if we cannot help wanting to feel at home, secure, proper, familiar and perhaps for that purpose within the circle of some nuclear or extended family (and indeed, community and nation are little more than that), normal, and indeed right and good, but normativity is not rooted in the *eidos* or idea of the good, but in the norm, or the normative and the normal. And of
course this is rooted in the normativity of practice: there is always a right and wrong way of doing something, at least if practice is conceived of instrumentally or teleologically. A style or manner of doing something is right or wrong if it is purposive: one does the thing in this way « in order to » accomplish something or be a certain way (« for the sake of » a possibility of myself or ourselves: as I have argued above, a possible way of being may just be a style). It is the concept of a possible way of being that reveals the groundlessness of being, and this for Heidegger is the basis of the experience of anxiety and unheimlichkeit. Ultimately every culture has a self-understanding or set of understandings of what it is like or wants to be like, and this cannot be explained by anything else. (At least not as far as the self-understanding of members of that culture, as opposed to an anthropologist, are concerned.) It doesn’t serve any purpose. As Wittgenstein argued, in the end we just have to say, this is what we do. But people also want to make sense of their experience. And when you try to do so, you eventually find it doesn’t make sense, because it cannot be explained. Ultimately one is faced, in inquiry into nature, with the sheer reality of Being, and in cultural inquiry, with the inexplicable fact that we appear to have certain characteristics and they are just facts about us. Dreyfus explains the emergence of unheimlichkeit in this way: it is a response to the discovery of the groundlessness of Being. One feels uncanny, not at home, because no basis can be found for what one is doing. And there is no possible basis: the practices of my society are groundless and therefore meaningless, provoking, when I finally recognize this, my anxious disquiet, but I cannot invent new ones and give them a ground and a meaning, except simply as given meaning by my having chosen and willed them
(this is Sartre’s solution), which is obviously nihilism, since my will would have no ground.

Heidegger does not offer a poetics, and while he might well be said to practice philosophical writing in a manner that is poetic and to advocate such a practice of thinking (given the assimilation in some of his later writings of thought to poetry), describing this discursive or textual strategy has not been the object of inquiry in this chapter. So, unlike in my discussions of Duchamp and Ponge, I have not treated Heidegger’s philosophy, early or late, as exemplifying an aesthetics of defamiliarization. Rather, his importance for my purposes lies in the resources he gives us for theorizing it.

Between 1927 and 1937, the years of publication of *Being and Time* and the final version of « *Origin of the Work of Art* », respectively, Germany in particular and Europe in general were caught within a problematical tension between forces of tradition and forces of modernity. The Third Reich itself is intelligible partly as an attempt to be both modern and traditional, and ideas of how Germany could and should be or become whatever it could understand itself to be in its essence were asserted and instituted in part because Weimar Germany was sufficiently modern for German national identity to have become a question and an issue, a question endowed with some importance and urgency, just as Heidegger said of the ontological essence of « *Dasein* », a term clearly meant to both name and describe individual human beings and collectivities that were, or could be thought to be, similarly possessed of some kind of identity or character. Heidegger’s early philosophy describes the crisis of a society that has become problematic without there appearing (at least to Heidegger at the time) to be any alternative.
Heidegger’s theory of practice is communitarian, and the practices that give meaning to people’s lives, and that provide them with all the resources they might hope to make use of in constructing such a meaning deliberately, are in essence those of a community. The « subject » of these practices is « das Man », which means someone in general, and obviously the condition of intelligibility of this idea is the existence of a plurality of individuals who are essentially the same, at least with regard to what they are doing. This communitarianism is obviously premodern, and indeed, in a sense, it is prior to language, or at least to any poetic or creative use of language (and obviously to any kind of inquiry, and therefore to philosophy and science as well as art). The picture of the social world Heidegger presents in Being and Time is also a society without a history, since the new cannot appear although traditional folkways no longer always make sense to people; and it is without a politics in the sense of speech and action taking place, as Arendt argues in The Human Condition they only make sense, in a public sphere or res publica whose condition of possibility is the contingent rather than necessary character of social institutions and practices. In other words, it is an anti-republican fantasy of a closed society, and the only social practices that could be appropriate to the alienation it acknowledges as inevitable would be those of a religious mysticism or some secularized form of it; neither art, nor philosophy, nor science nor politics are possible: no procedures for the elaboration of a truth that would develop out of the experience of defamiliarizing alienation. In “Origin” Heidegger will rectify this problem.

Heidegger is clear that the ordinary way of « circumspectively » using a hammer involves one in an understanding that is fully instrumental and not at all discursive. There are things that can be said, but ordinarily they are just ways of pointing out a
« signification » that is already articulated non-discursively within the practice.

Heidegger’s philosophical anthropology assumes the priority of tool-using to language, and assimilates the latter to the former. Since in some sense the defining characteristic of everyday life on this account its familiarity, which Heidegger sometimes calls « tranquilized », perhaps because it is both thoughtless and untroubled, endowed with a perfect contentment, it follows that the only possible escape from the banality of this world is through a process of defamiliarization or estrangement, or, simply, alienation.

Perhaps the novelty of Heidegger’s approach is to show, by implication (since these implications are nowhere drawn out, though as I have argued, connecting the argument of Being and Time with that of « Origin » enables us to suggest what some of them might be) that the thinker and the artist really are abnormal, unusual, and rare. When Heidegger’s one-time pupil Hannah Arendt argued in Eichmann in Jerusalem that evil is the consequence of not thinking, she could only draw the conclusion, perhaps relying implicitly on Heidegger’s anthropology, that evil is banal because the ordinary condition of human social life does not involve thinking or creativity at all (though it can involve fabrication, a distinguish which provokes the question, what is artistic creativity, to which Heidegger’s answer will be that it does not create an object but reveals a world). The first reflex of all legitimation is towards realism and naturalism: this is the way it should be because it is « how it is », and situations, practices, institutions are the way because things have a « nature » or « essence » that determines them, which really amounts to saying that things are the way they are because that is the way they are. This realism is rooted in the givenness of practice: we are thrown into a world (Heidegger clearly thinks the world is essentially a social and not a natural one) where we discover a language and
a set of activities that have the character of being there, and while we may well find the world strange, enigmatic, and challenging, we also have to find our footing in a sufficiently familiarizing and tranquil way, the infant normally being aided in this by one or more loving parents, that we can « go on », as Beckett put it. The world is traumatically strange, and as a result we have to learn how to live in it, but the child learns to put one foot forward, and then another, and the later steps resemble the earlier ones enough to constitute the kind of pattern that turns a series of actions into a practice. Heidegger’s concept of practice only makes sense on the assumption of a more or less absolute familiarity in which nothing is problematized, but he also thinks meaningful practice is self-relating, and the form this self-relation takes is essentially one of interrogation or problematization. Insofar as this is not far from Cartesian doubt, this is arguable the one thing Heidegger takes from Descartes and this surely is what makes Heidegger at least latently a modernist and not only a traditionalist communitarian.

**Heidegger between modernism and anti-modernism**

But of course Heidegger’s theory of practice without the theory of unheimlichkeit that is in turn based on the notion that man is the being whose manner of being is for him a question, an issue, and a problem, would not only be a pragmatism and not an existentialism; it would be a dystopian anti-modernism that paints the absurd picture of the life of communities in which there is labor but no philosophy, art, or science, and indeed no meaningful discourse, but only idle talk. What people say would be a representation of « how it is », that is, of the normative social practices that constitute the community’s self-understanding. This dystopia would be absolutely conformist and it would become authoritarian whenever any question of legitimation was raised. If
someone questioned, « Why do this? », the reply would be an « in-order-to » and ultimately a « for-the-sake-of-which » that would be taken for granted. However, Heidegger makes it obvious that the rendering explicit of the intentional-teleological structure of a community’s practices is only intelligible as part of an interrogative process that demands grounds, that asks « why? ». Since practice is purposive, answers to such questions always have the character of a referral or linkage, just as when you doubt a speaker’s claim she will normally support it with reference to another claim, which is its « reason ». Since social life is constituted by practices, and practice is purposive, the structure of a practice itself is, according to Heidegger, what enables such questions to be answered, such reasons to be given: if there is an instrumental rationality and not just an instrumental good sense, it is a rationality grounded in instrumentality, meaning, since practices are purposive, that reasons are purposes, the ultimate purpose being a possible way of being that our community affirms, doubtless because it seems to be given along with the things we do. The crucial thing for the transition from banality to a critical understanding (understanding the critical as the problematizing or problematized and not necessarily the formation of a « critical social theory » that theoretically totalizes the community’s practices and institutions with the implicit aim of either casting them aside, or identifying tendencies within them that indicate new possibilities, or both; though surely form of criticality that understands itself as historically situated and not only socially de-situated, and that regards the possible as being by definition transcendent of and not fully implicated in the actual, would see its task in terms such as these, and one could well say with Hegel that otherwise one is performing an « abstract negation »). The unheimlich subject that can only affirm its unheimlichkeit in « resoluteness »: this is a
modern mysticism, that of the alienated subject who merely celebrates his alienation and can finally do nothing but return to the cave and perform his labor (since, again, Heidegger’s communitarianism is a society of laborers) with the lucidity of one who knows that « Being » is groundless (or that « God is dead ») and who therefore accepts its mysterious and mystifyingly uncanny character.

Conservative anti-modernists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries condemned the emergent mass culture. Heidegger appropriated the right-wing critique of modernity from Kierkegaard, who spoke of « levelling », obviously exaggerating the traditional character of his society to the point of absurdity the better to disparage its “inauthenticity” while regarding it at the same time as inevitable, since there can be no societies like this, which is different from saying that all societies have a profound tendency in the direction of such a horrifying banality and conservatism, which if we credit Heidegger’s social theory at all, he has the merit of having demonstrated. The political function of Heidegger’s ethics of Entschlossenheit based on the unheimlichkeit of the alienated subject who has lost his familiar bearings is to enable individuals whose social life has become unmoored to enjoy a kind of secularized religious experience that confers an aura on their angst, and to encourage them to do the very things they have ceased to find meaningful with a renewed vigor and a heightened attentiveness that is essentially pious, with this piety itself rooted ultimately in the will, since Entschlossenheit means resoluteness or decisiveness. Essentially, it is amor fatti.

What is missing is anything positive that is other or alien or new. And this is possible because Heidegger shows that one becomes alien or other to oneself when one loses one’s sense of direction, one’s practical sense (sens: sense or direction) and
experiences angst, which is essentially unheimlich in a peculiar way: it is worldless. For Heidegger, one does not become estranged because one encounters something unfamiliar and new, but because what is familiar, proper, or normal loses its givenness. One might well argue that Heidegger’s error in *Being and Time*, which arguably he does not repeat in «Origin», is precisely to assume the familiar and unproblematic character of what is given. This seems to be a characteristic of instrumentality. In other words, the problem may be that early Heidegger has a pragmatist phenomenology. This has the consequence that the artwork as described in «Origin» is impossible in the world of *Being and Time*. However, Heidegger does still assume that the ordinarily given is unproblematic, because the world-disclosure of the artwork is by definition extraordinary. One is left implicitly with two different modes of givenness, one essentially familiar and one that is interesting because of its profound strangeness. Now estrangement is a consequence of something other than merely failure. But of course if a world is presented, we have to be able to recognize it, and so it will have both familiarity and strangeness. Heidegger at this point has ceased to be very interested in describing the structures of everyday life. At the root, the question is, how is the world and everything that is in it or part of it given to us? Is familiarity basic and strangeness the result of a crisis? Or are our encounters with our environment engimatic and provocative of wonder from the outset? What is it for a phenomenon to be given? If we retain the social theory of *Being and Time*, we can only justify valorizing strangeness by recognizing that the taken-for-granted world of everyday life is subject to breakdown, and that this provokes a crisis that involves an experience of estrangement because it deprives social life of its familiar character. The term de-familiarization captures this logic perfectly.
Of course, the breakdown of traditional societies is the story of modernity. Heidegger’s ethics of Entschlossenheit represents the consciousness of the person who, having become unsettled, can go nowhere. And so he returns home, returns to his familiar occupations, and does them with the wisdom of an « enlightenment » that is as empty of discursive thought or creativity, as distinct from simply being determined and « resolute », responsibility, as that of Zen Buddhism, which it resembles in this respect. He cannot imagine doing anything differently. (Heidegger would no doubt have said that if he did, it would not really be different, but there is a difference between changing nothing and making changes that are intelligible in terms of the ways things already are; this is the difference between answering the question « why? » with an expected reply that only makes explicit the purpose implicit in the practice, and initiating some sort of mutation; we could say it is the difference between the certitude that derives from the practical sense and creativity.)

But despite the inadequacy of Heidegger’s « existentialism » of the heroic individual with his enlightened acceptance of unheimlichkeit and mortality, which resembles the fascist celebration of military courage for its own sake, connecting *Being and Time* and « Origin » points to an important truth: art can make possible new ways of seeing (and ultimately, of doing and being) because of the experience of alienation from the everyday life of one’s society that lies at the origin of the production and reception of artworks. Heidegger in « Origin » understands that it is art that makes experience meaningful because in some sense meaning is not embodied in the familiar things we do without thought but in the strange things we encounter that cause us recognize that existence, for us, is engimatic. This is not why people *do* things: business, and therefore
both societies and states, are theoretically possible (at least if Heidegger is right) without ever problematizing what we are doing: we do what needs to be done. But it is why « all people by nature desire to understand », as Aristotle says at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*. As in ancient Athens, there is the life of the person engaged in labor and the life of the one who loves wisdom. Only, of course, the modern Western world does not have distinct classes of slaves and citizens freed from the responsibility to work or take care of the necessities of life; since the modern philosopher is a bourgeois who lives an everyday life, if everyday life excludes being philosophical, or being wise, or being authentic, something has to happen to it for the life of virtue to become possible. And what happens is it loses its traditional, familiar, taken-for-granted character: Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* identified this movement as the essential characteristic of bourgeois modernity. Of course, capitalism did destroy traditional communities, transforming peasants into dispossessed workers. The existence of processes of defamiliarization as a social phenomenon is an historical fact. Heidegger seems to have been conscious of what was destroyed in this process but not of what was created.

Perhaps what appears in modernity is a certain kind of artwork; perhaps the artwork when its character is correctly understood appears as essentially modern. And perhaps because modernity in the West has been linked at least since Socrates to the idea of philosophy, because the idea of philosophy is arguably an idea of modernity (clearly there is a modernity of philosophy in Greece with respect to the authority of myth which it repudiated), and Heidegger’s idea of the essence of human existence is a philosophical one, that of course being that we are the kind of beings whose way of being is problematical for us, perhaps then we can say that art, in its disclosures that function as
estrangements, is essentially modern. Artworks are peculiar artefacts in that they seem to call for being made sense of: they need to be understood, and their meaning, unlike that of labor, cannot be taken for granted. They situate us, because they present us with « worlds », and « world » is the name for our situation in its general or totalizing character; we are « in the world ». Worlds are not natural for Heidegger, but social, and consequently they are meaningful. And for Heidegger what is meaningful, even if in the first place it is what is given as unproblematically understood, is in the second place what is enigmatic, what has to be interpreted, and we want to understand it because we do not, and we do not understand it because we no longer know quite what to do with it.

Obviously, works of art are multiple in a way that communities are not: of course there are different communities but you can only really live in a single one because if you live in a world with a plurality of communities you are not living in a community but in a city or modern republic. Today, of course, homogeneity is dying under the onslaught of globalization. But Heidegger’s theory of practice suggests that an absolutization of rootless cosmopolitanism is equally an impossibility: whether or not there will always be nations, as long as human understanding is practical, there will be particular ways of doing things, which can only be practices of communities of some sort, and these ways of doing things will necessarily be sufficiently settled that they will constitute something of a tradition, if only in a greatly weakened sense that renders traditions easily representable in such a way that they become problematizable and manifestly contingent. Thus, we will always come from some place, even if, not unlike Heidegger himself, we are driven to want to celebrate the rootlessness that seems to be a consequence of our modernity and the heterogeneity of, increasingly, every place inhabited by a multiplicity of individuals
who themselves come from a multiplicity of places. The exile can be nostalgic or he can be adventurous in learning new languages and encountering new things. Modernism (I mean the idea of being modern as a kind of ethic) celebrates the new. But of course the absolutely new would be an absurdity: it is only in reference to the tradition from which it is a departure that novelty can make sense. The idea of defamiliarization recognizes this: unlike strangeness or unfamiliarity, it names a process and not a state; it is a movement from one state to another. It can perhaps be compared with the ideas of both reform and revolution (understood, of course, not necessarily with reference to governments), which really differ only in whether the change is thought of as partial or totalizing. Defamiliarization or estrangement is not strangeness, but becoming strange. If we are « strangers to ourselves » (Kristeva), it is not because we are located outside the territory in which we are located; it is enough to formulate the problematic in this way to see that the idea designates an impossibility, at least if it is something we could be and not be becoming. There is no subjectivity that is not interpellated as responsible for what is proper to it: there is no self, no one who can say « I » or « we », that is not situated. Since Heidegger understands « being in » as being involved in a practical situation and not being located in space and time, our ordinary at-home-ness is essentially our familiarity with what we are doing. This familiarity is a practical sense, and the normativity of this practical sense is expressed partly in the recognition that our practices and the situation in which they are developed and to which they respond make sense to us. When things fall apart, the trouble is at first resolved by discovering what it is we want to do, and why, and what it means, and why this is important (ultimately, because the things we do express who we are; because practical sense is implicitly normative, every
problematization is normally responded to with affirmation: part of doing anything at all is implicitly « knowing » or understanding that it is the right thing to do). But of course there is no reason why, once something has been brought to explicit attention, it has to be affirmed; that only makes sense when there are no other possibilities. It is the function of art to present new possibilities, and it makes present worlds that are not that of everyday life. The artwork discloses a new world because it presents the artist’s vision of the world, rooted indeed in his divergent, heterogeneous experience of the social world. Clearly this means he cannot merely have become alienated from an everyday life that has the universality of a premodern community; that is a myth that can only sustain a posture of heroism. When he becomes alienated, he interprets the world that troubles him and begins to make sense of it in a way that involves a kind of work of refashioning. It is the viewer who is rooted in an everyday life in a way that only someone who is not an artist can be who finds that his way of seeing the world is made strange, precisely because the artist has fashioned the artwork so as to present that world in a particular and therefore peculiar way. The concept of defamiliarization differs from that of, say, the enigmatic, in indicating a relationship of the experience of what is strange to a familiarity that is negated or destabilized. If ethics is about right, and the idea of justice originates in the normativity of practice, than the person who experiences the anxious defamiliarization of the unheimlich cannot be just, but neither of course is he unjust, he has simply lost all sense of normality and propriety, and the unheimlich character of the experience of angst is the anomie of one who feels abnormal because the norms no longer make any sense, and so of course he is paralyzed because he has lost his practical sense.
In « Origin » Heidegger shifts the origin of estrangement from crises in everyday life to the artwork, and implicitly he has shifted to a different understanding of the given and thus of the phenomenon: it still has familiarity of course, and if not we would not recognize the given or presented as present, as there, and so it would not be given, not disclosed, not revealed. Heidegger identifies truth with the Greek concept of « aletheia », which he interprets as « unconcealment ». The effectivity in reception (and surely also in creation) of the artwork is defined implicitly as a movement from what does not appear to what does. This entails an abandonment of the instrumental interpretation of phenomenology in *Being and Time* that is so problematic because it deprives understanding of thought and effectively makes thought the representation of social practice, conflating the two senses of « given », as « what appears or is there » and « what cannot be questioned, whose legitimacy is presupposed ». Now what is really present is remarkable; the engimatical character of being-in-the-world no longer requires a practical crisis to become apparent; it only requires the presentation of a particular way of seeing the world that is simultaneously a particular, contingent, and thus not unproblematic, but also potentially interesting re-presentation of the world. It is a representation not in the sense of a copy, of course, but of a referring interpretation: the artist’s vision of the world is indeed *about* the world. And recognizing that, he sees this world in a strange light, and it loses its appearance of naturalness as being « how it is » in the seemingly naturalistic or self-authorizing manner of what is taken for granted, « given » in the socio-political sense.

This reference to the world of social life is what makes artworks both intelligible and relevant. Indeed, arguably if we even could understand artworks that were purely
strange and thus had no connection to the world with which we are familiar, we would find them meaningless since they would be irrelevant. Danto identifies artworks with aboutness. Obviously representationalism is dead in philosophy as well as in art if it means repetition and identification. Indeed this concept of representation (which is that of the correspondence theory of truth) is based on an assumption of absolute familiarity because nothing is more familiar than what is an exact resemblance. Heidegger in rejecting correspondence sought to move philosophy in the direction of art and away from science. A concept of re-presentation as a differential interpretive refashioning makes it possible to see the artwork as evoking our given understanding in order to show us how it can be transformed. To the extent that we are rooted in our situation, and of course it is impossible not to be except in the angst of anomic worldlessness, as Heidegger demonstrates, we will tend to feel unsettled in a way that cannot but be remarkable when we see our world represented in a way that is both particular enough and forceful enough (by successfully capturing its character or some of its significant aspects) to seem a bit weird in a way that cannot simply dismissed as badly done but that makes us feel weird, and makes this weirdness fascinating. Heidegger thinks that beauty in art has this element of the sublime.

This could cause us to feel wonder at the mystery of existence, but it could equally cause us to find some value in what the artwork seems to be saying about the world we lately took for granted. Religion, ethics, politics, perhaps even science become possible modes of thought and action; but they are all deliberate explorations of a world and attempts to solve the problems it poses for us, and these are possible within a world that has been disclosed by an artwork, or something having its character (The Declaration...
of the Rights of Man and the Citizen is no doubt an artwork in this sense), and world-disclosure is transformational: it presupposes a world of everyday life that is made strange by a disclosure of an imaginary world whose reception is necessarily a work of problematization.

While Being and Time is conservative, because it can only problematize tradition without abandoning it, since there is no alternative, « The Origin of the Work of Art », particularly when interpreted with Being and Time in the background, presents the outline of a truly modernist, avant-garde aesthetics.
Surprisingly, that Duchamp’s readymades can be explained with the help of Victor Shlovsky’s concept of ostranenie or defamiliarization has been rarely noted. Peter Bürger, in *Theory of the Avant Garde*, has associated the Dadaist use of shock with defamiliarization, and another German critic, Wolf Reiner Wendt, has suggested that the readymades are an example of Shlovskian defamiliarization because “la chose est soustraite à son context, elle se voit dépouillé de sa signification concrete” (Wolf Reiner Wendt, *Ready-Made. Da Problem und der philosophische Begriffe des ästhetischen Verhaltens*, 1970, quoted in Jindrich Chalupecky, “Les ready-made de Duchamp et la théorie du symbole,” *Artibus et historiae* 7, no. 13 (1986), 155). But the connection seems natural insofar as the readymades place a familiar object in an unfamiliar context and thereby totally alter its significance.

The first readymades were created during the First World War. These include “Bottle Dryer” from 1914 and his urinal entitled “Fountain” from 1917, “perhaps his most celebrated work” (Thierry De Duve, “Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism,” translated by Rosalind Krauss, *October* 70 (Autumn 1994), 85). The surrealist writer André Breton defined the readymades in 1934 as “manufactured objects promoted to the dignity of objects of art through the choice of the artist” (André Breton, “Phare de la Mariée,” *Minotaure* 2, no. 6, 45-49, translated in “Lighthouse of the Bride,” *View* 5, no. 1 (March 21, 1945), 6-9, 13, quoted in Camfield 1989b, 65). They are defamiliarizing in the first place because they place an ordinary object in a context associated with works of art. *Fountain* is a urinal, but it was detached from plumbing, tilted 90 degrees, placed on a pedestal, and signed. *Bicycle Wheel* is a bicycle wheel, but
is placed upside down, its fork screwed to the seat of a stool, free to spin in space. *In Advance of the Broken Arm* is a snow shovel, but it was hung from the ceiling, as was the bottle rack. *Trap* is a coat rack, but it was placed on the floor. With Duchamp, whose objects are defamiliarized by being rendered nonfunctional, the focus seems to be more on that nonfunctionality than on an unfamiliar beauty, although some critics have described “Fountain” and other works as bringing out the aesthetic properties of everyday, utilitarian objects. Duchamp’s readymades are objects of utility (a snow shovel, a dog grooming comb) that are defamiliarized through recontextualization—taking an object out of its quotidian context and placing it in a museum or gallery. In this way, the objects are transformed so that they are nonfunctional, giving the work the quality of a commentary on or a reevaluation of conventional life. With the readymades, Duchamp chooses everyday objects as his subjects. He blurs the boundary between the material and the formal or ideal, between tools that we utilize for tasks and artworks on display in a gallery, by transforming one into the other. In the process, he forces us to look at objects that occupy a silent but important role in our lives.

However, objects like a urinal (“Fountain”) or a coat rack (“Trap”) were heavily tied, not only to daily life, but to the baser utilitarian aspects of it. The objects did not even function for or hold contents of any elevated value, but rather served purposes tied to bodily functions of urination or homeostasis. To put such object on display in a gallery was so akin to a joke or an embarrassment that Duchamp’s contemporary artists could not even support the display of the “Fountain.” By creating the readymades, Duchamp pushed both the bourgeois viewer and the artistic community, through, what may in the case of some of his works be called a harsh or extreme version of, defamiliarization, to
redefine the contemporary definition of and relationship to art. They are artworks that aim not to be artworks. “I]n 1913 he had already asked himself: ‘Can one make works which are not works of ‘art’?” (Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 74). De Duve notes that by using the term “readymade,” Duchamp “has carefully abstained from calling it art” (Thierry De Duve, “Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism,” translated by Rosalind Krauss, October 70 (Autumn 1994), 83). The very term “readymade” seems to exist in opposition to “work of art.”

The readymades question the nature of art by taking something that is manifestly not a work of art and baptizing it with the aura (or fake aura, and it finally seems undecidable if the aura is genuine or not) of art. They do this simply by saying "This is art." De Duve argues that the readymades translate “the ostensive [showing something] into the enunciative [saying what something is]”: Fountain is equivalent to the statement “This urinal is a work of art” (De Duve, 67). The readymade “reduces art to its enunciative function” (ibid., 70), “which is that of statements validated by the sole fact of having been uttered” (ibid., 86). It “is a work of art reduced to the statement ‘This is art’” (ibid.). “To validate the statement” only four conditions are necessary, according to De Duve, conditions he borrows from Michel Foucault’s theory of enunciative functions in Archaeology of Knowledge: “there must be a case, a referential ‘this’ whose existence is designated by an ostensive act. . . . there must be an enunciator, an ‘I’ who chooses, names, and signs the object. . . . there must be a viewer who doesn’t look, or who looks while turning one’s head, a photographer for example, who lets his camera look in his stead, but who repeats the statement as if it were his, a ‘you’ who says ‘I’ in turn:
there must be an institution which, if need be, refuses to validate the object but nonetheless effectuates, with all kinds of delays, the concomitance of the first three conditions, and registers it” (ibid., 86). The conditions of enunciation replace those of production. “For the enunciative paradigm, these four senses of the word work [discussed above]—handmade object, trace of its author, visual phenomenon, institutionalized value—are superfluous conditions . . . Not necessary, contingent. . . . the enunciative paradigm has nothing to say about the field of production; it only addresses the field of enunciation. And in this field, it is necessary and sufficient that a ‘this’ designated by an ‘I’ be shown to a ‘you’ by means of an ostensive statement, and that this statement by repeated and registered under the rubric ‘art’ . . . These conditions are those of art, and . . . of the work of art in general . . . but only insofar as it states itself or is stated, only insofar as it is the referent of the statement ‘This is a work of art’” (ibid., 88). Such works exist in “what Malraux called le musée imaginaire, the museum-without-walls,” in which works are subject to mechanical reproduction (ibid., 89-90). *Fountain* is a lost work; it exists only in Steiglitz's photograph and in various copies made later; it "only exists as the lost referent of a series of ostensive statements" (ibid., 89). " . . . a reproduction of art is an object the artist hasn't made, from which its viewer does not draw a completed aesthetic experience, and which the museological institution neither valorizes nor legitimates as a work. A reproduction of art does nothing beyond declaring the existence, as art, of the work that is its referent" (ibid., 90). The museum-without-walls "presents all sorts of things in the position of referent as if their artistic quality were merely a matter of status, or, to use Walter Benjamin's terms, as if their aura, their cult value, had been entirely reabsorbed into their exhibition value" (ibid.,
The age of mechanical reproduction reduces artworks to their enunciative conditions, and this becomes the essence of art; this is a historical condition, revealed as an ontological condition by the developments of art in the twentieth century, with the readymade at their center.

The nonfunctionality of the readymades negates the organic artwork, with its principles of meaning and coherence, and the autonomy of art generally. As Peter Bürger demonstrates in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, a key feature of the avant-garde movement, of which the Dadaism and the readymades were a part, is its negation of the separation between art and life, and therefore of the institution of art as a separate, and special, domain of activity—the autonomy of art. The autonomy of art, Bürger argues, following Adorno (1971) and Marcuse (1968), is a central tenet of bourgeois society. Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, “art [was] understood as an activity that differs from all others” (Burger, 42). Bourgeois society centered on work and business, whereas art was defined as the exclusion of work and utility. The readymades refused the separation of art and everyday life, by bringing everyday objects into art galleries without any additional beautification or aestheticization, and thereby called into question the autonomy of art.

Bürger further purported that in the bourgeois context “the autonomy aesthetic . . . contains a definition of the function of art: it is conceived as a social realm that is set apart from the means-ends rationality of daily bourgeois existence” (Bürger, 10). For the bourgeois, art was not art if it invoked the quotidian, the commercial, or the banal. It was necessarily not only separated from life, but also elevated. Benjamin, and Bürger following him, calls this elevation “aura,” which is the sense that the work is of special, heightened value, quasi-sacred. Benjamin defines aura as “the unique phenomenon of a
distance however close it may be” (Benjamin, 222, quoted in Bürger, 27); Bürger calls this “unapproachability” (Bürger, 27). Auratic works seem to have “uniqueness and authenticity” (ibid., 28). Benjamin says that “[w]hat [the Dadaists] intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creation which they branded as reproductions with the very means of production” (Benjamin, 237-38, quoted in Bürger, 29)—or, in the case of the readymades, as productions with the very means of mechanical reproduction. The aura attaches not only to the artwork but also to the artist. Hence the signature on *Fountain* of a fake artist, “R. Mutt,” is an attack on the aura of the artist as creative genius.

. . . the production of the autonomous work is the act of an individual. . . . In its most extreme manifestation, the avant-garde’s reply to this is . . . the radical negation of the category of individual creation. When Duchamp signs mass-produced objects (a urinal, a bottle-dryer) and sends them to art exhibits, he negates the category of individual production . . . The signature, whose very purpose is to mark what is individual in the work, that it owes its existence to this particular artist, in inscribed on an arbitrarily chosen mass product, because all claims to individual creativity are to be mocked. Duchamp’s provocation not only unmask the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work; it radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work. (Bürger, 52)

For Bürger this has the consequence that “Duchamp’s Readymades are not works of art but manifestations” (Bürger, 52), provocations, statements. They are not attacks on a particular kind of art, but on (autonomous) art as such, and thus, according to Bürger, on the separation between life and art, between everyday urinal and the aesthetically pleasing or at least art-status-bearing “fountain.” Is such an attack latently refamiliarizing? Does it show, as Thomas Hess put it, that “the object really is beautiful in itself” (Thomas B. Hess, “J’accuse Marcel Duchamp,” *Art News* 63, no. 10 (Feb. 1965), 52-53, quoted in Camfield 1989b, 101), that Duchamp “has rediscovered the
magic of the object” (Harriet and Sidney Janis, “Marcel Duchamp: Anti-Artist,” *View* 5, no. 1, 54, quoted in Camfield 1989b, 75), that “every object . . . has a value in itself”?


Duchamp of course puts to use the concepts of the artwork and of individual creativity, showing both to be potentially empty, or at least indistinguishable from mechanical reproduction.

. . . the avant-garde movements refer to the category “work” by negation. It is only with reference to the category “work of art,” for example, that Duchamp’s Ready-Mades make sense. When Duchamp puts his signature on mass-produced, randomly chosen objects and sends them to art exhibits, this provocation of art presupposes a conception of what art is: The fact that he signs the Ready-Mades contains a clear allusion to the category “work.” The signature that attests that the work is both individual and unique is here affixed to the mass-produced object. (Bürger, 56).

Duchamp of course with the readymades attacks this idea of work, but the institution of art that is composed of artworks survives and it incorporates the Duchampian gesture of provocation into the genre of artworks (Bürger, 57). The readymades like most avant-garde art also call attention to their artifice: “The organic work seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made. The opposite holds true for the avant-gardiste work: it proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact” (Bürger, 72). Indeed, it proclaims itself as a mechanical reproduced, and by the artist merely appropriated and resignified, artifact. “A readymade is an already-made object, and to admit it as an art object immediately leads one to eliminate the presupposition that the author has made the object with his or her own hands. Along with this presupposition of making goes the whole valorization of craft . . .” (Thierry De Duve, “Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism,” translated by Rosalind Krauss, *October* 70 (Autumn 1994), 71).
Duchamp says that the readymades were constituted by being chosen, and that the significance of his work as an artist consists of that choice (Entretiens inédits avec Georges Charbonnier, RTF, 1961, translated by Thierry de Duve, in De Duve, “Echoes of the Readymade,” 72); Duchamp thus reduces making to choosing. De Duve associates the concept of (art)work with four conditions: “something is a work because it is made by a human hand, because the hand that made it is unique and left its traces on it, because it shows itself and is beautiful, sublime, meaningful, or simply good, because its value is recognized.” Conceptual art, which has its origins in Duchamp, set out to negate all four conditions: “To negate the work as material object . . . To negate the work as being the opus of an author. . . . To negate the work as visual phenomenon offered to a viewer. . . . To negate the work as an institutionalized value” (De Duve, 86-87).

Certainly one type of defamiliarization would be a making strange that elevates aesthetic experience above the ordinary, and this gesture is perhaps performed in one way but in another also negated by that of the readymade. We could call this aestheticizing gesture auratic defamiliarization. But there is also what Bürger calls “the radicalization of defamiliarization in shock” (Bürger, 18): “If the Russian formalists view ‘defamiliarization’ as the artistic technique, recognition that this category is a general one is made possible by the circumstance that in the historical avant-garde movements, shocking the recipient becomes the dominant principle of artistic intent.” Burger suggests that it is with the use of shock in dadaism that “defamiliarization . . . does in fact become the dominant artistic category” (Bürger, 18). Thus, Fountain presents a familiar, everyday urinal, placing it in an unfamiliar position in a strange setting not or not only in order to make of it an object invested with aesthetic value but also to present it as a
negation of what it ordinarily is qua material object. The avant-garde in general involves taking the material of a work of art and “tearing it out of its functional context that gives it meaning” (Bürger, 70).

But in any case Bürger thinks the provocation reverts to an auratic defamiliarization when the gesture of refusal is recuperated by the art institution and the readymades and works like them are canonized as works of art.

Once the signed bottle-drier has been accepted as an art object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite. If an artist today signs a stovepipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it. Such adaptation does not eradicate the idea of individual creativity, it affirms it . . . (Bürger, 53).

For Bürger this reversal is a sign of the failure of the historical avant-garde to overcome the life/art opposition of autonomous art, and with it to destroy the aura. It seems that at least in terms of what has historically endured, the deeper logic of the readymade is a defamiliarization that may initially be anti-auratic and negative but that becomes auratic and affirmative, in Marcuse’s sense.

The defamiliarization operated by the transformation of the object into a candidate for a work of art can be seen either as attacking the institution of art as such, and the aura of the artwork and the creative individual (this is Burger’s interpretation), or as transforming an ordinary object into an artwork, either through subtle perceptual changes that confer on it aesthetic properties, or through a mere change in the object’s position and status. These two views of the readymades represent the two positions in the most significant debate on the works’ meaning. George Dickie expresses the latter view: “‘Why’, Dickie says, ‘cannot the ordinary qualities of Fountain—its gleaming white
surface, the depth revealed when it reflects images of surrounding objects, its pleasing oval shape—be appreciated?” (Danto 1981, 93).

In “History and Aesthetics of Fountain in the Context of 1917,” William A. Camfield cites several authorities in support of his intuition that *Fountain* is an aesthetic object of surprising beauty, “an object of intrinsic visual or aesthetic significance” (Camfield 1989a, 14). As Camfield notes, this has over the years been a minority view, but it was held by some viewers at the moment of the work’s initial presentation, and has been periodically asserted by various critics since. It is important to note that this view of *Fountain* depends on the defamiliarizing gesture of presenting a urinal in an unusual manner and context, so that, perhaps, among other things, its aesthetic features become a focus, whereas of course prior to this presentation it is a mere object of utility, and few men ever stop to contemplate a toilet fixture as an object of beauty. In 1917, Walter Arnesberg of the American Independents Society, to which *Fountain* was anonymously submitted by Duchamp, was reported to have said, in arguing for the upcoming exhibit’s inclusion of the work, “A lovely form has been revealed, freed from its functional purpose, therefore a man clearly has made an aesthetic contribution”; “you will see that it has striking, sweeping lines” (Beatrice Wood, *I Shock Myself* (Ojai, CA, 1985), 29-30, quoted in Camfield 1989a, 25). Also in 1917, the critic Louise Norton remarked “how pleasant is its chaste simplicity of line and color!” (Louise Norton, “Buddha of the Bathroom,” *The Blind Man*, no. 2 (May 1917), 6). Camfield even cites a somewhat imaginative and strained “anthropomorphic perception of *Fountain*,” shared by Norton and others, “in this instance a simple, frontal form whose curvilinear profile suggests the head and shoulders” of a Madonna or a Buddha (ibid., 35). Camfield also, taking up an
obscure comment by Duchamp, remarks that “Fountain quietly exudes sexuality. A masculine association cannot be divorced from the object because the original identity and function of the urinal remain evident, yet the overriding image is one of generic female form—a smooth, rounded organic shape with flowing curves” (Camfield 1989a, 53). Such interpretations depend, obviously, on the work’s aesthetic qualities.

Duchamp’s own comments suggest that the work was intended to be “either deliberately anti-art of aesthetically neutral” (ibid., 42). Thus, in “Apropos of Readymades” (1961), Duchamp writes:

A point which I want to very much establish is that the choice of these “readymades” was never dictated by an aesthetic delectation.

This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste . . . in fact a complete anaesthesia. (Marcel Duchamp, “Apropos of ‘Readymades’,” lecture, symposium on “Art of Assemblage,” Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19, 1961; quoted in Camfield 1989a, 42).

And in a 1962 letter he affirms:

When I discovered ready-mades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty. (Hans Richter, Dada Art and Anti-Art (New York, 1965), 207-08, quoted in Camfield 1989a, 43).

Camfield, however, thinks these pronouncements are only half the story of Duchamp’s view, quoting for instance Duchamp on Bicycle Wheel: “To see that wheel turning was very soothing . . . I enjoyed looking at it, just as I enjoy looking at the flames dancing in a fireplace” (Schwarz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, 442, quoted in Camfield 1989a, 44).

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3 “—one only has: for female the public urinal and one lives by it” (Duchamp, “Box of 1914,” 1914, in Salt Seller, 23, quoted in Camfield, 1989a, 50).
But whether the readymades are viewed as aesthetic objects or anti-art provocations, in either case, the juxtaposition of art and non-art have an uncanny, unsettling effect. But in the latter case, the transformation is seen as actually conferring an aura on the object, and on the artist via his signature, either somewhat undermining this uncanniness or appropriating it as an aesthetic quality. In “Transformed Utilitarian Objects,” George Basalla notes that there are a variety of ways in which utilitarian objects can be transformed so that their form is preserved but their function is lost, and this is involved in their transformation into works of art. An example is Picasso’s “Head of a Bull,” which is made of a bicycle seat and handles. Danto notes, “It is always possible to suspend practicality, to stand back and assume a detached view of the object, see its shapes and colors, enjoy and admire it for what it is, subtracting all considerations of utility” (Danto 1981, 22).

Basalla catalogues various kinds of transformations of utilitarian objects, including transformations of them into commemorative objects, ceremonial and ritual objects, toys, and aesthetic objects. They all have in common that the object “loses its primary useful function” and “takes on a new function that is symbolic, aesthetic, or educational.” This is necessary for the object to become a thing of a different type, and is distinct from mere ornamentation. In addition, “the form of the object remains essentially unchanged” and as a result “[t]he transformed object can be easily related to its utilitarian counterpart” (Basalla 183). Basalla divides utilitarian objects transformed into aesthetic objects into two categories: “popular decorative and novelty items that belong to the realm of kitsch,” and works of art, which “are altered in ways that enable us to understand better the nature of all transformed utilitarian objects” (ibid., 189). The
readymades in particular “were altered in very subtle ways and given new functions that were not well-defined yet clearly belong to the world of art. Some of the artifacts were transformed by displaying them in a fashion that forced the viewer to look at a familiar object from an unfamiliar vantage point. All were transformed by Duchamp’s act of judgment in choosing a utilitarian object and giving it the status of art by signing and tilting it, incorporating it into the corpus of his works, and exhibiting it in a gallery or museum containing conventional artistic productions” (ibid., 192). Basalla identifies three types of transformative operations common to all transformed utilitarian objects: “simple manipulations; alterations in material, size, and color; and ornamentation” (ibid., 193). Duchamp employed manipulations: he “understood that transformation could be achieved if a familiar object was merely displaced from its ordinary physical context. This meant that it was to be viewed from an unusual visual angle and exhibited in a foreign environment” (ibid., 193). What Duchamp left unchanged was the object’s form, and Basalla asserts that it is critical to transformations of utilitarian objects that the utilitarian function is lost but the form preserved. Because the form refers back to the displaced original function, this creates the crucial ambiguity in the relationship between form and function, between the object’s present status and its original status as object of use.

Basalla asserts that transformed utilitarian objects have “a special aura,” “accomplished by creating a distance between the artifact and its model in the workaday world” (ibid. 197). Basalla claims that it is this aura “that separates . . . Duchamp’s snow shovel from one purchased at a local hardware store” (ibid.). A sign of the aura is that the transformed object, deprived of its ordinary use, seems set apart for some special
function, although it may not be clear what that is. But of course in so far as that aural object is identified with the ordinary object that is its material support, and that it also is in some sense, this aura and the effectiveness of the transformation that brings it about is called into question if not actually negated. Basalla asks why transformed objects engage our attention as they do, and speculate that “we have a strong emotional attachment to the form and function of ordinary useful things,” and that “their full meaning is not to be found in their utilitarian functions alone” (ibid., 198, 199). We seem rather to be moved by a form that we associate with a function, but which can become uncannily detached from it. We associate the form of useful things with their function, and “we come to expect to find them together,” so we experience cognitive dissonance when “[t]he transformation process disturbs the bond between form and function by preserving the form and associating it with an entirely new function” (ibid., 199). For this to happen, we must perceive a relevant connection that is absent; “we must be able to recognize the object that has been transformed” (ibid.). The transformed object seems in the first place to be uncanny, at one remove from familiarity; there is “a dissonance that is essential to the nature of the transformed object” (ibid., 200). However, Basalla claims that the “dissonance is then resolved by separating the artifact from the utilitarian function and reserving it for some higher purpose” (ibid., 201). But this is only possible if it indeed has conferred on it a stable higher purpose or aural status. Fountain, however, is at best an unstable aural object, because it both is and is not a urinal and it is not clear that it is aesthetic object or a work of art. Moreover, as clear as it is that the readymades are objects that have partially or entirely lost their utilitarian meanings, it is far from clear, and is fundamentally contested, what new meaning they take on: “par ce

Basalla is surely right, though, in emphasizing that it is crucial that the transformation, whether it is viewed as aestheticizing or anti-aesthetic, subtracts from the object its familiar utility. It is a subject of dispute whether the resulting object is aesthetic, ugly, or aesthetically neutral; and whether it is a work of art or the negation of a work of art, but in any case it has been transformed, and in the process has ceased to function as the object of utility it originally was. (Thus it can with justification be titled “Fountain” rather than “Urinal,” or at least it would not be quite appropriate to give it the latter title. The bicycle wheel is called *Bicycle Wheel* and the hat rack is titled *Hat Rack*, but their transformations seem less radical; although the bicycle wheel is turned upside down and mounted on a stool, and is certainly not part of a functioning bicycle, it is still a wheel). An unsigned editorial on “The Richard Mutt Case,” sometimes attributed to Duchamp, and with which Duchamp said he agreed, notes that the artist chose the object, and proclaims: “He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for the object” (“The Richard Mutt Case”).

In its subtraction of utility, the defamiliarization of the object in Duchamp can be compared with the failure of equipment in Heidegger. As Heidegger points out in his analysis of equipment in *Being and Time*, when we use a tool we ordinarily are not
thematically aware of it; it is inconspicuous. Using a tool as a means to complete a task normally involves a familiarity with the tool and an adoption of conventions and norms connected with its use that we likewise do not notice and therefore do not question. Conventionality, familiarity, and inconspicuousness thus go together in much of everyday life, which is why Heidegger, following the romantic critique of modern alienation, called them “inauthentic.” According to the principles espoused in *Being and Time*, we only notice tools when they fail to be serviceable for some task, and then both the tool and its context become foregrounded as the object of our attention. Duchamp, however, draws our attention to tools that are nonfunctional not because they are broken or unserviceable, and thus need repair, but by purposely removing the context in which the tool is used—rendering it “functionally” useless by giving it a new aesthetic function that negates the task the tool was meant for.

The readymades vary in the extent to which they were transformed. For instance, the snow shovel (*In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915) was changed only in its title, which suggests a change of function, and placement (it was suspended from the ceiling). *Fountain* was subtly transformed in certain ways, besides just being placed in a different context (it was signed, given an incongruous title, tilted and placed on a pedestal, and detached from plumbing fixtures), but it is still recognizable as, and largely indistinguishable from, an ordinary urinal. Hence it raises the problem how can a work of art be indiscernable or nearly indiscernable from an ordinary object, and does this indiscernibility make it not a work of art, or does it on the other hand necessitate finding other features in the artwork besides its appearance which make it a work of art? It is the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto who has most systematically explored this
question, in an essay titled “The Artworld,” and a book-length study, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, whose title indicates one of the things that is at stake in Duchamp and the neo-avant-garde (particularly Warhol) which looks back to his work and repeats some of its motifs: an ordinary object can be transformed, *without necessarily changing its appearance*, into a work of art. Insofar as this transformation involves a defamiliarization, that operation may be seen to consist entirely in a change of context and function of the object. Actually, the readymade effects a double transformation: an ordinary thing becomes elevated to a work of art and a work of art becomes reduced to an ordinary thing. As Joseph Masheck puts it, “The wit was in making a common object as remarkable as an art object and making a work of art as real as an ordinary thing at the same time” (quoted in Judovitz, 76).

Danto credits Jorge Luis Borges, in “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” with the discovery that two works of art could be perceptually indiscernible and yet ontologically distinct. Menard is the fictional author of an exact replica of *Don Quixote*, but written in nineteenth-century France. The different contexts make all the difference. “Cervantes ‘opposes to the fiction of chivalry the tawdry provincial reality of his country’. Menard on the other hand . . . selects for its reality ‘the land of Carmen during the century of Lepanto and Lope de Vega’. These are of course descriptions of the same place and time, but the mode of referring to them belongs to different times.” “‘The contrast in style is also vivid’, Borges writes: ‘The archaic style of Menard—quite foreign after all—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time’” (Danto 1981, 35). This example, as well as that of the readymades and the many artworks inspired by them that emerged in
the 1950s and ‘60s, demonstrate the remarkable thesis that the significance of an artwork is not exhausted by, and perhaps not fundamentally constituted by, its perceptible qualities, because of two objects that are impossible to tell apart visually, they are different works of art, or one is a work of art and one is not.

It is a consequence of a theory of Leibniz [the identity of indiscernables] that if two things have all the same properties they are identical, and that identity indeed means that, for every property \( F \), \( a \) is identical with \( b \) in case, whenever \( a \) is \( F \), so is \( b \). It must follow that if the works in question have all the same properties, they must be identical. But Borges’ point is that they do not. They have in common only those properties that they eye as such might identify. So much the worse for the properties that meet the eye, then, in individuating works of art. (Danto 1981, 35)

This means that “no perceptual criterion can be given” for distinguishing works of art (Danto 1981, 61); their status is wholly conceptual. With the readymades, the ordinary object and the work of art become “ontologically distinct but perceptually indiscernable counterparts” (Danto 1981, 61). At least virtually indiscernible, subtracting changes in title, signature, and placement of the work; their indiscernibilities in any case amount for what is most remarkable in the work.

Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* were Danto’s immediate inspiration for his work on indiscernibility and the ontology of the artwork. They present in purer form the same indiscernibility of object and artwork that is presented by Duchamp when he calls an ordinary object a work of art. The *Brillo Boxes* were wooden replicas of cardboard boxes of Brillo pads that were in every way perceptually identical to them. This led Danto to the conclusion that the essence of art cannot lie in its perceptible form, a conclusion he also draws from Borges’s story. Because this is a case in which an object that is a work of art has the same perceptible form as something else which clearly is not. Obviously, there
are two possibilities here: either something which looks just like an ordinary object can be a work of art; or something which is called a work of art and associated with an auratic status is not a work of art at all, to the apparent detriment of all objects in its class with their associated auras.

The near-indiscernibility of the readymades from industrial objects threatens their artistic status. As Danto puts it, “nothing in which indiscernibilities consist can be the basis of a good theory of art—or a good philosophical theory of anything whatever” (Danto 1981, 6). Hence it becomes necessary to find the properties with respect to which they differ, which make the one thing an ordinary object and the other a work of art. The artwork which is perceptually indiscernible from an ordinary object disproves Leibniz’s theory of the identity of indiscernibles if that is taken to mean perceptual indiscernibility. But an object may have non-perceptible qualities that help to make it the kind of object it is. The ordinary object and the artwork belong to different ontologies, they participate in different worlds. As Danto puts it, “Knowing that there is a difference may make a difference to the way we look at two works, and even to the way in which we respond to two works, but the difference need not be in the way we see them” (Danto 1981, 43). The readymades are significant in art history because they mark out the purest form of the ontological difference between reality and art, when art is freed of all aesthetic properties. Danto says of a “square of red paint” which the artist “declared to be a work of art”: “it came into existence in a theoretical atmosphere in which the boundaries between art and reality become part of what makes the difference between art and reality, and incorporating its boundaries in the work it managers somehow to transcend them. It becomes an artwork by incorporating a definition of itself as such” (Danto 1981, 51).
One clue to the difference, which already hints at a certain defamiliarization, is that the categorization of something as an artwork renders it in a sense unreal.

Consider the role of such a expression as “I did not mean it” applied to an action. It serves precisely to withdraw the action in question from the framework of assessments and responses that an outwardly similar action would be subject to if meant. So with “It was only a joke” or “It was just a game” or “It was only in play or, finally, “It is an artwork.” (Danto 1981, 18).

We could say that there is already a latent defamiliarization, or the possibility of a defamiliarization, whenever there is a distinction made between appearance and reality, because the familiar sense that appearances are reality can then be questioned. Danto associates this distinction with both philosophy and art, and speculates that this is why art has been a concern of so many major philosophers from Plato to Heidegger and beyond (Danto 1981, 77-80).

For Danto, the artwork is constituted by what he calls “the is of artistic identification” (Danto 1964, 577).

It is the sense of is in accordance with which a child, shown a circle and a triangle and asked which is him and which his sister, will point to the triangle saying “That is me”; or, in response to my question, the person next to me points to the man in purple and says “That one is Lear”; or in the gallery I point, for my companion’s benefit, to a spot in the painting before us and say “That white dab is Icarus.” (Danto 1964, 576).

This “is” is at work in Fountain in at least two ways: the title, which indicates that “this is a fountain” (and not or not only a urinal), and the signature, which indicates that “this is an artwork” by the artist R. Mutt. The “is of artistic identification” identifies an object or a feature of an artwork with an idea or interpretation that has artistic value. “Artwork are . . . typically about something” (Danto 1981, 3). Danto’s theory of art is, then, essentially
cognitive; artworks make statements, and the history of art reaches its endpoint with the 
*Brillo Boxes* when, in a manner that echoes the theory in Hegel’s *Aesthetics* of art coming 
to an end and being surpassed by philosophy, art transforms itself into philosophy, 
making statements about art. “[T]he philosophical question of its status has almost 
become the very essence of art itself” (Danto 1981, 56). This intellectualism is implicit in 
the readymades, which seem to be making a statement as much as presenting or 
representing an object for appreciation. (Indeed, Duchamp pronounced himself as 
against a “retinal art” —“c’est-à-dire,” comments Chalupecky, “contre un art basé 
uniquement sur les sens” (158); he also announced that the readymade “is something one 
doesn’t even look at, or something one looks at while turning one’s head” 
(“Conversations avec Marcel Duchamp,” in Alain Jouffroy, *Une révolution du regard* 
(Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 119, reprinted in *Opus International* 49 (March 1974), 89, 
quoted in De Duve, “Echoes of the Readymade,” 82); and he proclaimed, “I was 
interested in ideas—not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once more at 
the service of the mind” (Heschel B. Chipp., ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley and 
Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 393-94)). Conceptual art developed 
this assertoric quality, and the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, who recognizes Duchamp 
as lying at the origin of conceptual art, takes the intellectualism of art to an extreme when 
he says that “a work of art is a kind of *proposition* presented with the context of art as a 
comment on art” (Kosuth 1969, 20-21). Danto even supposes that works of art are 
fundamentally similar to words and not at all like things, because they are signifiers: they 
are *about* something.
What I want to propose . . . is that works of art are logically of the right sort to be bracketed with words, even though they have counterparts that are real things, in the respect that the former are about something (or the question of what they are about may legitimately arise). Artworks as a class contrast with real things in just the way in which words do, even if they are in “every other sense” real. That they stand at the same philosophical distance from reality that words do, that they accordingly locate those who relate to them as artworks at a comparable sort of distance . . .” (Danto 1981, 82).

A potentially defamiliarizing distance, we might add. Art in being about something is in that sense always representational, but not always mimetic, and this is where the philosophy of art with Plato got off on the wrong foot (Danto 1981, 82). Art is necessarily representational in the minimal sense that even fully abstract formalist art is about something: a black square in paint may be about a black square in paint and this is different from its just being a painted black square). And of course, Fountain is a re-presentation of a urinal.

For Danto, art is only intelligible in terms of a theory of art. Thus, pure abstraction, when the artist insists that there is nothing in the painting but a painted surface, is meaningful within the context of art history: “this artist has returned to the physicality of paint through an atmosphere compounded of artistic theories and the history of recent and remote painting. . . . His identification of what he has made is logically dependent upon the theories and history he rejects” (Danto 1964, 579). Danto concludes, “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art, an artworld” (Danto 1964, 580).

Duchamp’s readymades were seen by some philosophers of art in the mid-twentieth century as posing the most important challenge to their enterprise by calling
into question the distinction between a work of art and an ordinary object. Steven Goldsmith writes that “Duchamp presents an object that radically questions the borders of any definition of art” (“The Readymades of Marcel Duchamp: The Ambiguities of an Aesthetic Revolution,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 12, no. 2 (Winter 1983), 197). Taking inspiration from Danto’s theory of the “artworld,” George Dickie developed the Institutional Theory of Art, which proposes that a work of art is any artefact that has been recognized as a work of art by a member of the art institution: "A work of art in the classificatory sense is 1) an artifact 2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation" (Dickie, Aesthetics, 101). This of course makes the readymades the paradigm case of the artwork, but it also obliterates the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic artworks that the readymades instantiated and played upon. And it totally overlooks the possibility that the readymades may have been conceived and deployed as an attack on art as such. In this theory, there is nothing to attack. If what is legitimately an x is anything that a suitably placed individual chooses to call an x, then there really is no possibility of creating something that challenges the legitimacy of xs.

Dickie held that “[a] work of art is a ‘candidate for appreciation’, a status conferred upon an artifact by ‘the artworld’, in Dickie’s use of the term—an institutionally enfranchised group of persons who serve, so to speak, as trustees for the generalized musée imaginaire” (Danto 1981, 91). But it is part of the uncanniness of the readymade, which exists at the boundary between artwork and ordinary object, that it defamiliarizes both ordinary objects and art and renders the objects that are presented and
re-presented of an ambiguous status as far as appreciability is concerned. And Dickie obscures this ambiguity by including within the world of art everything that can be designated as such by a participant in that world. Part of the unsettling significance of *Fountain* is its ambiguity and undecidability, its occupying the interval in between the mundane and the auratic, tending simultaneously to auraticize the mundane industrial artifact and banalize the auratic art object. Is a urinal being presented as an object for aesthetic appreciation? Not a urinal but a *fountain*, with pleasing lines and smooth, gleaming surfaces and holes facing upward for jets of water to spurt out of instead of facing downward to collect bodily fluids and channel them into the plumbing that is conspicuously absent from the work? Or is it a joke played on the idea of an aesthetic object, such as a fountain, which is reduced to an industrial object and a receptacle for bodily wastes? The debate between the two most common perspectives on the readymades, that they are attacks on the institution of art and that they present industrial objects as aesthetic objects, conceals the crucial possibility that the works are designed precisely to play on the tension and ambiguity between these two possibilities. The readymades contain internally, so to speak, the ontological divide between reality and art and they juxtapose these two statuses in such a way that each refers to the other and is destabilized by this reference, rendering unfamiliar both the ordinary industrial object (and the idea of such an object) and the idea of the artwork as an auratic exemplification of genius. And of course this unfamiliarity exists on the border of a familiar status/use/function, so it is properly a movement from the familiar to the unfamiliar, a defamiliarization.
Danto objects to Dickie’s view that *Fountain* can be appreciated for its visual properties that these are properties of the urinal but not necessarily properties of the work as artwork, which include its functions as wit and provocation. Indeed, the philosopher Ted Cohen has even “supposed that Duchamp’s work is not the urinal at all but the gesture of exhibiting it” (Danto 1981, 93). This tends to situate *Fountain* within the views of it as an attack upon art. In any case, its meaning exceeds its perceptible, aesthetic qualities and it is in this that the readymades are historically novel for Danto. For “[i]f what made *Fountain* an artwork were only qualities it shared with urinals, the question would arise as to what makes it an artwork and not those” (Danto 1981, 94).

There are aesthetic responses to mere things and aesthetic responses to artworks, which presuppose non-perceptible aesthetic qualities; these are part of the ontology of art, part of what constitutes the object as art, and are not conferred merely by institutional status. The title and placement of the object are among the defamiliarizing gestures that can constitute as a work of art the re-presentation of an ordinary object, as for instance with a work called *Laundry Bag* by a certain Kuriloff, which consists of a laundry bag mounted on a board with the label “laundry bag.” “The work,” says Danto, “looks as if it were part of an exhibit for people from outer space . . . . To label an object so banal and familiar is to dislocate it, to distort the environment” (Danto 1981, 133). An ordinary object can be defamiliarized by its situation.

And the aesthetic object is torn out of the familiar context of its tradition not so much because that context is negated as because it is called into question and destabilized. In this the readymades are fully within the tradition of modernism as championed by Clement Greenberg, who celebrated formalist experiments which sought
to articulate the possibilities of the medium (so that painting, for instance, becomes the exploration of a flat surface), and for whom “[t]o be modernist is to be a work that takes its own conditions of possibility for its subject matter,” testing “the conventions of the practice it belongs to,” modifying them and rendering them explicit, and “revealing them as nothing but conventions” (Thierry de Duve, “Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism,” translated by Rosalind Krauss, *October* 70 (Autumn 1994), 62). As Kosuth put it, “Being an artist now means to question the nature of art” (“Art after Philosophy,” 79). The readymade is that strange, ambiguous object that is neither quite an object of utility placed in a museum and given a label nor an object of pure aesthetic value to be contemplated for its intrinsic properties. The world of autonomous art is one of a clear dichotomy between everyday life and a privileged auratic realm of quasi-religious aesthetic value, and both of these are familiar categories that are destabilized and rendered strange by the incongruous crossing of the border between them.
L’huître, de la grosseur d’un galet moyen, est d’une apparence plus rugueuse, d’une couleur moins unie, brillamment blanchâtre. C’est un monde opiniâtrement clos. Pourtant on peut l’ouvrir : il faut alors la tenir creux d’un torchon, se servir d’un couteau ébréché et peu franc, s’y reprendre à plusieurs fois. Les doigts curieux s’y coupent, s’y cassent les ongles : c’est un travail grossier. Les coups qu’on lui porte marquent son enveloppe de ronds blancs, d’une sorte de halos.

Roughly the size of a rather large pebble, the oyster is more gnarled in appearance, less uniform in color, and brilliantly whitish. It is a world categorically closed in upon itself. And yet it can be opened that takes gripping it in a folded rag, plying a nicked and dull-edged knife, chipping away at it over and over. Probing fingers get cut on it, nails get broken. It’s a rough job. The pounding you give it scars the envelope with white rings, a sort of halo.

This is the first paragraph of Ponge’s prose poem “L’Huître” (“The Oyster”). In this chapter I discuss Ponge’s poetry from 1932-1937—in particular “L’Huître” (“The Oyster”), “Le Cageot” (“The Crate”), and “La Cigarette” (“The Cigarette”)—in which Ponge defamiliarized ordinary objects in a novel way. (Note that although the works are presented in Ponge’s Le Parti pris des choses which was published in 1942, they were first drafted between 1932 and 1937.) He effected a revelation of the ordinary as extraordinary without eschewing the ordinary, familiar, and useful character of an object by defamiliarizing ordinary objects not so much by viewing them in a different way as by simply looking at them very closely and intensely. Thus he aestheticized objects while, at the same time, refusing to aestheticize them, unconcealing them—to use Heidegger’s terminology—without removing them from their “earthly” context. The fact that his prose poems are allegories of a close reading that eschews interpretation while also virtually eschewing metaphor in a phenomenological attempt at pure description is part of Ponge’s refusal of the aesthetic as autonomous and auratic.
The title *Le parti pris des choses* (roughly translated, taking the side of things) is a key to Ponge’s intentions. "Things exist," comments Sartre in his essay on Ponge. “We have to come to terms with this; we have to come round to their terms. We shall, then, abandon all-too-human discourse and set about speaking of things, of taking their side” (p. 396). Shklovsky had written, “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*” (Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” §15). Ponge’s descriptions of various objects are designed to highlight their perceptible qualities and make them strangely present. Ponge does what Shklovsky says of Tolstoy: “He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time” (ibid., §18). He wants to make us really see an oyster, see it for how it presents itself in its nudity, not how it is familiarly regarded and conceptualized. “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (ibid., §15). This involves a focus on objects in lieu of their meanings: "[I]ts purpose [that of an image] is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object—*it creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it*" (Shklovsky, quoted in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, p. 18, quoted in Stacy, *Defamiliarization in Language and Literature*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1977, 40). Thus, it is a function of poetry to concern itself with and to reveal the haecceity, the quiddity of reality" (Stacy, 35). The heightened perception made by
possible by seeing the object in its nudity is understood by Shklovsky as an antidote to an anaesthesia and misrecognition that attends habitual perception:

By this ‘algebraic’ method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten.

The process of ‘algebraization’, the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. (Shklovsky, §14).

Similarly, Victor Erlich writes of Shklovskian defamiliarization in his history of Russian formalism:

It is this inexorable pull of routine, of habit, that the artist is called upon to counteract. By tearing the object out of its habitual context, by bringing together disparate notions, the poet gives a coup de grâce to the verbal cliché and to the stock responses attendant upon it and forces us into heightened awareness of things and their sensory texture. The act of creative deformation restores sharpness to our vision. (Victor Erlich, Russian Formalism: History and Doctrine, The Hague: Mouton, 1969, p. 177, quoted in Stacy, p. 33).

Daniel P. Gunn, in “Making Art Strange: A Commentary on Defamiliarization” (The Georgia Review 38, no. 1 (Spring 1984), gives as an example of Shklovskian defamiliarization the treatment of Gulliver's hat by the Lilliputians in Gulliver's Travels:

“By not calling the hat but its name . . . and by removing it (in the most bizarre way) from its normal context, Swift makes it harder for us to recognize it as a hat. When we finally do understand, we see the hat more clearly than we ordinarily would: the very difficulty and slowness and strangeness of the perceptual process forces us to attend to the object at hand with a more than usual intensity” (25-26). Indeed, asks Sartre, “What is a thing? A thing is an object divested of human uses and meanings: "any kind of object will appear as a thing as soon as we have taken care to divest it of the all too
human significations initially bestowed upon it" (p. 400). Ponge will similarly go far beyond the familiar name of the thing, which he sometimes mistrusts, to disclose the unfamiliar reality of the familiar object. Boris Uspensky refers to defamiliarization as a refusal to name the object in favor of descriptions which render the object afresh: “'The essence of [ostranenie] resides primarily in the use of a new or estranged viewpoint on a familiar thing, when the artist 'does not refer to a thing by its name, but describes it as if it had been seen for the first time’” (Boris Upsensky, A Poetics of Composition, trans. Valentina Zavarin and Susan Wittig, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, p. 131, quoted in Stacy, 47). N. M. Willard compares the view of Ponge and other poets which ascribes aesthetic truth to a vision of things to the philosophy of Bergson, who "maintains that in ordinary perception we do not see this tree or this flower but a tree, a flower; the differences, having been suppressed, are useless to us. Because we classify things according to the use we make of them, we see only a classification and not the things themselves. The artist has freed himself from the molds which language and a life of action force on human vision, and therefore we say he sees things freshly, as they really are" (Willard 312).

Though the manner in which Ponge made quotidian objects significant bears comparison to what Duchamp did with his readymades, Duchamp made objects significant through irony, provocation, and negation, whereas Ponge found genuine beauty within the seemingly banal. Whereas Duchamp transferred ordinary objects into aesthetic contexts not to call attention to their singularity and aesthetic beauty but to negate the contemporary conceits of aesthetic value, Ponge conferred aesthetic value on the most ordinary objects. The recurring motif of his poetry is that it is only the ordinary
that can be truly extraordinary, and only when it is looked at closely and understood
phenomenologically does the ordinary show itself as extraordinary. In comparison with
the view of Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological school that the essence of things
is constituted by their appearance, the way they manifest themselves, and the way they
are perceived by the viewer and not by something that underlies and causes their
appearance, Pongé’s poetry can be called phenomenological, something that was first
noted by Jean-Paul Sartre in his review of Le parti pris des choses in Situations I: “What
has he done but effect the 'phenomenological reduction'? And doesn't this consist, in fact,
in 'bracketing out' the world in order to rid oneself of all preconceived ideas? The world .
. . is simply there—and I am conscious of it” (Sartre, "Man and Things," Critical Essays
2010, p. 451). Remarking that “sa démarche se rapproche en cela de la phénoménologie,
qui cherche à extraire une 'logique' des phénomènes eux-mêmes,” Michel Collot notes
that Ponge himself likened his poetic researches to Husserlian phenomenology: “Ponge
s'est souvent réclamé explicitement de ce courant de pensée, assimilant le Parti pris des
choses à un 'dictionnaire phénoménologique' (Tome premier, 228), et saluant en la
personne de Husserl 'le plus grande philosophe du siècle’” (Ponge, L'Atelier

Ponge's descriptions of objects aim to think them without the abstraction which
reduces the object to its concept: “Il lui faut se forger un langage qui évite le concept et
respecte la teneur concrète dont les choses sont le réceptacle, tout en le faisant accéder à
une forme d'intelligibilité nouvelle: celle du 'conceptacle', à mi-chemin entre le sensible
et le sens. Or, la langue tend à réduire la chose à une notion . . .” (Collot, 127). Ponge
complains that too often descriptions in literature do not fully capture the perceptible qualities of the object: “[L]es descriptions des romans ou des poèmes', observe Ponge, sont souvent 'incomplètes' . . . elles s'avèrent incapables de s'égaler au sensible, et il renoncent à en dégager le sens” (Collot, 128, quoting *Le grand recueil II: Méthodes*, p. 11). Ponge's “phenomenological” method involves looking at objects independently of scientific explanations or preconceived ideas, noticing only what presents itself: “Il refuse de recourir à une conceptualisation extérieure au phénomène lui-même, et préfère un langage 'seulement descriptif', 'sans intrusion de la terminologie scientifique ou philosophique' (*Tome premier*, 220), 'opposant' très nettement 'la littérature de description' à 'la littérature d'explication' (ibid., 228) (Michel Collot, *Francis Ponge: Entre mots et choses* (Champ Vallon, 1991), p. 129). It is also necessary to avoid the notions of objects suggested by ordinary language, which makes them all too familiar. “[P]our 'décrire' ainsi la chose 'ex nihilo' (*Le grand recueil II: Méthodes*, 35), il faut aussi faire abstraction des notions et définitions véhiculées par la langue commune: 'Je ne veux mettre dans la TABLE que ce qui me vient naturellement d'elle, en chasser l'idée (chasser le concept. Les mots sont des concepts)’” (Ponge, “La Table,” Editions de Silence, Montréal, 1982, 16). The name of the object is subject to a defamiliarizing reworking: “Il conviendra donc d'opérer sur les mots, et en particulier sur le nom de la chose, un travail de déconstruction et de redéfinition, qui lui permettra de reprendre en charge les qualités sensible de son référent: 'il faut beaucoup de mots pour détruire un seul mot (ou plutôt pour faire de ce mot non plus un concept, mais un *conceptacle*’” (Collot, 130, quoting *L'opinion changée quant aux fleurs, VI: Coquelicot*, l'Ephemère, no. 5, 1968, p. 4). The object is to be seen independently even of “the human point of view,” itself too familiar.
Ponge therefore effects “une dernière époque, la plus radicale: celle du 'point de vue de l'homme' (Pour un Malherbe, Paris: Gallimard, 1965, p. 173), qui ordinairement façonne la chose à son usage et à son image” (Collot 130).

Ponge experienced a “distrust of discourse.” Sartre associates this with the aftermath of the First World War. “There was the violent discontent of the demobilized their maladaptedness to civilian life; there as the Russian revolution and the revolutionary agitation that spread almost everywhere throughout Europe; and, with the appearance of new, ambiguous realities that were neither flesh nor fowl, there was the dizzying devaluation of the old words that couldn't quite name these new realities, even though the very ambiguity of these forms of existence prevented new names being found for them” (389).

by a subtle breakdown of the links between them, are enormously affirmative” (Sartre 429). And "it is the primary function of the act of assertion, with all its pomp, to imitate the categorical bursting forth of the thing" (Sartre 430). The poet is so struck by the object because of its strangeness: “Cette emprise des choses tient à leur ‘étrangeté même’, qui échappe aux prises habituelles du langage et de la pensée. L’émotion qu’elles provoquent est le symptôme de ce débordement: ‘s’agissant d’un object, quel qu’il soit (. . .) il provoque une émotion à la rencontre: une émotion faite de sa beauté? sans doute, mais peut-être seulement de sa différence, de son mystère” (Collot, 123, quoting Ponge, Pour un Malherbe, Paris: Gallimard, 1965, p. 310). Echoing Heidegger, Bill Brown in “Thing Theory,” Critical Inquiry 28, no. 1, Things (Autumn 2001), distinguishes between objects and things, and notes, “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us” (Brown 4). The word "thing," he says, “designates an amorphous characteristic or a frankly irresolvable enigma” (ibid.) "[T]hings is a word that tends, especially at its most banal, to index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable" (Brown, 4-5). “You could imagine things . . . as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence . . . thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)” (Brown 5). “Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility . . . what's encountered as opposed to what's thought” (ibid.) Similarly, In “Words and the Murder of the Thing” (Critical Inquiry 28, no. 1, Autumn 2001), Peter Schwenger distinguishes between objects (familiar,
domesticated) and things, and says of Shklovskian defamiliarization that it "attempts to return the object . . . to the strangeness of the thing" (102).

Words, familiar names and descriptions for objects, are an enemy that has to be struggled against:

the generic nature of words can hardly do justice to the particular object. Words, as we know, denote, not single items, but classes of things. What is peculiar to the individual is precisely what the sense of the word leaves out, and this happens to be exactly what the object-poet is interested in: the 'non-distinctive' features of a situation - the size, shape, color of, say a particular apple, not the 'distinctive' or semantic features, common to all situations that call forth the utterance of the word 'apple'. . . to specify the quality of a perceived object, the poet must go beyond its essential qualities, those that must belong to an object for it to be called, say, 'apple', and bring to the fore those attributes which are inessential, belonging, not to the 'sense', but to the accidents of the individual being of apple x or y" (Shimon Sandbank, "In Defense of Referentiality," Poetics Today 6, no. 3, Poetics of Poetry (1985), p. 467).

Sartre writes,

His objection to words is that they adhere too closely to their most commonplace signification, that they are both exact and impoverished." Because the thing is what escapes reduction to familiar concepts, "we should catch at [words] and seize them a the point when they are becoming things. Or, rather, since the most human and most constantly handled of words is always, from a certain angle, a thing, we should strive to grasp all words—with their meanings—in their strange materiality, with the signifying humus, dregs or residue that fill them. To this very day he remains obsessed with the materiality of the word: "(...) I want to have you loved for yourself rather than for your meaning. To raise you at last to a nobler condition than that of mere designations" (Sartre, 393, quoting Ponge, "La Promenade dans nos serres," in Le Parti pris des choses, p. 128).

Thus, the defamiliarization of the object goes hand in hand with a defamiliarization of language. Ponge found, according to Sartre, that “[h]e could renew the meaning of words and fully appropriate their deep resources only by employing them to name other things. . . discourse has to be wrested from its commonplace usage, our gazes turned towards new objects, and we have to render 'the infinite resources of the density of things . . . with
the inner resources of the semantic density of words” (Sartre 396, quoting Ponge, "Introduction au galet,” in Le Parti pris des choses, p. 176). The strangeness of things is to be evoked by an estrangement of language. “[O]ne will have to give the impression of a new idiom that will produce the effect of surprise and novelty of the objects of sensation themselves” (Ponge, "De la modification des choses par la parole," in Le Parti pris des choses, p. 122, quoted in Sartre, 414). In the prose poem, "[n]othing should be taken for granted. Looked at closely, a banal object may be a splendid spectacle. Anything can be thus scrutinized. In like manner, as each word in a language beckons to all the others, a thing, when looked at closely . . . evokes multiple correspondences" (Pierre Laszlo, "'La Leçon de choses', or Lessons from Things, Substance 22, nos. 2-3, issue 71-72, special issue: Epistémocritique (1993), p. 275). Ponge said that "Chaque mot s'impose à moi (et au poème) dans toute son épaisseur, avec toutes les associations d'idées qu'elle comporte . . ." (Stephani Smith, "Structure and Vision in Le Parti pris des choses," SubStance 1 (March 1971), 40, quoting "My Creative Method," 10). Thus, "[t]he examination of the object and that of the words or notions associated with it take place at the same time" (Stephani Smith, "Structure and Vision in Le Parti pris des choses," SubStance 1 (March 1971), 40). Richard Stamelman writes that "Ponge's poems dramatize the radical transformation of the object of the poet's desire and his contemplation, the objet-chose, I will call it, into a different and original form, namely a text, an objet-description" (Richard Stamelman, "From Muteness to Speech: The Drama of Expression in Francis Ponge's Poetry," Books Abroad 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1974), 689). "'Il ne s'agit pas', writes Ponge, 'de "rendre," de "représenter" le monde physique, si vous voulez, mais de présenter dans le monde verbal quelque chose d'homologue" (Ponge,

Ponge tries through successive efforts to get at the truth of the object: "En revenir toujours à l'objet lui-même, à ce qu'il a de brut, de différent: différent en particulier de ce que j'ai déjà (à ce moment) écrit de lui. Que mon travail soit celui d'une rectification continuelle de mon expression (sans souci a priori de la forme de cette expression) en faveur de l'objet brut" (Ponge, "Berges de la Loire," Tome premier, p. 257). Ponge often begins anew in an attempt to describe the object with each paragraph (Stamelman 1978, p. 415). There is a "perpetual rectification," a "continual taking hold anew of the object and its features" (416). "A new paragraph indicates a new tactic by the poet to dislodge a hidden meaning, a new attempt to express an undisclosed quality of the object" (Stamelman 1978, 417). “La Cigarette” (see below) is a good example of this.

Stamelman asserts that "[t]he rhetoric of reprise and rectification is responsible for a sense of perpetual recommencement in Ponge's works as well as for a sensation of discontinuity, since the poet without explanation abandons one description for another or corrects an earlier assertion. This use of repetition and rectification links Ponge stylistically to the cubist painters" (Stamelman 1978, 421).

Ponge often mimicks the form of the object in language, in an extreme mimeticism, while at the same time his poems are often allegories of the process of writing and/or reading, as Stamelman and others have noted (for instance, in “L’Huitre” (see below) the prying open of the oyster to disclose a world inside). "One example" of Ponge’s mimeticism “is 'Ode inachevée à la boue'. Mud has no form; it is an amorphous substance resisting any definite shape. The poem is, likewise, unfinished—shapeless and
indefinite" (Sherman 63). Another example is "L'Araignée", "The Spider": "Just as the web of the spider is held together by fragile threads, so has Ponge here given us nouns linked by tenuous phonemic and/or associative connections. Similar to the spider's web, this enumeration is tortuously contrived and intricately complex. It too is worked into a delightfully vertiginous pattern, as is the spider's webby network. . . The poem functions as a real web, then, in its total effect. It is nearly impossible to continue to read through this entire section without somehow becoming caught in this entangling verbal network. Ponge has succeeded in achieving, with words, what the spider does with its silk" (Rachelle Unger Sherman, "Francis Ponge: Mimesis versus Poiesis, The French Review 52, no. 1 (October 1978), 64-65). The form of the object becomes the form of the text.

"For Ponge, perfect writing would be this complete integration of words and objects, an integration such that these two poles would be fused organically through similar inherent characteristics" (Sherman 71). Ponge seeks "une adéquation" (Méthodes, 32) "between the words and the things they are describing" (Stamelman 1978, 419). Indeed, Ponge's materialism of the object is matched by a materialism of language. "Ponge conceives of words as material entities which are as substantial and concrete as the objects they denote" (Richard Stamelman, "The Object in Poetry and Painting: Ponge and Picasso," Contemporary Literature 19, no. 4 (Autumn 1978), p. 411).

There is debate about whether Ponge like Duchamp removes things from their utilitarian significations, which Basalla saw as key to creating an aesthetic object out of a useful thing. Ponge aims "to divest things of their practical significations," argues Sartre, referring to "The Pebble," in The Nature of Things, p. 65): "Compared to the finest gravel, one can say that given the place where it is found, and because man is not in the
habit of putting it to practical use, the pebble is rock still in the wild, or at any rate not domesticated. For the few remaining days it still lacks meaning in any practical order of the world, let us profit from its virtues" (Sartre, 401). For Sartre, Ponge assumes an attitude of contemplation that "far from suspending all dealings with the object, it presupposes, on the contrary, that one will adapt to it by a range of efforts whose only limitation is that they mustn't be utilitarian" (Sartre, 416). But “Ponge internalizes this use and makes it part of the definition of the object" (p. 427). Sartre sees the defamiliarization in Ponge as a dehumanization: Ponge "finds within himself words that are soiled and 'ready-made' and outside himself objects that are domesticated and abased. He will attempt in one and the same movement to de-humanize words by seeking out their 'semantic density' beneath their surface meaning and to de-humanize things by scratching away their veneer of utilitarian meanings. This means that one has to come at the thing when one has eliminated within oneself what Bataille calls the project" (Sartre, 402). N. M. Willard writes that by "[d]ivesting words of their utilitarian function, the poet tries to restore them ... to their original colors by bringing them close to things. He must work against a tendency in human thought to overlook the individuality of things by abstracting the qualities which they have in common" (p. 322). But Richard Stamelman (1978) argues that "Ponge ... never causes his objects to lose their function in the world, for very often this function defines their uniqueness; they way the object is used is one of its distinguishing qualities. Certainly the uses of a cigarette, a crate, and an oyster are part of the reality Ponge reveals. Similarly, Michel Collot thinks that Ponge does not follow the Duchampian strategy of stripping the object of its utilitarian function, but in showing the marvelous within the most familiar and banal objects (and therefore
revealing an unfamiliar side of them), calls attention to their everyday utilitarian functions: “[U]ne préoccupation essentielle de Ponge” is to “montrer que le ‘merveilleux’ réside dans les choses les plus prosaïques et les plus familières, dont une trop longue habitude a fini par occulter le potentiel affectif et sensoriel. Pour révéler leur valeur poétique, Ponge ne cherche pas à les dépouiller de leur valeur d'usage ou à les détourner de leur fonction, comme le voudrait la stratégie surréaliste du ready-made, par exemple. Il prête au contraire une attention redoublée à leur pratique la plus utilitaire et la plus quotidienne. . .” (Collot, 125). But this calling attention to the uses of an object, along with its perceptible aspects, has the effect of making that function marvellous and therefore strange. Ponge's whole strategy is to focus attention on familiar everyday objects in a way that makes them unfamiliar. Collot fails to distinguish between use and mention: when we notice a thing's uses we are not using it, we are contemplating it. So these objects are indeed "détournés de leurs fonctions." Perhaps the best way to describe Ponge’s use of the equipmentality of things is to say that he calls attention to what is extraordinary in the familiar and everyday. That is, it is what is most familiar that he defamiliarizes. As Basalla puts it, “Ponge in his poems [has] called attention to the extraordinary nature of the familiar things we encounter in daily life and to our deep involvement with them” (p. 199). Stephani Smith even suggests that Ponge assaults the dichotomy between the aesthetic and the functional by refusing either pole of this opposition: "Ponge excludes the attitude which opposes veneration for the artistic to scorn for the utilitarian, as well as its reverse. In playing on the tension between the artistic and the functional, he eliminates this tension completely" (Stephani Smith, "Structure and Vision in Le Parti pris des choses," *SubStance* 1 (March 1971), 43).
Ponge, according to Sartre, reverses Heidegger's view that things are deficient equipment. "[I]n the Heideggerian world, the existent is, first, Zeug or item of equipment. To see it as das Ding, the temporo-spatial thing, the proper course is to 'neutralize' oneself. One stops, forms the project of suspending any project, and then remains in the attitude of 'nur vuweilen bei' (merely tarrying with). It is at this point that the thing emerges, being, all in all, merely a secondary aspect of the item of equipment—an aspect grounded in the last resort in equipmentality [das Zeughafte]—and Nature appears as a collection of inert things. Ponge's movement is the opposite: it is the thing that exists first for him in its inhuman solitude; man is the thing that transforms things into instruments. One merely has, then, to muzzle this social, practical voice inside oneself for the thing to disclose itself in its eternal, instantaneous truth" (Sartre 402).

Certainly Ponge regards the thingness of the thing as its truest form, truer than its functionality as equipment, which is what is primary for Heidegger. Heidegger does regard de-functionalization as an estrangement that reveals the thing in its nudity; only for the German philosopher this is not the true essence of things, which lies in their equipmental use. Ponge considers the same transformation but regards it as the revealing of the truth of the thing (Sartre says "it is just this that is at issue: making something manifest" (408)), its functionality being merely artificial and anaesthetizing.

Ponge’s poems can be said to give voice to objects, to let them speak for themselves. His images are generally not metaphors or symbols; they do not stand for anything, but manifest what is unique and interesting about the objects they name as the very things that they are. The images evoked in Ponge’s poems involve a hyper-realism, an aesthetic truth that is not a representation in which words and images are presented.
and objects referenced, but a presentation of objects themselves in their own nudity, a pure presence in which the objects have ceased to either mediate or be mediated by any idea distinct from themselves.

In this way, Ponge can be seen as playing both with and against the story that could be drawn from a reading of the shift that Heidegger describes in *Being and Time* as a shift in the way things are encountered from equipment to objectivity and from the idea of aesthetic autonomy (Bürger 1984) on which this story depends. The presentations of ordinary objects in Ponge’s prose poems confer, through a defamiliarization that is effected by the singularity of the presentations themselves, aesthetic value on the objects, while, at the same time, Ponge links the beauty of these objects not only to their everyday characters but to their everyday contexts, where they are not decontextualized but remain objects of use. The fact that these are prose poems that often eschew metaphor in favor of a purely descriptive use of imagery formally emphasizes Ponge’s refusal of the autonomy of art and aesthetics.

For Ponge, the artist deforms the world that he sees and represents through a phenomenological strategy of presentation—intensely defamiliarizing in a paradoxical way. His hyperrealist style presents things as they are but the concentration with which it does so makes familiar things so remarkable and strange that the reader sees them as they really are for the first time. This defamiliarizing (re)presentation of ordinary things, often described with almost no use of metaphor, is key to the Ponge’s hyperrealism, as “L’Huitre” demonstrates:

L'Huitre

L'huitre, de la grosseur d’un galet moyen, est d’une apparence plus rugeuse, d’une couleur moins unie, brillamment blanchâtre. C'est un
monde opiniâtrement clos. Pourtant on peut l’ouvrir : il faut alors la tenir
ay creux d’un torchon, se servir d’un couteau ébréché et peu franc, s’y
reprendre à plusieurs fois. Les doigts curieux s’y coupent, s’y cassent les
ongles : c’est un travail grossier. Les coups qu’on lui porte marquent son
enveloppe de ronds blancs, d’une sorte de halos.

A l’intérieur l’on trouve tout un monde, à boire et à manger : sous
un firmament (à proprement parler) de nacre, les cieux d’en-dessus
s’affaissent sure les cieux d’en-dessous, pour ne plus former qu’une mare,
un sachet visqueux et verdâtre, qui flue et reflue à la vue, frangé d’une
dentelle noirâtre sur les bords.

Parfois très rare une formule perle à leur gosier de nacre, d’ou l’on
trouve aussitôt à s’orner.

(The Oyster

Roughly the size of a rather large pebble, the oyster is more
gnarled in appearance, less uniform in color, and brilliantly whitish. It is a
world categorically closed in upon itself. And yet it can be opened that
takes gripping it in a folded rag, plying a nicked and dull-edged knife,
chipping away at it over and over. Probing fingers get cut on it, nails get
broken. It’s a rough job. The pounding you give it scars the envelope with
white rings, a sort of halo. Within, one finds a world of possibilities for
food and drink beneath a mother-of-pearl firmament (strictly speaking),
the skies above settle in on the skies below, leaving only a rock pool, a
viscous greenish sack that ebbs and flows before the eyes and nose,
fringed with a border of darkish lace. On rare occasion the perfect formula
pearls up in its Nacreous throat, and we take it at once for our
adornment. [22])

Notable, of course, here is the prose style of the poem and the realistic—even
hyperrealistic—description of the oyster. There is a near-absence of metaphor (the only
real metaphor in the poem being that of the microcosm), in lieu of which Ponge merely
describes the oyster’s appearance. It is notably here that he does not dwell on the pearl,
pearls of course being objects whose utility derives from their being regarded as beautiful
and not the other way around.

In his descriptions, Ponge disparages comparisons and to some extent metaphors
(although many of his descriptions are full of exotic personifications of the thing,
personifications that, as Smith says, “begin in the object itself, in the material of which it
is made (44)). Notes Collot: "Ce souci de la différence explique la méfiance professée par Ponge à l'encontre de l'analogie, qui réduit la chose à une autre, en niant sa spécificité: 'les analogies, c'est intéressant, mais moins que les différences' (Le grand recueil II: Méthodes, 41). La résistance des choses à toute 'assimilation' conduit à disqualifier les figures privilégiées par la tradition poétique, métaphores et comparaisons" (Collot, 131).

In “L'Huître” Ponge declares that the presentation of an object, and the revelation of truth that is essentially constituted by this presentation, is the presentation of a world, because “a l’intérieur l’on trouve tout un monde” [“within, one finds a world of possibilities”] not only for nourishment, but also implicitly for perception and understanding. In this way, the object’s presence-effects are key to its meaning-effects.4 Indeed, in the “Introduction au Galet” [“Introduction to the Pebble”], he says: “Ce ne sont pas des poèmes que je veux composer, mais une seule cosmogonie” (80) [“I do not want to write poems, but a single cosmogony” (81)]. Ponge may have come to embrace Heidegger’s view that a single, totalizing view of the universe or the world of objects was impossible, but poems such as “L'Huître” suggest, if not a cosmogony, at least a microcosm.

The opening of a world of possibilities and the vision of a microcosm which instantiates this visually is made a consequence of literal, physical opening of the oyster with a knife. The beauty of the object is partly, but only partly, identified with the pearl that is revealed by the prying open of the oyster, which is also an allegory for the

4 I am referring to a distinction made by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey
interrogation of the object that the poem performs. The conjunction of this opening and the revelation of presence and meaning with techniques by which the oyster is rendered useful combines functionality and aesthetics, use and appreciation. Ponge has resisted making the aesthetic autonomous and auratic by making the visible microcosm appear only after the knife has been used to open the oyster and introducing it by the idea of a “world of possibilities” that is in the first place not only sensual or physical but also linked to the satisfaction of needs—it is “a world of possibilities for food and drink”.

Exercises in how to see (and how to read), Ponge’s poems propose a certain relationship of thought between what is perceived and a kind of inquiry, but one that follows a logic peculiar to aesthetic presentation. In *The Principle of Reason*, Heidegger (1996) argues against rationalism in the form of Leibniz’s “Principle of Sufficient Reason,” according to which everything that exists or appears calls to have its existence explained and accounted for and thus justified. He shows that this project is incoherent because being and appearance as such, the fact not that a particular event happened in a particular place and time (which can of course be causally explained just as an interlocutor when asked can usually present a reason intended to justify his previous claim), but that objects as such exist and that we can see and touch them, is beyond explanation. This is a gaze (and a strategy of reading, for which it is also allegory) which interrogates, not by seeking the explanations or justifications for what has been posited or presented that has been refused by phenomenological presentation, but by seeking to identify previously disregarded details and uncovering what is implicit—unsaid but sayable—implicated, or folded within the object [or text]) by seeking not only to unfold its implications, but to find them by continued observation, not by inference or
interpretation. The oyster’s “opening onto a world of possibilities” (the translator’s addition of the word “opening” is correct if not accurate, as Ponge merely states, “A l’intérieur l’on trouve tout un monde”) as a consequence of bring pried open physically by a knife is a metaphor for this rendering the object into a field for interrogation of the real, and of the possible as it is disclosed by the real.

Ponge’s ambiguous relationship with the concept of the autonomy of art is also demonstrated in “L’Huitre.” While on the one hand, the poem’s phenomenological objectivity and the location of beauty within the object implicitly contrasts non-aesthetic, habitual, or merely utilitarian modes of apprehension and thereby depends upon the autonomous and auratic character of modern art and aesthetics generally, Ponge actually resists this dependence by unifying the functional and the aesthetic, or at least making the former a condition of the latter.

In “Le Cageot” (“The Crate”) Ponge takes this dependence on functionality further and emphasizes the contingency of an everyday object on its fragility and limited lifespan as well as its dependence on a context of being not only used but used and then thrown away. The crate is oddly, even ironically, juxtaposed as appealing (Ponge says that “il luit alors de l'éclat sans vanité” (“it gleams with…unassuming luster”)) despite its very mundane context of being dumped as a waste object:

Le Cageot

A mi-chemin de la cage au cachot la langue française a cageot, simple caissette à claire-voie vouée au transport de ces fruits qui de la moindre suffocation font à coup sûr une maladie. Agencé de façon qu'au terme de son usage il puisse être brisé sans effort, il ne sert pas deux fois. Ainsi dure-t-il moins encore que les denrées fondantes ou nuageuses qu'il enferme. A tous les coins de rues qui aboutissent aux halles, il luit alors de l'éclat sans vanité du bois blanc. Tout neuf encore, et légèrement ahuri d'être dans une pose maladroite à la voirie jeté sans retour, cet objet est en
somme des plus sympathiques - sur le sort duquel il convient toutefois de ne s'appesantir longuement.

(The Crate

Midway between cage and cahot, or cell, the French has cageot, a simple little open-slatted crate devoted to the transport of fruit that is such a way that after use it can easily be broken down, it never serves twice. Thus its life-span is shorter even than that of the perishable it encloses. So, at the corners of every street leading to the market, it gleams with the unassuming luster of slivered pine. Still brand new and somewhat aghast at the awkward situation, dumped irretrievably on the public thoroughfare, this object is most appealing, on the whole—yet one whose fate doesn’t warrant our overlong attention. [Ponge, 1979, 18])

Ponge highlights how its limited duration also limits its claim on our attention, but turns its fragility and disposability into an element of ephemeral aesthetic beauty. In stating of the crate, “Ainsi dure-t-il moins encore que les denrées fondantes ou nuageuses qu’il enferme” (“its life-span is shorter even than that of the perishable it encloses”), Ponge emphasizes its ephemeral character, which is in this case because of its function as a piece of equipment which is explicitly designed to be used and immediately thrown away. This frailty renders the crate beautiful—or to be precise, sympathetic (“cet objet est en somme des plus sympathiques” [translated as “this object is most appealing”])—but “il convient toutefois de ne s'appesantir longuement” [“[it]doesn’t warrant our overlong attention”]).

“Le Cageot” expresses the kind of a democratic ethos that refuses to police the demarcation between beauty and ugliness, because ugly objects can be redefined as beautiful by the aesthetic gaze: “jeté sans retour, cet objet est en somme des plus sympathiques.” While the public considers the crate useless after its task has been completed, and thus of no value, the poet retrieves the object from wherever it has been thrown out (the translator adds an explanation of the fate of the tossed out object,
presuming it to be “dumped irretrievably on the public thoroughfare”) and rehabilitates it by replacing the functional value it recently had but lost with the aesthetic value that is constituted by an attentive gaze.

Ponge’s emphasis on the ephemerality of quotidian objects is also a central point in the aestheticization of the cigarette in “La Cigarette”:

La Cigarette

Rendons d'abord l'atmosphère à la fois brumeuse et sèche, échevelée, où la cigarette est toujours posée de tra-vers depuis que continûment elle la crée.

Puis sa personne: une petite torche beaucoup moins lu-mineuse que parfumée, d'où se détachent et choisent selon un rythme à déterminer un nombre calculable de petites masses de cendres.

Sa passion enfin: ce bouton embrasé, desquamant en pellicules argentées, qu'un manchon immédiat formé des plus récentes entoure.

(The Cigarette

First, let’s set the atmosphere, hazy yet dry, wispy, with the cigarette always placed right in the thick of it, once engaged in its continuous creation.

Then the thing itself: a small torch, far more perfumed than illuminating, from which, in a number of small heaps set within a chosen rhythm, ashes work free and fall.

Finally, its sacrifice: the glowing tip, scaling off in silvery flakes, while a tight muff formed of most recent ash encircles it” [Ponge, 1979, 20])

In “La Cigarette,” a functional object really does seem to undergo a shift of purpose from functionality to an object of pure aesthetic appreciation. Smoking a cigarette is not, of course, normally an object of contemplation, as a pearl in an oyster perhaps might be, the shift from equipmentality to aestheticized objectivity that is obscured in the two previously-discussed poems is brought to the forefront in “La Cigarette.” The principal object is recontextualized as something that may or may not remain in the hands and/or
mouth of the smoker but has passed entirely from something considered useful to an object of beauty and wonder.

The cigarette becomes an actor (as the translator says “then the thing itself”), which certainly represents a valid interpretation of Ponge’s phenomenological objectivity. Husserl had identified the task of phenomenology as the presentation of “the things themselves,” although “the thing itself” mistranslates “puis sa personne.” “Personne” here means personality, usefully defined by the Petit Robert not as the identity but rather the singularity of an individual, or what makes him or her unique: “Être humain considéré dans son individualité, sa spécificité.” “The thing itself” does potentially suggest this singularity, but primarily it elides the dramatization of the object—a key part of the poem’s strategy of aestheticizing defamiliarization.

The cigarette is presented as a character in a drama, systematically presented and marked by a narrative logic: with the adverbs “d’abord,” “puis,” and “enfin” in three stanzas or scenes in which first the atmosphere is set, then the character appears on stage, and finally he undergoes, “sa passion.” It is a one-man, one-act play whose title character’s role is essentially not to say, do, or refer to anything but simply to be there and manifest his own personality or persona. Thus, although it remains an ordinary object, it has become entirely present-at-hand for the poetic gaze. Indeed, it is situated in a context of involvements: “in the thick of it” as the translator again translates correctly as a general interpretation but incorrectly as a specific one, because the statement that “la cigarette est toujours posée de travers depuis que continellement elle la crée” in fact indicates a détournement away from its normal context (Le Petit Robert renders “de travers” as “dans une direction, une position oblique par rapport à la normale” (Petit
Robert). This shifting of context away from the normal or familiar, this defamiliarization through personification, is a consequence of the cigarette’s continual “creativity” as it transforms itself while burring.

The translator renders as “sacrifice” what in French is simply “la passion,” suggesting a metaphoric association with the passion of Christ that seems unlikely in the original, as the cigarette is undergoing a transformation but it is not clearly elucidated that the idea of passion here involves suffering (let alone sacrifice) so much as simply an experienced intensity, which is perhaps one way of understanding Ponge’s idea of passion and why his descriptive poems are passionate. The theme of this poem and the way it is presented is also, as with the other two poems I have discussed, an allegory of its own poetic performance and of poetry in general as Ponge conceptualized it—another reason why Ponge’s descriptions are of inescapably aesthetic objects and don’t merely conveying documentary, factual information, why they are prose poems and not simply works of prose.

In each of these poems as we have seen there is an elevation of the ordinary to the extraordinary as part of the aestheticizing strategy implicit in Ponge’s project of phenomenological presentation. Although two of these poems seem to endeavor to efface the boundary between the useful and the beautiful, not unlike Duchamp’s readymades, but in this case by rendering the former the source of the latter, in “La Cigarette,” functionality is a source that seems utterly forgotten in a celebration of the autonomous character of intense, focused perception. Seeing is an act of interrogation because all of these objects are revealed as retaining their original identity but at the same time becoming, under the poetic gaze, something more, and more complex, than what they
appeared to be initially. Through defamiliarization, this reveals a structure of latency in which this interrogation invokes latent or unnoticed features of the object and brings them into visibility.
V. CONCLUSION: Towards a theory of defamiliarization as the basis of a modernist theory of art and aesthetic experience

Heidegger can be considered a theorist of defamiliarization as both a social theory and a theory of art that is essentially modern. “The Origin of the Work of Art” relies on a phenomenological notion of presentation that conflates creation with revelation and a somewhat mystified account of defamiliarization as the emergence of the unfamiliar in place of the familiar in an exchange that also makes the familiar unfamiliar. This account becomes much more coherent if it is linked, as I want to suggest it should be, to the implicitly sociological theory in *Being and Time* of practice as the basis of an everyday life whose essential quality is what because habitual is familiar beyond recognition.

Since this theory is almost a parody of an impossibly pre-modern world and is at odds with Heidegger’s conviction that the essence of the human is to be an enigma for oneself, the experience of alienation becomes central as the inevitable consequence of the intrinsic fallibility of practice and therefore of the normality of everydayness. What is missing from the world of *Being and Time* is the emergence of the new, and this is supplied in “Origin” by the artwork because it discloses or presents a world in a way that because perspectival and partial is always liable to novelty and thereby estrangement. The artwork is clearly called defamiliarizing, but the familiarity it transforms is that of the world of everyday life described in *Being and Time*. The two texts should be read together.

Duchamp’s artistic practice is more radical than anything suggested by either Heidegger or Ponge. As with Heidegger and Ponge, the familiarizing basis of the work of defamiliarization is the world of utility. The uncanniness of his artistic practice is constituted in part by the undecidable ambiguity between, on the one hand, the attack on
the institution of art that is constituted by conferring the authority of art as an institution upon an object that in several ways belongs precisely to the realm of things that the idea of art, based on the bourgeois idea of art’s autonomy, constitutes itself as excluding; and, on the other hand, the potentially aesthetic character that is now extended from objects of beauty to banal objects of everyday life in a way that is inevitably ironic but that also works to shift the object of art from the beautiful to the interesting, grounding the phenomenal character of the work of art that is material for thought in its strangeness. The strangeness of the readymade consisted not only in its generic transgressivity, but more fundamentally in the fact that the object of utility was subjected to a series of transformations which deprived it of its utility and with its normality or familiarity. This was done without necessarily or principally having the effect of making it a beautiful object whose appreciative contemplation would consist simply in its being enjoyably consumed or appreciated, and thus its provoking a wonderment that appears to be its own justification rather than the beginning of an inquiry. Some critics did claim this was the essence of *Fountain*; if so, Duchamp would be a much less imaginative sculptural equivalent of Ponge in celebrating the wonderfully strange beauty of ordinary things.

This view is as conservative as the interpretation that sees no meaningful content in the redefinition of art that the readymades provoked over an extended period in analytical philosophy of art as well as in the practice of art in giving birth to conceptual art and the neo-avant-garde of Warhol and Johns. The Institutional Theory of Art proposed that an artwork is simply what a properly certified member of the art world declares is art. Yes, and a madman is someone a psychiatrist says is mad. If the relevant art institution has any connection to other social institutions and practices, we should not
have very high expectations. Is the beautiful (or the artistically valuable, however that is understood) not linked to the true and the good as it was for Plato? If art (or anything else) is what authorized speakers say it is, then there is no truth, but only opinion. But then we cannot say that art is in fact what someone thinks it is. Moreover, if institutions and practices constitute the identity of any of the things that are dealt with by the persons who participate in them, these things are tools and not artworks.

But of course Duchamp did not or did not only make a urinal, a bicycle wheel, and other mundane things beautiful; fundamentally, he made them strange. Of course *Fountain* and *Bicycle Wheel* are both not without a certain beauty, but before we recognize the beauty of the urinal or the bicycle wheel, we surely notice what it is: it is rendered useless as the instrument it originally was, but it retains that object’s form; it is form deprived of function. Of course the form can be appreciated, and it can be appreciated in the way it has been transformed, for instance, as a bicycle wheel turning uselessly atop a wooden stool. One can very well regard as pleasing to the eye the particular form the transformed utensil has, but one cannot ignore the fact that it is, precisely, a urinal or a bicycle wheel upended, transformed, repositioned; in a word, defamiliarized. Clearly if the readymades reveal something essential about art it is not only that a work of art can be a found object. This object is subjected to certain transformations, and presented in an art gallery, with the implication that it is the kind of commodity that is to be celebrated as a work of art, possessed of the auratic character that marks the autonomous artwork’s possession of a transcendent value. This claim may be taken as merely ironic, obviously false, and therefore as an assault on the institution, practice, or idea of art as we know it. In that case, the artist is seen as negating the
institution of art by showing that the institution of art must include what it excludes, since this clearly cannot be art and yet must be regarded as such. Or it may be taken as suggesting an extension of the possibilities of creative artistic practice by rejecting some central defining feature of artworks up till now, such as their beauty, autonomy, or auratic character. Whether or not the intention of abolishing the separation of art from everyday life that Burger ascribes to what he calls the avant-garde is expressed in the readymades, that of course is not what happened: art survived and its possibilities were expanded. Neither aura not autonomy disappeared. However, beauty ceased to be the essential and defining character of the artwork.

Artworks disclose worlds or reveal truths. They show us something, and when we talk about them we tend to interpret them as saying something and thus as making claims. To be sure, perceptible presentations arguably differ from statements (at least statements understood as prose) in having the inexhaustibility that derives from the fact that what is present or presented as real almost always seems to exceed what can be described; in other words, artworks are never wholly explicit, which is the part of the significance of Heidegger’s use of the concept of “earth.” It is a contingent matter whether what is presented is pleasing or displeasing, beautiful or ugly. Arguably, it must interest us in some way, at least so as to engage our attention if not also provoke us to talk about it, and while it must have the minimal familiarity of anything that appears (the near-total strangeness of traumatic experience manifests itself partly in its obscurity as something that, because by definition we cannot cope with or manage it, we cannot understand), it must be strange and peculiar enough to strike us as interesting.
This is a wholly contemporary phenomenon, and it is still rare enough that popular culture, particularly television but also much cinema and music, tends to be enjoyed because of its familiar and familiarizing character, which is why it is repetitious: films made to satisfy generic formulae, situation comedies that repeatedly present the same situation in minor variations, rock music with a percussive repetitive measure at its basis. These stories are comforting because they represent the world we know, and do so in stereotypically patterned ways. This comforting refamiliarization could be said to be the essence of kitsch. The routines of everyday life may or may not have the “tranquilized familiarity” Heidegger ascribed them; obviously, tranquilization here is a metaphor that describes how such a world must appear to one not absorbed in it. But television (at its worst) achieves this literally, and its familiarizing character is not that intrinsic to the instrumental practices of everyday life but is unique to cultural forms that are designed to be popular because they cultivate an appreciation of the practices of everyday life that is rooted in their familiarity and not their strangeness. That means people recognize themselves in their likenesses, and they are interpellated not in order to distance themselves from their social environment but in order to appreciate and valorize their engagement without the estrangement and discomfort that might provoke them to doubt, question, or problematize their way of life. (Although surely pure kitsch is surely an impossibility, like absolute familiarity.) The word for this is entertainment, whose purpose is to provoke or facilitate not thinking but enjoyment.

In these conditions, the socially critical artist has no option but to try to make the viewer uncomfortable in some way, and in a way that does not resolve the tension or conflict as traditional dramatic narratives do, which are affirmative in Marcuse’s sense.
because they imply that the problems of the social world have already been solved. Thus, the viewer need not trouble about them. Of course, the late modern world is not in fact a conformist world where alienation is rare; it is rife with conflict. Heidegger’s implicit social theory is pre-modern in this respect, and in some ways is almost a fantasy of a world in which the very idea of modernity is absent or inoperative, along with thinking, liberty, and creativity, except in rare moments of crisis. In fact, of course, capitalist modernity is crisis prone and at least since World War I, which was of course the immediate context of Dadaism and the readymades, the European world at least has been a world thrown into crisis. The near-simultaneous emergence after the war of radical modernism in various forms, particular in the arts, and fascism as an attempt to create traditional organic national communities and as refamiliarizing and reterritorializing society through a set of naturalizing mythologies, were both responses to the widespread sense that the modern world had somehow thrown everything into crisis.

What would be an absolute modernity? A society which is in no sense a community, without the normality of the normative, in which there is no order, in which all traditions have been definitively dissolved as Marx appeared to promise in *The Communist Manifesto*, when, as Marx there puts it, “all that is solid melts into air”; when, as Yeats put it in “The Second Coming,” “things fall apart.” Traditions and communities will always exist, but the givenness they make possible has been shrinking, and has been replaced by the pseudo-givenness of the entertainment media, which replace art with kitsch through naturalizing and refamiliarizing aesthetic strategies.

Ponge makes fascinated wonderment the basis of a kind of inquiry. We can begin to understand the world of our everyday life on the far side of, if not alienation, at least
estrangement. But while Ponge makes things interesting and accords them both a strangeness and a beauty that are part of our appreciation of them, Duchamp’s gesture, which in some ways is essentially a performative gesture as much as the presentation of a work, so violates our expectations both for the utensil and for the artworld that is now said or asked to accommodate it that it seems to turn our attention away from the object toward an idea that it evokes. And that may be why Duchamp said that the readymades were not intended to be looked at. The ultimate defamiliarization of the artwork is the negation not simply of its beauty but of what lies at its basis, its perceptual or sensible character as something that appears. Of course, in Heideggerian phenomenological terms, we can wonder if a world can be presented without making it or something that refers to it in some way present as something that appears: isn’t it images that are presented and experienced, and ideas that comprehend and make sense of them? Though Duchamp does not of course render the urinal invisible. Indeed, as Basalla has emphasized, the defamiliarizing transformation of utilitarian objects typically precedes by preserving their form and negating their function. It is essential to the work of estrangement that the defunctionalized thing appear, that we see it, encounter it; the strange is not only something that has lost its familiarity and thus acquired an Otherness that we can shun if we are cowardly or welcome if we are courageous; it is also something essentially manifest and there. Indeed, as Heidegger shows, the familiar is in its essence what is not recognized, thanks to the habitual character of the utilitarian practices of everyday life. Thus, the artwork has a phenomenal character that everyday life lacks, although both are experienced by subjects who engage with things in part through perceptual contact with them. It is thus, in a sense, the phenomenally apparent and this essentially which is
uncanny or strange, and the strange or enigmatic character of Being is the strangeness of
the world as it appears to us.

But Duchamp does not only want to reveal the strangeness of existence, as
Heidegger does in a subjectivist way (in Being and Time) and Ponge does in terms of
things. He is not an existentialist. He wants to reveal the strangeness of things like
urinals, bicycle wheels, and shovels; or else the strangeness they acquire when they are
subjected to one or more transformations either materially or contextually. Art is by
definition artifice, artisanal production or crafting (techne); but if it is only that, it is
production of a commodity; so what distinguishes an artwork from anything else that is
made, including something manufactured industrially and not artisanally? It cannot just
be that it has the beauty of pleasing form: in fact, that the inverted urinal can be seen,
one deprived of its functional context, as having pleasing shapes is a not very interesting
theory of what makes it interesting as a work of art, in part because these pleasing forms
are manufactured and not the work of Duchamp. Though it is thought by some that the
essence of the artistic character of the work is its appropriation by the artist and
placement in a different context (conveniently, that of an art gallery), and so a piece of
driftwood placed in an art gallery is an artwork. Is it? In Heideggerian terms, no or not
very much. It is a natural object relocated in an environment constituted by an instituted
practice, art-making, that is social and signifying; what does it reveal about the world
which for Heidegger is social and not natural in its essence?

Though one thing that is fairly certain is that we can abandon beauty as definitive
of artworks; Danto will also say we must abandon appearance, since Warhol’s Brillo
Boxes demonstrated that an artwork may be perceptually indiscernable from something
that is not art. I suggest simply that artistic practice is a making that is analogous to linguistic practices in that it can be said to have a meaning, it is interesting, we can talk about it; in short, it gives us something to understand, which is an experience of something in some ways strange. For Heidegger, it is essentially worlds and not things that are meaningful; in *Being and Time* it is practice that is meaningful, but of course practice is worldly; a form of life is a manner of “Being-in-the-world.” Being is practice, and practice is situated, so in a sense our manner of being or doing is inseparable from our understanding of the world that is constituted by the necessarily unitary character of ways of doing the various things we do which all express and make sense as ways of being who we are, expressing our form of life. The difference from speech is that most if not all artworks have the partially implicit character Heidegger celebrated with his notion of “earth”; this grounds their interpretive openness and seeming inexhaustibility, though in fact it is inquiry and not the artwork which is intrinsically infinite because untotable.

But what makes something interesting, something we seem to be able to talk about and whose meaningful character is not obvious and thus something that requires an inquiry? Danto says artworks are constituted by the “is of artistic identification,” or an “aboutness.” Since we live in a world of meaningful practices, ultimately what is significant is significant either because it has some familiar use in that world or because it has some significant relationship to that world or some aspect of it (including ourselves). The character the artwork is said in “Origin” to have of disclosing the world in some (particular) way is rooted in the practical character of understanding, and this has the consequence that artworks cause us to see the world we live in, or some part of it, in
some new way that seems compelling and important because we cannot help caring about what we are doing, and since crises always throw into relief the fact that since the world is both enigmatic and an object of interest or concern to us, our ways of doing things, and thus also the way the world is, are something that only seems to be unproblematically given with an inexplicable authoritative character; in reality, we can only regard it as an issue since it is utterly contingent. It is as if being were a chaotic strangeness hidden by an order that is tightly mapped onto it, covering it completely, and in which we are normally enmeshed as a consequence of the fact that this veil of Maya is the price of our success in managing things and in this management ordering them so that their inherent strangeness is rendered purely latent, though it erupts in the failures and lacunae in the order of things that they inherit from their intrinsic chaos.

Duchamp seems to be implicitly “saying” something about the world; the readymades are so provocative and seem to negate what they present, represent, or refer to in a multiplicity of ways that they seem almost to be more like statements than visual presentations. They are also confrontational, in your face, works. It is clearer that some aspect of the familiar world is being subjected to an assault than it is what is being opposed: the artworld, the idea of beauty, our familiar uses of things? I suggest that it is in part the incongruity of the juxtaposition of the utilitarian with the aesthetic that constitutes the strangeness of the readymades. But this strangeness in itself is a central part of their aesthetic character for Duchamp. He makes strange (and thereby perhaps questions) both the utilitarian character of the urinal and the institution of art, which cannot but include something that cannot be proper to it. Art will not disappear nor will Duchamp or his followers abandon it; they will change it into a practice of estrangement,
and this may be Duchamp’s real achievement. In numerous ways the Dadaist movement Duchamp was loosely part of and the surrealist movement that followed it were an art of estrangement, celebrated by some surrealists as the “marvelous” character of the incongruous or shocking. This was arguably part of a broader tendency within early twentieth century modernism towards an absolute negation of tradition, order, normality, propriety, and for some of the surrealists, reason, illustrated in the image of the acephalous (headless) man that provided the title for an important surrealist journal (Acéphale). The absolutely unfamiliar is the absolutely strange character of what is traumatic and as such cannot be recognized, an experience that in some sense is not understood or comprehended or grasped at all, something that can happen to us in such a way that we are totally unable to deal with it. Of course the ultimate unmasterable trauma is death.

The interwar period particularly saw the imagination of both absolute modernity and absolute tradition, although in a world that is historical, both are impossible. Defamiliarization or estrangement is possible, but defamiliarization is not unfamiliarity but the transformation of the relatively familiar into the less so, it is a movement or process and not a state (and arguably it shares this character with all poietic world-disclosive creation; the being of appearing is a becoming). Its condition of possibility is in fact the contentment, normality, and banality of an essentially, though of course not absolutely, familiar world that is presupposed as the basis for its deconstruction, given in the sense of material for transformative reworking. You can only become an exile by leaving your homeland. Strictly speaking, you cannot be a rootless cosmopolitan but only plant your roots in a place with a cosmopolitan character or in a manner that is fleeting
and contingent, in accordance with Baudelaire’s idea of modernity, and thus involving a nomadic changing of places rather than a sedentary remaining in one. One is always situated, and this in part means, somewhere, in a place, though one’s manner of relating to one’s place may vary. One can be in a place but move around a lot, be loosely rather than tightly rooted, perhaps because one travels, speaks several languages — or experience many different works of art which manifest different worlds or at least different visions.

A place is inhabited, occupied, or visited. But is not all habitation, even temporary (including occupation and visitation), heimlich and not unheimlich, occupation of a place which one not only inhabits but to which one belongs? The unheimlichkeit of Being and Time is only possible against the background of, and as the necessarily temporary and partial dissolution of, the at-home-ness of the familiar community that in *Being and Time* is the world of everydayness, which in some sense is the real subject of its practices insofar as there is one. Heidegger calls this community “das Man” because it appears as an anonymity that is the only possible subject of the normality of normativity, normativity being proper use and normality being proper comportment. The ethics of normality and propriety is grounded in utility, not because it treats others instrumentally but because it recognizes them merely as users of instruments who must be anonymous because they are as inconspicuous as what they are doing. The proper thing to do is at once the way to do it most successfully and the way that it is done, the way that “one” does it, meaning anyone who might do it, since it makes no difference, as the subject proper to a practice is simply the one who performs it: subjects accrue to practices. One can also marry outside one’s family (the law of exogamy, of forming a liaison with a
stranger, is perhaps the basis of estrangement), but in that case one creates a new family
and in any case one usually has a family to start with that one leaves in order to not
remain within. Worse, if being at home is just being in a place (and not occupying it in
some special normalizing and reterritorializing way), one quite obviously cannot be
without a place, although one might well be without some particular way of belonging to
or being in one’s place. One could celebrate the detachment of the person who refuses to
be at home in the world anywhere (or who cannot be); he inhabits a situation but refuses
to grant it propriety, perhaps because he denies it legitimacy. What is the difference
between location and belonging? We are attached to the things in our environment
because we are absorbed in what we are doing, and that is a condition of doing anything
successfully at all. So we tend to appreciate where we are and imagine ourselves as
belonging to it; space becomes property, the place I call my own. I can leave my place
only by wandering into another place, and then it is either not mine or I assimilate myself
and make it mine. But I can break the ties of absorptive belonging that connect me to my
world, its things, and its place or places. Then I am disengaged, disaffected, alienated, a
stranger. To be sure, this would better reflect the metaphysical or existential truth that
being is essentially strange and enigmatic. This is an historical truth that realizes and
expresses a certain possibility intrinsic to our at once situated and contingent existence as
beings who tend to become absorbed in what we are doing but who are essentially
abandoned into a world that is inevitably traumatic. Because capitalist modernity is
essentially destructive of traditions and thus defamiliarizing, it throws into relief this
opposition that can be taken as defining the essence of the modern project on the one
hand and the traditional world it destroys on the other, as well as the conflict between them as being arguably the essence of the modern.

There are no necessary connections, and this means once our involvements reveal themselves as having the conspicuous character that our ordinary absorption in them precludes, we can only find whatever appears to us to be an object of concern because we have some involvement with it as curious, dubious, and questionable, as a consequence of its suddenly appearing strange to us. We don’t know what to do with it, and wonder what it means. The idea that art, at least in the late modern world, has the character of foregrounding this strangeness and showing us all kinds of things that are interesting on the basis of this strangeness, is a very plausible candidate for what art today is, now that not only mimetic representation but beautiful appearance are no longer viable. This means that the artist today typically wants to disturb, not comfort or entertain. This is because art obeys the twin laws of, first, having to be not pleasant but interesting; and, secondly, calling into question or throwing into crisis in some manner the way things are in the actual world of everyday life. It is not enough to be socially critical in some way: art must challenge the viewer’s everydayness. Heidegger played a key role in this development with his claim that everyday life is “inauthentic,” while being at the same time the source of all meaning and value. He thought it was the source of all possibilities, because possibilities are implicit in projects that define themselves with reference to them. But the idea of possibility reduces what can happen to what I can do, whereas what can happen is unknown and unpredictable on the basis of what is (or what is being done). The event is not the expression of a possibility but the appearance of a new way of understanding the world and living in it, which we could also call the appearance of a
new world, if “world” has the twin significations of the world of everyday life and the particular and wholly contingent world of an artist.

Although the new does not exist in *Being and Time*, it is central to the theory of the artwork in “Origin.” However, the early theory of practice as the basis of everyday understanding remains the background of intelligibility of Heidegger’s theory of art. Practice is banal; the artwork is what discloses worlds, and their particularity and thus that of the worlds they disclose makes possible the emergence of the new. Artworks can disclose worlds because they are not banal; and that means they are essentially strange, and their strangeness is effective as a disturbance of the comfortable banality of everydayness.

Is everyday life irredeemably banal? Perhaps not, but the emergent idea of art expresses an idea of modernity that is in its essence a negation of everyday life. Consequently, it pictures everyday life as deprived of meaning, reflecting both the conservative modernist’s disdain for the man of the crowd and the idea that ordinary life is a passive material for the work of revolutionizing. This could be that of capitalism which transforms peasants from traditional communities into propertyless laborers whose work is reduced to routinize boredom by the mechanization of their labor time and the consequent destruction of experience. Or it could be that of a republican or socialist revolutionary terror that insists, like Robespierre, on virtue. Or it could be that of the artist who is auratically celebrated as possessed of a mysterious creative power (genius) and who is naturally counterpoised to the aforementioned laborer or the ordinary person he was before becoming a alienated visionary as the result of a Demascene event. In all of these cases, modernity is not so much the emergence of the new as the negation of the
old, which of course is understood as its condition. To be sure, this situation gives ample resources to those who desire to create the new or facilitate its emergence, and/or to problematize the given not in order to render it merely odd, but in order to cause it to be doubted and rejected, transformed, of subjected to an inquiry that in some way or other will ultimately end in the question, “What is to be done?” even if the artist’s concern for presentation is linked much more tightly to the desire to understand than the desire to do something as a result of what one has understood.

Duchamp’s readymades stand as provocations that provoke inquiries (and have done so, in art and philosophy), though it is less clear what is problematized or how or with what apparent conclusion than the fact that, at least, the role of objects of utility in everyday life, the role of mechanical production in relation to both everyday life and art, and the role of the practice of art and the institution of art, and thus also of the idea of art, are all called into question. I have suggested what I think the consequence was: to establish an aesthetics of problematization based on estrangement, based in turn on the becoming critical or in crisis of everyday life and the modes of practice, experience, and understanding characteristic of it. This will to crisis was based in part on an idealization of everyday life as meaningless that has roots in the conservative response to modernity as opposition to mass society, though this theme has sometimes been taken up by thinkers on the left (e.g., Adorno, Kracauer, Clement Greenberg) who attribute it not to modernity as such but to its imperfect realization in capitalism. Heidegger in Being and Time formulated a particularly extreme but also powerful form of this sociology, counterposing a near-absolute familiarity to an estrangement that, having nowhere to go, could only take cognizance of its unsettledness with the courage of “resoluteness,” while returning to the
once-familiar practices with a lucid and perhaps ironic recognition of the metaphysical contingency that subtends their social necessity.

Ponge’s problematization of the given is without negativity and reflects the optimistic French faith in the patient labor of the scientist, who in the guise of a sort of phenomenologist who seeks to describe and not provide explanations, or to explain only by describing, reveals the true character of things through a careful investigation that shows their appearance from different sides or in a variety of situations. Ponge’s objectivism is a rendering extraordinary of the ordinary. It resembles in this respect religious ideas of the sanctification of everyday life that achieve a conquest of the profane by the sacred at the cost of revealing that it is precisely the profane that should be sanctified, precisely and only the ordinary that should be called extraordinary. This project sounds like an impossibility since it aims to abolish the distinction that grounds it. But the project may survive its theoretical basis since it is perfectly possible to regard not some but all things as valuable and worthy of intensities of love, reverence, enjoyment, or wonder that do not depend on dividing objects into different categories of valuation. Zen Buddhism obviously aims at something similar, in its case by freeing perception from language on the grounds that language is normalizing while perception is always of the marvelous. Since sanctity extends to everything, there is no reason for departing from the practices of everyday life; one simply does them with the right attitude. In this respect Heidegger follows a similar path and his ethic of resoluteness is religious but not social or political. The Zen Buddhist’s focusing of his attention and avoidance of distractions affirms the normality and propriety of the community’s tasks as rooted in instrumental practice by fusing labor with worship. The Buddhist enlightened by estrangement seeks
to annihilate it since estrangement itself is world- and self-annihilating rather than world- and self-disclosing, and it is fitting that he can only seek to annihilate his own sense of self. Ponge of course is a poet and not a monk, and he uses language to evoke perceptions and thereby reveal things in the reality that they have when perceived attentively and described with care. The modernism of Ponge lies not surprisingly in the negation of the familiarity of the habitual that underlies his turn to the things themselves and the reality that their ordinary familiarity occludes. But this negation is mostly not performed, but merely presupposed. Ponge is a populist: he doesn’t reject the ordinary things of our lives but only our taking them for granted and using them in purely ordinary ways. Like Heidegger, he has an idea of truth that is not embodied in practical instrumentality but obscured by it. Unlike Heidegger, for Ponge it is the way we see things that becomes transformed, not just the position we adopt towards something like “being” or the “world” or, of course, more precisely, “being-in-the-world.”

Duchamp is not interested in the object but in what can be done with it. The readymades are in essence a transformation of utilitarian objects in ways that somehow appear to legitimate their inclusion in institutions that show works of art. We do not see a urinal that has become something else (what could that be?), but a urinal-in-transformation into something that, whatever it is, is some kind of negation of the thing that it quite obviously originally was. Artificing becomes transformation of the given thing, not its production, and the essential character of the artwork becomes its reworking through unworking or deconstruction. Perhaps the ultimate estrangement is not the creation of an unfamiliar new world but the rendering useless, disclocated, and directionless nonsensicality of the given thing, which is of course what defamiliarization
is in essence and definitionally, It is not about imagining or creating a new or possible
world, but problematizing the given world. Politics and political art today always has this
character, even when aligned with a revolutionary project: its essence is critique and
negativity. Political artists show what is wrong with the world, and activists protest. But
the new can and does emerge, and in art it is presented at least as a possibility. It may be
difficult in practice to distinguish representations of the way things are from the way they
might be, since these may well be intertwined and their basis is the same. This basis is a
vision of the world rooted in the artist’s particular experience and the alienation that
might lead the religious to merely respectfully appreciate the good that seems sometimes
to appear like a gift since worlds are not crafted but brought forth, the artist being in a
sense more of a midwife than an authority. This is so because the work does not merely
reveal the artist’s subjectivity but the world that he necessarily shares and responds to as
a citizen with members of his community, the world that is necessarily common, as his
audience. Wonder affirms the essential character of art and the world it reveal as strange
and estranged. But wonder alone is not revelatory but only expresses receptiveness to a
revelation.

The necessarily uncompleted character of the transformation the work represents
as a performance (the only completed or perfected, thoroughly made, object Fountain
could possibly be regarded as is the banal implement it originally was and was made to
be) renders it essentially a problem. Ponge responds in his poetry to a prior
problematization of the object that motivates its descriptive unfolding and that remains
present essentially in the marvelous character of the object under investigation, a
marvelousness that is itself unfolded and fulfilled by the description, since the purpose of
the description is both to understand the thing and to reenchant it and the world along
with it, a reenchantment that is not neotraditional in any way and also lacks the
authoritarian character of religious piety. It is a credible candidate for the restoration of
the wonder that Heidegger says characterized the ancient Greek encounter with the
world. Piety transforms respect into obedience. Ponge’s is instead a fully modern
fascination, and of course it may well be that forces of modernity facilitate this
reenchantment precisely by destroying much that is traditional and thus familiar, since it
is the strange that is marvelous.

What is modern is the recognition that the world is not simply marvelous, because
modernity constitutes itself as a war against tradition (this is the essence of the modern
idea of revolution, and the revolutionary character of capitalist modernity) and thus can
only produce the estrangement it valorizes by negating it. But for Ponge this war, or
revolution, has been won already, whereas Heidegger, especially in Being and Time, is
preparing to fight it, but without having anything to fight for or any way of opposing
what has become problematic, since it is the originally unproblematic character of the
problematizable that is the source of all significance. Duchamp is half an ironist and half
a revolutionary without a programme, problematizing the given without imagining the
new. Ponge imagines the new as a new use for, or new way of understanding, the old, or
at any rate the given. Duchamp is the most characteristic of his time among the three and
perhaps among the century’s artists. Art today seeks above all to be interesting; a serious
narrative artist will tell an entertaining story if it is interesting, though the businessmen
marketing his art hope it is merely interesting enough to be entertaining; they want people
to like it, and for that it doesn’t even need to mean anything. When artists stop thinking
about the market, they often seek to provoke, disturb, even annoy: the world we live in cannot be criticized unless the habitual and normalizing character of everyday life is somehow disturbed. It cannot just be doubted, it must be interfered with, as if the artist were a saboteur. The viewer does not need to be a satisfied customer; it is permitted to annoy him. Taste goes by the wayside along with beauty. What is truly interesting is not what I like but what challenges me, and that of course requires that it have something of the sublimity of what, if it is pleasing at all is pleasing only as a paradoxical appropriation of its unpleasantness.

Strangeness used to be something only tolerated because of its incorporation within a world that is familiar; and, while one may doubt if this is even possible, there seems to be a tendency today to valorize the strange in itself. And that of course is Heidegger’s move in *Being and Time*: if the work has an implicit aesthetics, it is an aesthetics of the object and the experience which appear as essentially strange, unheimlich, uncanny, unsettling, troubling. There may be a plot that locates this experience and confers on it the generic normality that may well be a condition of meaning. Obviously, intelligible difference has a background of familiarity and sameness that makes it recognizable: poets create new expressions, but they do so in a language. And the language whose subject is the anonymous “one” has a priority over the speech of particular subjects, a priority that derives from the normality of practice and that has as a consequence the inevitable dominance of the old and the rarity of the new. Heidegger’s theory of practice shows why a modernist dream of absolute estrangement is as impossible as the dreams of absolute autonomy or self-determination, or the problematization of all of social life that is implicit in the slogan “The personal is the
political,” which is of course based on the principle of totalitarian modernism that everything is political, nothing can be taken for granted, and everything that is done must be justified and can be because it is willed or chosen, since being has been rendered completely explicit and represented. Heidegger’s later critique of technology, metaphysics, the modern world picture, representationalism, and so forth does much to show why this is an illusion. We cannot problematize everything everywhere and always, and would quickly exhaust ourselves in futile and unimportant endeavors if we tried, since some crises reveal comparatively little of the character of the social world while others tend to evoke more far-reaching interpretations of what is at stake precisely because they affect us more deeply and therefore seem to call into question what we are doing in a more thorough and doubtless consequential way. The danger of the modern aesthetic of strangeness is that of making an issue of easily solved problems whose manageability effectively makes them alibis for normality or conveniently used as such, even if the uselessness of the correspondence theory of truth, at least with regard to artworks, renders it meaningless to speak of false representations or ideologies conceived as such; we can only fault certain artworks for not saying very much of importance.

Of course the desire to be read or seen or listened to (and thereby bought, though that is secondary, since artists succeed by finding audiences, not necessarily by making money, the attainment of an audience’s attention being necessary to the artwork’s effectiveness as a work; the artist’s making a living is accidental), which in turn is a function of the desire to be understood, depends on a background of familiarity, but familiarity tends to be understood today more as a condition of the significance of the artwork than as a constituent of it. Familiar works are agreeable because comforting;
what is strange is interesting, and art today aspires above all to be interesting, comforting familiarization being relegated to the entertainment industry.

The legacy of Heidegger today in philosophy of art is that art is understood as revealing some aspect of the world we live in a wholly non-mimetic way that allows for formalism, abstraction, conceptualism, and the range of modernist experiments. That may be one reason these were especially rich in the crisis-driven interwar period, before the defeat of fascist totalitarianism and disenchantment with its socialist variant motivated skepticism towards the more radical affirmations and negations of modernity. And before the emergence of a postmodernism that affirmed the impossibility of abandoning traditions that could one no longer have faith in, and consequently replaced politics with irony as the characteristic mode of problematization and tended to affirm a principle of play as a process of transgressive transformation that lacks the negativity of work and its confident seriousness, but retains its poeitic character. This is estrangement perhaps without negativity but in any case without the utopianism that makes it possible to problematize the given by opposing it in the name of a different world, given as a possibility, for which one would like to exchange it. But if the political is problematization, or the response to crisis by the articulation of a critique, art has not ceased to have this character. It is simply that problematization has ceased to be authorized by a theory which ascribes to the given not just an explanation but a logic, an ordering that subjects appearance to the economy of a language that is the fully articulated institution of the social world. But of course such theories are the antithesis of problematization, and the source is the idea of the emergence of worlds as being produced according to a plan. Whereas the world is already there, and, since the real
object of the artwork, the site of its particular kind of truth, is not the work itself but the world it illuminates, the artist merely makes certain aspects of it conspicuous in an interesting way.

The artwork is revelatory because of its strangeness. This is the lesson of Shklovsky: the modern artist’s first task is, if necessary by first becoming a stranger to himself or recognizing the uncanny character of the real that is its origin and destiny, to transform the commonplace in order to make some good use of the pervasive sense of crisis and will to problematize that drives the modern intellect. Perhaps the most valuable artworks today serve in an almost paradigmatic way as enigmatical problematizations that make it clear enough that something is wrong with the state of things, while leaving us to inquire what that is exactly and how it should be changed. Heidegger’s Greek temple does not have that character, and as with many of his pronouncements and ideas it lacks the modernity his thought helps us to both understand and affirm. If the essence of “Dasein” is that who and what we are, and the meaning of what we are doing and identity of what we ought to do instead — because all of this is something we necessarily take for granted and yet can only find strange when we come face to face with it, if only because we no longer know what to do with it, and thus can only wonder what it means for us, is a problem, an issue, and a question — than the perfect artwork would be one that manifest and evokes this very quality.

It would have the enigmatic character not simply of the unaccountable groundlessness of being, but of something we must make sense of and yet cannot quite seem to, like something we are used to using in a particular way and suddenly no longer know exactly what to do with it, like a tool designed by an alien that no doubt is useful
for performing a function we cannot imagine. Perhaps the essential modern artwork is the object that is not thoroughly made and perfect (*per+facio*), but unworked, taken apart, deconstructed, or simply deprived of its proper and normal use. Perhaps this would prefigure some new form of social life. Or perhaps the paradigmatic modern artwork is simply the work that on the basis of estrangement problematizes our social life in a way that seems profoundly revelatory because of the extensiveness and depth of its compelling and troubling referential implications.
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