Yuk Hui and Brian Kuan Wood

A Conversation on *Art and Cosmotechnics*, Part 2

Continued from "A Conversation on Art and Cosmotechnics*, Part 1"*

Brian Kuan Wood: *Art and Cosmotechnics* has only three chapters, plus an extensive introduction. But each chapter is substantial enough to be its own book! In chapter 1, there is a wonderful passage about "the Open" which I wonder about as a possible object for the search for what you've called "another beginning" of modern technology:

> Heidegger aligns the un-concealment of Being with what Rilke calls "the Open." When human *Dasein* looks at the world in a narrow and closed way, like a subject scrutinizing an object, the earth withdraws itself. The Open is not a scientific object, but rather another name for Being. To think together with the Open is to take into account that which resists closure and objectification. In this process, the re-grounding of truth, the truth of Being, becomes possible. Re-grounding here means rationalizing the non-rational as the incalculable last god.

How does "the Open" reflect the logic of Heidegger's "enframing" in relation to technology? And how is another path revealed in your exploration of Heidegger's interest in Klee and Cezanne's painting as instances where world and earth, or figure and ground, can be said to create openings to the unseen?

Yuk Hui: In order to answer your question, we must first address the meaning of the un-concealment of Being. But explaining Being and the un-concealment of Being in such limited space is an extremely difficult task, also because "*un*-concealment" cannot be said positively, so my answer to your question may have to do some kind of violence to these concepts. In *Art and Cosmotechnics*, I consider that there are two key interpretations besides my continuous work on recursivity: the first is the interpretation of the question of Being in Heidegger and the second is the interpretation of Daoist thinking in terms of recursivity. Heidegger's work is for me a *detour* in order to move forward. Daoist literature often discusses dialectics, but how is Daoist dialectics different from Hegelian dialectics? Can one really call it dialectics at all? There is also much speculation on the influence of Daoist thought on Heidegger, largely based on the story that he once wanted to translate the *Dao De Jing* into German together with a sinologist. The way I approach this subject is rather different.
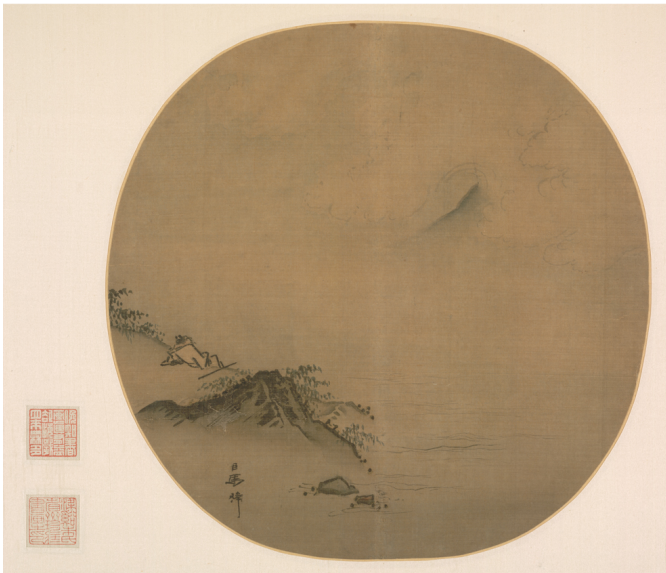
Ma Lin (c. 1185–1260), *Scholar Reclining and Watching Rising Clouds*, Poem by Wang Wei (1225–75), Cleveland Museum of Art.

Let's start with the question of the un-concealment of Being, because, without an entry point to that, we can't address the question of the Open and the meaning of the passage you quoted. The Greeks used the same word *technē* for both "technology" and "art." For Heidegger, what the Greeks understood by *technē* allows us to experience what he called the un-concealment of Being. But here lies the most difficult question – one that haunts everyone and may also make life feel really worthless, especially if you spend your life working on the question of Being, and only realize much later that there is actually no such question of Being! I think that happened to the American philosopher Thomas Sheehan, who taught at Stanford and worked on Heidegger for half a century. A few years ago, he claimed that Heidegger's obsession with Being misses the point.[1] I wouldn't say that Being is an illusion just because no one can say what exactly it is, like an object in front of us; this is the case precisely because Being belongs to a category I call the Unknown, or that we can also call, following Heidegger, the nonrational. The nonrational is obviously not rational, but neither is it irrational. It's nonrational because it always remains as the Unknown (*Unbekannte*). For example, if God were irrational, then the world (including human beings) created by God could not be rational at all. If God were rational, then we would comprehend God through rationality. If we can't do this, it would be because we are an imperfect being. Paradoxically, either human rationality is limited or God is beyond rationality. In either case, if I ask you to demonstrate the existence of God, you'll never be able to, regardless of your belief. In this sense, God remains nonrational and unknown – which could also be the highest rationality.

For example, Descartes's famous demonstration of the existence of God in Part IV of the *Discourse on Method* (as well as in the third Meditation of *Meditations on First Philosophy*) is based on a negation of the human itself, because God's existence is negatively inferred by the imperfection of the human intellect. The first cause is a capacity beyond human rationality that we can call God. Kant is more tactical in considering God, like freedom and the immortal soul, as a postulate. This is how we can say that Being belongs to the category of the nonrational, the category of the unknown. However, when we look out to the world, we see only beings, a chair, a table, a flower, a dog, a human being. Like what Novalis says at the opening of his *Pollen*: "We look for the unthinged [*Unbedingte*, also translated as "the

unconditioned," or "the Absolute"] everywhere and only ever find things." There is a difference between Being and beings – which we find in Heidegger's early work – that is known as the ontological difference. When Heidegger says something is *happening* (*sich abspielt*) in what the Greeks understood as *technē*, he calls it the un-concealment of Being. Being doesn't appear as an object to be predicated or analytically ordered and decomposed, but rather as a place to be opened and cleared to reveal the world in a different way. It is in this decisive moment that the human being may find its place in the cosmos, or situate itself in the flux of time as historical *Dasein*.

I wrote that Heidegger aligns un-concealment of being with what Rainer Maria Rilke called "the Open" because "the Open" is precisely what cannot be reduced to either rational or irrational. Let's recall what Rilke says in the eighth Duino Elegy:

> With all its eyes the natural world looks out
> into the Open. Only *our* eyes are turned
> backward, and surround plant, animal, child
> like traps, as they emerge into their freedom.
> We know what is really out there only from
> the animal's gaze; for we take the very young
> child and force it around, so that it sees
> objects – not the Open, which is so
> deep in animals' faces.[2]

You can see how "the Open" can be interpreted as a non-objectified way of looking at the world, and also what allows us to situate a work of art. At the same time, "the Open" is what a work of art – through its *being at work*, its *energein*, because *energeia* is that which actualizes – allows us to access, to enter into a relation with. The work of art is always *being at work*, but towards what? It is working towards the Open. The work of art opens what has been closed or what is in the process of closing. This is why I related Heidegger's un-concealment of Being to what Rilke called "the Open."

For Heidegger, the un-concealment of Being in the Greek concept of *technē* is still possible in modern technology. This doesn't mean that modern technology becoming, in essence, *Gestell* rather than *poiesis* means we can no longer talk about the un-concealment of Being. Heidegger claims that it's still possible, yet modern technology's mode of un-concealment is

no longer *poiesis*, but what he called *herausfordern,* meaning to "challenge," "provoke," or "dare." Now, for example, if we build a dam to generate electricity, we challenge and order the river. We challenge the land, we challenge the villages that have dwelled there for a thousand years, especially when the villages need to be destroyed to make way for the dam. In the era of modern technology, the un-concealment of Being is still possible through this challenging. However, this form of challenging also means catastrophe, when something overwhelming like a massive engineering project becomes catastrophic, as with Fukushima, Chernobyl, and so forth. The coronavirus pandemic can also be said to be such an event.

If the un-concealment of Being is still possible in modern technology, such a possibility is also a danger. How do we confront such a danger that is also a possibility? My major question is: Is it still possible, while keeping this danger in mind, to transform technology by developing a new understanding, a new imagination, a new concept of invention, and a new relation (Heidegger would say a free relation) to technology? This is why I want to ask, as I said in my answer to your previous question, how art can transform technology. The engagement with Benjamin that we discussed earlier wasn't a criticism, but rather a review of a historical agenda. Why does it become necessary for art and philosophy to relate technology to the Open? Precisely because it is the Unknown, the Open is also open to interpretation, and it is in this sense more general than Being. Can we, for instance, direct technology towards the Open without pushing it to catastrophe and self-destruction? Catastrophes may allow us to resituate ourselves, as when an alcoholic has a horrible traffic accident or a fatal disease and only then gives up drinking. We moderns are all such alcoholics, but self-destruction cannot be the only way to discover meaning. The question then becomes: Can we transform technology before we hit bottom? Even the coronavirus pandemic seems not yet fatal enough to deter us from wanting to resume "normal" life.

In *Art and Cosmotechnics*, I went back to Heidegger's essay "On the Origin of the Work of Art" and his encounter with Klee and Cézanne, because I think it's precisely in the thinking of Klee and Cézanne that Heidegger identifies a way to overcome what he himself calls "the ontological difference." Heidegger made this clear in a postcard he circulated during Christmas, where – after a short poem – he wrote:

What Cézanne called "*la réalisation*" [the realization] is the appearance of what is present [*des Anwesenden*] in the clearing of presence [*des Anwesens*] in such a way indeed that the duality [or twofold, *Zwiefalt*] of the two is overcome in the oneness [*Einfalt*] of the pure radiance of his paintings. For thinking, this is the question of overcoming the ontological difference between being and beings.[3]

In the first chapter titled "World and Earth," I discuss how overcoming such an "ontological difference between being and beings" shows the necessity but also the possibility of reinterpreting and resituating technology. But, as I said earlier, maybe "the Open" provides a more general way to pose the question than Heidegger's Being. Even if Heidegger was able to talk about the un-concealment of Being, how could non-Europeans relate to this Being when, as we said before, the question of Being was not a central one in, say, Eastern philosophy, if we follow what Kitarō Nishida, founder of the Kyoto School, said? Nishida claimed that if the central question of Western philosophy is Being, for the East the central question is nothing. Of course, one can contest such a clear and neat division. At least in the case of China, one may say that the central question is *dao* – not only in Daoism, but also at the core of neo-Confucianism since the eleventh century. This is why, in *The Question Concerning Technology*, I go back to the classical categories in Chinese thought, *dao* and *qi*, to elaborate the concept of technics in China. *Qi* means "utensil," which has to be distinguished from another term with the same pronunciation more familiar to non-Chinese speakers, namely "breath," like in Qigong.

BKW: Let's move forward to the second chapter of *Art and Cosmotechnics*, which begins by identifying how the logic of self-reflexivity within modern art actually forms a tautological, recursive loop. As you write:

Modernism is characterized by a reflexivity that often takes the form of self-critique. Its language is necessarily tautological. Through a negative detour, a logical contradiction, it reinforces what it negates. This gesture is fundamentally tragist because its initial negation or refusal is indeed a preparation for affirmation.[4]

You continue by offering Marcel Duchamp's

Fountain as an iconic example of this recursive refusal-affirmation. I think we can be clear that this tautology is not self-negating (on the contrary), nor necessarily dishonest – in fact, you clearly identify it as a "tragist" logic, following Greek tragedy. But we might say that it does sacrifice questions concerning Being for more immediate – maybe more urgent – questions concerning industrialization, specifically technologies of mass reproduction we know from Benjamin to Duchamp to Warhol and onward, perhaps up to today's contemporary art. From this perspective, we might also suspect that modern and contemporary art have habitually confused industrialization with Being! But that would make it all the more necessary to contrast the "tragist" logic of this loop of refusal-affirmation with what you call "Daoist logic," which you find in the centuries-long tradition of Chinese *shanshui* painting. This second chapter of *Art and Cosmotechnics* is probably the most demanding of the book, because it synthesizes centuries of scholarship and commentary on Daoist thought to identify how recursive or even paradoxical logics produce meaning, either in the visual field or more generally in what can and cannot be sensed or apprehended. *Shanshui* painting can be

considered an ultimate expression of the dynamics of this logic, but I wouldn't even know where to mark an entry into such an encompassing chapter of the book! But perhaps the centrality of *xuan* (□) in this system would be a place to start?

YH: This is a key question. The passage you cited is from my commentary on what Clement Greenberg wrote about Duchamp and claimed about modernism. Greenberg claimed that Duchamp was not destroying art, but rather enlarging the concept of art through the negation of art. That's why I called it "tragist." But we haven't gone into the difference between tragist logic and *shanshui* logic yet, which is at the core of the book. I don't think that I can do this in a satisfactory way here, but maybe I can start with an interlude from 2016 when I was at a conference in London with the sinologist François Jullien.

During a public discussion I had with François, a friend, the American art critic and poet Barry Schwabsky, raised a question: Did tragedy, in the Greek sense, ever exist in China? And if not, why? François answered immediately that the Chinese had developed a thinking to avoid tragedy. I was amazed by this answer, but I

Marble torso of the so-called *Apollo Lykeios*, AD 130–161, The Met Fifth Avenue. Rainer Maria Rilke has a poem entitled "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (1908) that ends with this command: "You must change your life."

was even more amazed by the complexity of the original question, because I don't think the Chinese could avoid tragedy when they didn't know what tragedy was. If you want to avoid something, you have to know what it is first. Otherwise, even if you encounter it sooner or later, you will not recognize it. And if you can recognize something, you must already know it. This is similar to one of the most famous aporia in Western thought from Plato's *Meno*, when Meno challenges Socrates that if he knows what virtue is, he doesn't have to look for it, but if he doesn't know what it is, he wouldn't recognize it even if he encountered it. So I tend to think the Chinese didn't know the Greek meaning of tragedy – a term that doesn't mean "sad," of course, as we use the term "tragic" in the modern sense. That's why I made a distinction between "tragist," on the one hand, and "tragic" on the other, because I don't want to confuse tragist, as a logic, with "tragic" as a colloquial term.

The logic of Greek tragedy always starts with a contradiction – an irreconcilable contradiction. We can take an example from Sophocles where Antigone, by the law of the family, has to bury her brother who died at war, yet the brother, for having been at war against the polis, cannot legally be buried as an enemy of the city. What can Antigone do? She must choose between the law of the family and the law of the polis, since the two are not reconcilable. This is the basic structure of Greek tragedy, and why I try to understand Greek tragedy as a logic. Years ago I was struck by the first sentence of Péter Szondi's *Versuch über das Tragische* (1961), which says that "Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic." In poetics and philosophy, there is a sharp distinction between what is traditionally known as aesthetics and logic. In Aristotle, there's a discourse about emotion, about *catharsis*, about purification of the soul through tragedy. But only in Schelling do we find a *logic* of tragedy – a basic structure of the tragedy starting with these irreconcilable contradictions. What I call "tragist" thought attempts to reconcile what is not reconcilable. Daoist logic also starts with oppositions, but the way the oppositions are formulated and how they are resolved are rather different from the tragist logic. The opposition we find in Daoist thinking is continuous, for example, having vs. not having, movement vs. tranquility, yang and yin are all opposed to each other, but also continuous. Daoist logic departs from these oppositions in order for thinking to proceed. It seeks a movement that can reconcile these oppositions, as the Greeks do with tragedy. The secret of this reconciliation, or this

unification, and how it operates is the task of elaborating *dao*.

But *dao* is like Being in the sense that it is something we cannot really demonstrate. I said earlier that Being belongs to this category of the nonrational, the unknown, and the same goes for *dao*. When you open *Art and Cosmotechnics*, the first sentences you read in the epigraph are the opening of the *Dao De Jing*:

> The *dao* that can be said is not the eternal *dao*.
> The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
> *Wu* (nothing): the origin of heaven and earth.
> *You* (being): the mother of ten thousand things.
> Empty of desire, one perceives mystery.
> Filled with desire, one perceives manifestations.
> The two spring from the same source but differ in name;
> Both are designated as *xuan*.
> *Xuan* and again *xuan*,
> gate to all mysteries.

So the *dao* that can be said is not *dao*. The name that can be named is not the eternal name, because it cannot be named. It cannot be said. *Wu*, which means "nothing" or "not having," is the origin of heaven and earth, and *you*, which means "having," or "being" – the mother of ten thousand things – are already opposed. One is the origin of heaven and earth and the other is the mother of ten thousand beings. The way to resolve this is *xuan* and again *xuan* (*xuan zhi you xuan*), which I see as the beginning of a recursive thinking. There are different versions of the *Dao De Jing*, and in one of the versions it's written as *xuan zhi you xuan zhi*, which makes *xuan* a verb. *Xuan* has many meanings – "dark" in terms of color, as well as "mysterious." You can see how a loop serves to resolve the opposition, but then a curious question arises: What is the difference between this recursiveness and the recursiveness of Greek tragedy, and furthermore the recursiveness we are familiar with in cybernetics? This is the question *Art and Cosmotechnics* attempts to open. It is only through understanding this recursive logic that we can articulate the Open in a more concrete way. That would be my brief response to your complex question!

BKW: And we saw that, among other similar translations, Stephen Mitchell had it as

"darkness within darkness," which is profound. For my final question, let's look to the final chapter of *Art and Cosmotechnics*, which identifies a path forward. Put simply, this path forward means, as you discussed before, reversing the question of how technology determines art to ask how art can determine technology, specifically by returning technology to the primordial question of Being. You point out that science and technology have a low tolerance for the unknown, or a poor understanding of the significance of the unknown beyond posing a threat to control. So as a simple question, I'd like to ask how – either in this final chapter or more generally in your thinking since you wrote it – one might delineate a cosmotechnical approach to creating art today. Have you encountered any artistic strategies that could renew a relation to Being or to the unknown, over and above the determinism of technological enframing or capture?

YH: In *Art and Cosmotechnics*, I compared several English translations of the *Dao De Jing*, yet you can see that it is impossible to translate it word for word, since it is fundamentally a logic. For your question concerning artistic strategies, I'm neither an artist nor an art historian, nor an art critic. I became interested in art because I see an openness in art, which might be an experimental field for all of us. On the terrain of thinking, art is still in a position to deterritorialize and reterritorialize thinking. Secondly, on the institutional level, art institutions might still have the flexibility and possibility to experiment. Like it or not, we have to deal with the question of institutions because we have to think about education for future generations. How are we going to think of the role of universities in the twenty-first century? The role of a humanities education, but also engineering and science educations? At the same time, I've also become very skeptical about the potential of institutions, as you'll read towards the end of the book:

> This new "institutionalization" of art has yet to come, and it has to go beyond an art designed to serve "man's spiritual needs." But it is hard to say whether this institutionalization of art will come to pass, since conventional and conservative practices in the arts and humanities, combined with institutional lack of vision, may be even more efficient than engineering and scientific disciplines in refusing imagination and becoming reactionary. Nevertheless, we still have to prepare for its arrival by providing a

"ground" to think the relation between art, philosophy, and technology today.[5]

You can see that I'm not an optimist, yet I'm still hopeful. I'm also not a pessimist, and definitely not a cynic – cynicism is an enemy we all have to fight against today. I'm suggesting that we should all prepare for a possibility to come. That's why I still see in art – particularly in its relation to technology – a potential at different levels to deal with these questions.

Maybe we can go back to the beginning of this conversation. The question I put forward in the book is: How can we relate technology to the unknown at all? For example, if we could "integrate" the unknown into technology, then it would no longer be modern technology – we would no longer be modern. Modern technology would disappear and Heidegger's discourse on modern technology would come to its end. Can art be a *place* for that? If you ask how to do that concretely, like adding a parameter or function to an algorithm, I wouldn't be able to give you an answer – not only because it would be impossible, but also because, if it were possible, it would paradoxically close thinking. At the same time, for me at least, this should be the way to think about overcoming modernity, because in the last century, overcoming modernity was basically done through wars, which was paradoxically only a continuation of modernity: economic and military expansion via technological means. The Second World War was also a project for overcoming modernity, with National Socialism promising to marry Romanticism and industrialism into a holism (and we know that Heidegger also became a Nazi), or with the Kyoto School in Japan wanting to restore an organic thinking, which I discuss towards the end of *Art and Cosmotechnics* during my analysis of Miki Kiyoshi.

But maybe there are other ways of overcoming modernity that remain important for us today. War is not the most desirable thing, though it is always a possibility as long as the sovereign state remains the only reality of international politics, since sovereignty presupposes the possibility of war. Though realpolitik has its importance, in *Art and Cosmotechnics* I try to explore some different paths, *obscure* paths that are not straightforward and probably not brightly lit by the sun. They are obscure like *xuan*, in the sense that one will have to take many detours – moving backward before being able to move forward, for example, or having to turn around many times. That's also why I said at the very beginning of our

conversation that this is a strange book.

In the very last paragraph of my previous book, *Recursivity and Contingency*, I called for a post-European philosophy, which was partly to echo Heidegger – for whom Western philosophy ended with cybernetics, making a post-European philosophy the only way for philosophy to continue at all – but also to propose an agenda for an individuation of thinking. *Art and Cosmotechnics* can be considered a response to that call, but one that is still at the very beginning of its development. However, this call is for a collective project, which means we will have to work together, as thinkers, artists, scientists, and engineers. And I hope there will be occasions for these kinds of dialogues to continue and flourish.

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1
Annie Atura, "Stanford Scholar Upends Interpretation of Philosopher Martin Heidegger," *Stanford Report*, July 8, 2015 https://news.stanford.edu/news/2015/july/paradigm-heidegger-sheehan-070815.html.

2
Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Vintage Books, 1982).

3
Cited by Julian Young in *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), n24: "This was privately circulated as a Christmas gift to a few friends in 1975."

4
Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics* (e-flux and University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 131.

5
Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics*, 286.