

# **Stony Brook University**



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**The Importance of Experience: Art and Levinas**

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by

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Abstract of the Thesis

**The Importance of Experience: Art and Levinas**

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For Levinas, art serves as a valuable source for philosophy because it can be a source of philosophical truths. Levinas frequently uses works of art, such as Shakespeare, to either exemplify or discuss particular truths regarding our relationship with the Other. However, because of how the artist works, artwork is problematic for Levinas' ethics. According to Levinas, the artist elevates himself above reality and treats the Other as an object by only focusing on the materiality of the Other. The artist is only able to depict the image of the Other. In only concerning himself with the materiality of the Other, the artist avoids his ethical responsibility to the Other. Therefore, artwork and the artist must be redeemed. For Levinas, this is done by bringing language to the work through critique and philosophy.

However, does the artwork and the artist need to be redeemed? I argue that by addressing the necessity of experience we will find that the artist does not act unethically. Furthermore, we will see that it is through experience that the artwork speaks. The experience of artwork allows for the Other to speak in the artwork.

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## Introduction

Art is often used as an example to highlight issues of philosophical importance. Levinas frequently uses art, in particular literature, to demonstrate his metaphysics of existence and existents. For example, in *Time and the Other* Levinas uses Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to highlight the difficulty of grasping what he calls the "paradox of death."<sup>1</sup> In using *Macbeth*, Levinas illustrates the relationship one encounters between death and the future. Despite his hope to overcome the witches' prophecy, Macbeth is faced with the impossibility of mastering death. He cannot accept the imminence of his own death at the hands of Macduff. For Levinas, Macbeth's quandary demonstrates that ultimately the subject does not have control over his own existence. Even though Levinas could have explained his point without the use of art, by using *Macbeth* he was able to illustrate a philosophical issue regarding an aspect of existence that all subjects encounter. Art for Levinas is important for philosophy because it can serve as a source for philosophy. When philosophy uses artwork it treats the artwork as something to be explored and compared to reality thereby revealing what Levinas calls philosophical truths. Thus, for Levinas, art is an indispensable source for philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, tr. Richard A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 71.

Despite the importance of art for Levinas, he finds art to be problematic in two ways. First, the artist disengages from the world<sup>2</sup>, thereby ignoring his ethical responsibility. The artist works alone and in silence. Second, the artwork denigrates the Other; it petrifies the individual into a frozen image, robbing him of a future. The artist not only removes himself from society and ignores the existence of the Other so that he can create, but he also reduces the Other to a mere image. The artistic act treats the Other only as an object. In doing so the artist ignores the saying of the Other in order to create. Thus ignoring the source of his subjectivity and his obligations to the Other.

Additionally, artwork itself does not reveal truth according to Levinas. This viewpoint is counter to Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." Heidegger, unlike Levinas, believes that the artwork can reveal truth. In his essay Heidegger argues that artwork allows us to learn about our way of being in the world because art, unlike language alone, is able to preserve its own work. Despite Heidegger and Levinas differences on art their views on language are not entirely dissimilar. Language for Heidegger and Levinas is important to being. However, for Heidegger artwork is only possible because of language whereas, artwork for Levinas' is not a part of language. Language is related to ethics.

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 136.

According to Levinas, ethics, as it is conventionally understood, begins with self-awareness<sup>3</sup>, whereas he believes that ethics originates with an awareness of the Other.<sup>4</sup> To be ethical is to speak, in Levinas' view. Language is primary to his ethics, for "language is born in responsibility"<sup>5</sup> to the Other. Levinas bases his critique of art on this responsibility toward the Other. Levinas believes that it is necessary to bring language to the work of art in order to justify the artist. This is the task of the philosopher and the critic.

Through analysis or critique the philosopher or the critic redeems the artwork. Philosophy forces the artwork "into movement" and the artwork is thereby "made to speak."<sup>6</sup> By connecting the representation to reality, the philosopher treats the artwork as a myth, which in turn serves as a source for philosophical truths. Philosophy saves art by connecting the artist to the Other. This connection relates the 'untruth' of art to philosophical truths, whereas criticism seeks only to interpret the work. Criticism redeems art from its "irresponsibility" by recognizing the individuals that constitute the artistic relationship. However, the critic fails to justify the "artistic act" of preying on the

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<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy" in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 76-78.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Tr. Alphonso Lingus, (Duquesne University Press, 1969), 43 and 210.

<sup>5</sup> Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 142.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



other, according to Levinas. The critic merely interprets the work, but nonetheless introduces it to the real world.

Although the critic and the philosopher can highlight important aspects of the artwork, Levinas does not address the importance of experiencing the work of art. Even though this maybe intentional by Levinas and not seen as necessary, I believe that experience is necessary when it comes to artwork. In order to address artwork we must also address the importance of experience of the artwork. Furthermore, experience is especially important if we are concerned with the work of the artist and whether truth can be derived from the work of art.

In this essay I will argue that there are two types of experience that relate to art, subjective experience and non-subjective experience. Subjective experience allows one to address art through the point of view of the subject, which is important to the relationship of the artist and the viewer. Through subjective experience the artist and the viewer can seek out one another. By doing so, one seeks historical truths that situate the artwork. Although subjective experience does allow one to discuss the artwork through his point of view, it does not allow us to make universal claims regarding the experience of the artwork; our personal experiences are unique. Furthermore, the difficulty of discussing art through subjective experience would be problematic in keeping with Levinas' idea of alterity. In order to maintain Levinas' view on alterity we must ask where is experience located? If we only address experience through the

subjective, then we get no further than addressing my experience or your experience. However, if we understand that experience is in the artwork itself and not the subject, then we are able to discuss universal claims that relate to the experience of the artwork as well as whether truth is revealed by artwork.

### **Language, Ethics and Metaphysics**

For Levinas, language, ethics, metaphysics and ontology are bound up with one another. It is impossible to speak of one without addressing the others. Here Levinas takes himself to be going against the traditional view. According to him, the traditional view places the ontology of the self prior to ethics (and therefore to metaphysics), whereas he believes ethics is essential to understanding both ontology and metaphysics. Furthermore, we cannot understand ethics without first understanding language. In other words, none of these elements can be explained in isolation.

The traditional view, according to Levinas, begins with knowledge of the self. It is only after we gain knowledge of our existence that we are able to access the world around us. The *I* receives knowledge for its own benefit, and thus knowing is a private activity. This view, according to Levinas, derives from Descartes' *Meditations*. The conventional interpretation of Descartes says that knowledge in general is ultimately based on knowledge of one's existence, and is

only possible after the discovery of the ego. I know that I exist because I know that I am a thinking thing. Ultimately, then, all knowledge is private. Levinas describes this form of knowledge as:

the notion of an intellectual activity or of a reasoning will – a way of doing something which consists precisely of thinking through knowing, of seizing something and making it one’s own, of reducing to presence and representing the difference of being, an activity which appropriates and grasps the otherness of the known.<sup>7</sup>

Knowledge becomes a “property of thought,” molded to fit to one’s own criteria. It originates from me and thus does not stand outside or in opposition to me. “Knowledge is re-presentation, a return to presence and nothing may remain other to it.”<sup>8</sup> Levinas finds this emphasis on the *cogito*, which Husserl adopts, to be problematic. Husserl believes that the process of knowing is conscious and deliberate. According to Levinas, consciousness treats the Other as an object prior to recognizing that it too is an embodied being.<sup>9</sup> The Other, for the sake of our knowledge, is reduced to the same. We first come to know the Other as an object that is presented to our consciousness. Thus, for Levinas, conventional epistemology starts off by treating the Other as a mere object. To base ethics on this structure is to place the self prior to the ethical. It is only after learning of the *cogito* and then becoming aware that there are other conscious beings that one

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<sup>7</sup> Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” 76.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

then proceeds to the ethical. Ethics then becomes self-centered and not purely concerned about the existence of the other, according to Levinas.

Levinas, however, has a non-standard interpretation of Descartes, which carries over to his unique view on ethics. He interprets from Descartes' third meditation that awareness of the infinite is what ultimately grounds knowledge of our existence. That we cannot understand the finite without the infinite:

This finitude could not be determined without the recourse to the infinite, as is the case in the moderns, for whom infinitude is, for example, determined on the basis of the mortality of the subject. The Cartesian subject is given a point of view exterior to itself from which it can apprehend itself. If, in the first movement, Descartes takes a consciousness to be indubitable of itself by itself, in a second movement – the reflection on reflection – he recognizes conditions for this certitude. This certitude is due to the clarity and distinctness of cogito, but certitude itself is sought because of the presence of infinity in this finite thought, which without this presence would be ignorant of its own finitude.<sup>10</sup>

In Descartes' first two meditations, one becomes aware of his existence because he is able to doubt, but is unable to doubt his existence. Every time Descartes utters the phrase "I doubt" he confirms his existence and is able to reflect upon this thought. However, Levinas argues, that in Descartes' Meditations we only gain certainty of our existence in the third meditation, which is Descartes' proof for the existence of God. It is only through our encounter with the infinite, God, which is completely other to us, that we discover the *cogito* and have certainty of our finite existence.

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<sup>10</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 210.

Levinas believes that we only become aware of our existence through our encounter with the Other. Thus, ethics for Levinas precedes awareness of oneself. We become aware that there is an Other, who cannot be completely known because the presence of the Other causes us to question our knowledge. The Other resists complete understanding. Through the critical process, we come to understand that the Other is always in some sense inaccessible. The Other is and remains Other to us despite our attempts to know him. “A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other.”<sup>11</sup> The presence of the Other makes us aware that there is something completely foreign to us that cannot be totalized. Through our questioning of the Other we become aware of our existence.

Levinas calls this the moment of hypostasis. Hypostasis consists of two movements, a departure from the self and a return to the self. Through language, we depart from ourselves to address the Other. For Levinas, the act of speaking is the ethical. Through speaking we address the Other, thereby acknowledging the existence of the Other.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 43.

## **Language and Ethics**

Language and ethics, for Levinas, are so intertwined that they cannot be separated. It is only through language that one can engage in ethics. Traditionally, ethics is discussed as a guiding principle for one's actions or behaviors. However, Levinas is not providing us with a guiding principle like Kant's categorical imperative or Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Both Kant and Aristotle's ethics focus on the development of the self first, whether it is done through developing one's faculty of reason to follow the categorical imperative or developing one's soul to be virtuous. It is after the self is developed that one becomes concerned with others. In Levinas' ethics, one is responsible for the existence of the Other prior to awareness of the self. His ethics is "a responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself."<sup>12</sup> There is an ambiguity as to what this means in terms of our actions; I argue that Levinas intentionally retains this ambiguity to avoid creating an ethics that is action governing. Since ethics serves as the foundation of the self, we are obliged from the beginning to acknowledge the Other prior to all action. If we are unaware of the Other, then we are unable to treat the Other as more than a mere object. Not only does the presence of the Other give us our subjectivity, it also makes us aware that we possess Otherness

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<sup>12</sup> Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 83.

within us. Thus, for Levinas, the main function of ethics is to acknowledge the presence of the Other, which can only be done through language. “Language is born in responsibility”<sup>13</sup> to the Other.

Language that is grounded in ethics is not the same as our everyday language. By everyday language Levinas means conversations that pertain to ideas, thoughts, or any forms of knowledge that we have already acquired. Ethical language is an acknowledgment of the Other. We are aware that our knowledge of the Other is limited; there is always something lacking in our awareness of the Other. Thus, in our desire to know and understand we speak. However, our desire is never fulfilled because we can never completely know the Other. We do not speak in hopes of the Other returning the gesture, which is not to say that the Other will not return the gesture. We speak to acknowledge the Other.

Man is the only being I cannot meet without my expressing this meeting itself to him. That is precisely what distinguishes the meeting from knowledge. In every attitude toward the human being there is a greeting – even if it is the refusal of a greeting. Here perception is not projected toward the horizon (the field of my freedom, my power, my property) in order to grasp the individual against this familiar background: it refers to the pure individual, to being as such.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental” in *entre nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, tr. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 94.

In my meeting the Other I am compelled to acknowledge his presence and therefore him. He is what I do not know. In this sense, Levinas addresses the Other as a stranger. We acknowledge the stranger's existence in the presence of our familiar surroundings whether or not we choose to embrace his presence. We are also aware that we have no power over the stranger.<sup>15</sup> The ethical move is simply our awareness of the Other's existence and his right to exist.

Ethical language, for Levinas, is not the written or the said, but the act of saying. Ethical language only takes place in the present; it is the saying that brings about the present. In hypostasis we depart from ourselves through language; it is the act of saying that provides the rupture from the totality of ourselves. We encounter the face of the Other, which commands us. Our exchange takes place in the present as does our relationship.<sup>16</sup> In the act of

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<sup>15</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> It is the act of saying, which can only take place in present, that establishes all relationships. For example, I am in a relationship with my husband now. I do not speak of having a relationship with him in the future or in the past. We discuss it as on going. If our relationship ends, then I speak of my past relationship. I may speak of how our relationship has evolved, the history of our relationship, and the future of our relationship, but I do not say "when you were my husband yesterday." Of course this can be clouded with words that represent a change in our relationship like "when you were my boyfriend" to "now you are my husband." We should not let these titles confuse us, however; our relationship has merely changed, but it has never ended. Also, because my husband and I are not in a dialogue at the moment does not mean that our relationship has ended. Relationships go beyond the everyday dialogue, which highlights Levinas' view that the saying is more than everyday dialogue. My relationship with my husband functions on a promise, which we have made to each other. We may have uttered a promise to each other on our wedding day, but the promise we have established



saying we direct ourselves toward and situate ourselves before the Other. Thus, our relationship can only take place in the present because the saying is in the present. Once the moment has passed, the saying becomes the said. The said becomes part of our knowledge and therefore is reduced to the same. I can repeat what was said, whereas the saying is immediately in the world to be heard. The saying may not be vocalized, but it is still present such as a promise. When you make a promise to another, especially in a close relationship, the promise may never be uttered out loud, but it is still present in the relationship. The saying is an expression that cannot be undone even by the one who speaks. The language that I use to speak seems as though I own it, yet it is separate from me and is intended for the Other to hear. Although the Other may hear the saying, he does not have control over the meaning of the saying. Our relationship with the Other pivots on the uniqueness of the saying. “Language accomplishes a relation between terms that breaks up the unity of a genus. The terms, the interlocutors, absolve themselves from the relation, or remain absolute with in relationship.”<sup>17</sup> Language allows me to communicate with the Other without treating the Other as an object. I become aware of the Other through language, which preserves the otherness of the Other. The act of the saying preserves the separation between myself and the Other, yet I am able to reach out to the Other.

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to each other was prior to our wedding day. The promise may not be vocalized, but we say our promise to each other in Levinas’ sense of saying.

<sup>17</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

Not only does the saying allow the Other to remain distinct from myself in our relationship, but it also places the Other in significant role over myself. By speaking or listening to the other I open myself up to the Other in my disclosure. I use my voice to solicit the Other. By doing so I attempt to bring myself closer to him. I place the Other in a powerful position. He can speak or remain in silence. Both choices are legitimate responses to my saying and it is only his choice. I cannot force the Other to speak, however, I should not prevent the Other from speaking as well. The implication, for Levinas, then is that it is the speaker's responsibility to provide the Other an opening that allows him to speak, but it is the choice of the Other to recognize the speaker in return. In this sense we can come to understand ethical language as being more akin to the traditional idea of prayer.<sup>18</sup> The presence of the Other obliges me to speak to him, but it does not oblige him to respond: "the Other faces me and puts me in question and *obliges* me by his essence qua infinity."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, "the first revelation of the other, presupposed in all the other relations with him, does not consist in grasping him in his negative resistance and in circumventing him by ruse. I do not struggle with a faceless god, but I respond to his expression, to his

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<sup>18</sup> I should note at this juncture, for simplicity, I consider the Other to be a human other. Who Levinas considers to be the Other is ambiguous and would be better left for separate time.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

revelation.”<sup>20</sup> When we pray we do not expect a direct response; we are unsure as to whether there will or will not be a response. Our act of saying is merely to provide an opening up to the Other. We are humbled by the presence of the Other, for Levinas, and thus we place the Other before ourselves.

For Levinas, language or the act of saying is not merely vocal. Saying can also be silent. Suffering for the Other is an example of saying that is silent. Suffering, according to Levinas, is pointless, however it gains meaning when one recognizes that another is suffering.

There is a radical difference between *the suffering in the other*, where it is unforgivable to *me*, solicits me and calls me, and suffering *in me*, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional of congenital uselessness can take on meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else.<sup>21</sup>

Because I am capable of suffering as well, I am capable of recognizing when the Other is suffering. Although the suffering of the Other, according to Levinas, is useless, my recognition of the Other’s suffering causes me to suffer in return. Only when suffering occurs for the Other does it acquire meaning. Suffering for the Other is done in silence. I cannot explain why the Other is suffering, thus the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering” in *entre nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, tr. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 94.

desire to explain via language fails me.<sup>22</sup> I am rendered silent; yet I do respond to the Other by suffering for the Other. Like the saying, empathy for the Other also situates me before the Other. I recognize the subjectivity of the Other, who is suffering, which in turn elicits an ethical response in me. I am aware that I am responsible for the Other and thus I suffer because the Other is suffering.

One major aspect Levinas fails to address in his ethics is what allows us to recognize suffering in the Other. As human beings we share some similarities. Potentially the similarities that we share allow us to recognize in one another and in art, particular states like happiness or suffering. We understand that we share these similarities and yet there is something unique about us, which distinguishes us from one another. I believe that what unites us, our similarities, are what allow us to recognize our responsibility to the Other. This is not to say that we can absolutely know the Other, which is ultimately Levinas' concern regarding the Other. We cannot reduce the Other to pure knowing, but because we are each similar we can recognize the otherness in another. If the Other was completely foreign to us, there is a greater potential to ignore the Other, even if the Other is the source of our subjectivity.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> We should also note, for Levinas, to give an explanation for one's suffering is the same as justifying one's suffering. Since the Other's suffering is useless and meaningless it cannot be justified and to do so would be unethical.

<sup>23</sup> Take for example the existence or non-existence of God. God is so absolutely Other to us that one easily can doubt his existence.

## **Art and Language**

Art, for Levinas, is not related to language. "It does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue."<sup>24</sup> This is in part because Levinas believes that the artwork enters the world completed; nothing more can be done to the work of art. Thus when it enters the world any conversation that pertains to the artwork will not change the artwork. For Levinas, language is for dialogue and dialogue is an exchange. When we speak to the Other our dialogue is potentially responded to and moreover we respond to the Other's response. Art, however, for Levinas, cannot be changed by dialogue. Furthermore he argues that we do not have access to truth through art rather we can only access it via the saying. We gain access to truth and thereby knowledge through conversation. We do not gain knowledge, for Levinas, from art. Art is something that we consume for ourselves. It is only when the artwork is discussed philosophically that any sort of knowledge can possibly be contributed to the artwork. However, the truth is not in the artwork and cannot be acquired from it.

The artist finishes his work when the artwork presents itself as complete. It is the completeness of the art object that makes art especially problematic for Levinas. By depicting an image in any particular medium the image is unable to change. Since art enters the world as complete time does not affect the image -- time has been stopped within the artwork. Levinas refers to the stopping of time

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<sup>24</sup> Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 131.

as the ‘freezing’ quality of art, which leaves the image frozen in ‘eternal duration’ of a particular moment.

A statue realizes the paradox of an instant that endures without a future. Its duration is not really an instant. It does not give itself out here as an infinitesimal element of duration, the instant of a flash; it has its own way a quasi-eternal duration.<sup>25</sup>

The image is forced to live the same moment over and over again. The artist has taken away the promise of death for the image. By taking away the possibility of death the artist also takes away the possibility of a future. The image is never able to fulfill what it aspires to do. Levinas uses the painting of the Mona Lisa to elucidate this idea “[e]ternally, the smile of the Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden.”<sup>26</sup> For Levinas the image is not dead, but it is not living either. The image is forced to repeat the actions that are either written by the artist, in the case of literature, or is stuck in a particular pose, which will never relax or complete. It appears as though the image has life but “[t]he artist has given the statue a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life.”<sup>27</sup> The image is unable to respond to its particular situation.

Not only is the image unable to change itself, but the viewer also is unable to affect the image. Regardless of the effect that the artwork may have on the viewer, he is unable to respond in any way that would alter the image. The

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

viewer is placed in to the mode of contemplation over the art piece. The viewer is also helpless; he is forced to witness the ‘world’ that the artist has created. This is due to how the artist creates the artwork. The artist has removed himself from society to work and his work is determined to be complete when it “refuses to accept anything more, appears saturated. The work is completed *in spite of* the social or material causes that interrupt it.”<sup>28</sup> Because art is not created out of a dialogue, it is not up to society to determine when the artwork is done nor is society, the viewers, able to influence the artwork. It then enters the world as complete; the artwork “does not give itself out as the beginning of dialogue.”<sup>29</sup> It is closed off from the world it has entered. The viewer is only able to view the artwork.

However, for Levinas, it is impossible to be confronted by the Other and not to speak. When presented visually with the face of the other we are compelled to speak. The face for Levinas is not simply the image, but it is the expression of the Other herself. “The ‘vision’ of the face is inseparable from this offering language is. To see the face is to speak of the world. Transcendence is not an optics, but the first ethical gesture.”<sup>30</sup> The face cannot be reduced to an image alone for us to see. The face is what expresses; it is what speaks. Rather

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 174.

than addressing the Other via language the artist makes an idol out of the Other via the artwork.

Furthermore, Levinas' critique on art is rooted in the artistic act. According to Levinas, in order for an artwork to be the artist is required to "disengage" from the world. The artist creates her artwork by stepping back from society to contemplate on the world around her. Heidegger considers this movement to be vital for man to live well. He believes that to "dwell poetically" man elevates himself "fantastically above reality"<sup>31</sup> and then begins to measure himself "against something heavenly."<sup>32</sup> Out of this process man creates poetry<sup>33</sup>, "poetry is a measure,"<sup>34</sup> which then brings man back to earth.<sup>35</sup> For Heidegger, poetry becomes a foundation for being.

Man does not dwell in that he merely establishes his stay on earth beneath the sky, by raising growing things and simultaneously raising buildings. Man is capable of such building only if he already builds in the sense of the poetic taking of measure.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Heidegger, "...Poetically Man Dwells..." in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, (New York: First Perennial Classics/Harper and Row, 2001), 215.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 218

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger considers all art to be poetry regardless of form. "All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry." ("The Origin of the Work of Art," 70)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 225



In other words, for one to create anything contemplation is required before action – one is to disconnect herself from society and is to only reconnect with society once the object, i.e., the creation, is completed. In responding to Heidegger's essay, Levinas argues that this movement frees the artist from his ethical obligation; the artistic act is elevated above one's ethical duty. In this movement, which is required and justified by art, the artist is freed from responsibility and action.

Moreover, the artist's work is problematic, for Levinas, because the artist treats the Other as an object. The Other has "duality in its being,"<sup>37</sup> he is unknowable in his being and yet has an image that represents him. The face of the Other commands us to acknowledge his presence and otherness, but it also provides with an image that resembles the Other. In depicting the Other, the artist provides us with a caricature that immobilizes the Other. The artist depicts the Other in a particular pose within a scenario of her choice thus taking away the power that the Other commands over us. The artist is only able to do this if she separates herself from the world and frees herself from her ethical obligation to the Other.

Once the artist has withdrawn from society she then proceeds to create an object. The basic practice of creating an artwork is to construct a 'world'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 135.

<sup>38</sup> A term often used by Heidegger – world is created by the artist.

however, for Levinas the world that is created by the artist is only a representation of reality. Although we have come to believe that we gain truth of the Other from the artwork, the basic nature of art *work* “consists in substituting for the object its image.”<sup>39</sup> The artist separates the concept from the object.<sup>40</sup> The artist does not work with concepts rather she creates an object using images. The art work mystifies truths that we desire to uncover; the truths are not apparent in the artwork. She works with the ‘shadow’ of reality, which does not carry with it truth.

This is possible because all objects have a dual existence – every object has a concept and an image that is removed from its concept. In other words, when we interact with an object in real life we are able to connect the concept to the object. “A concept is the object grasped, the intelligible object.”<sup>41</sup> The object is understood through our interaction. However, an image is not connected to its concept. An image is a manipulated representation of an object. We do not interact with the image the same way one interacts with the object. “The image neutralizes this real relationship, this primary conceiving through action.”<sup>42</sup> All objects can be represented, but the representation is removed from the concept of the object. The artist knows that the image of the object, which she is depicting,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

does not carry with it the weight of the actual object, which affects the viewer. The artwork removes, even if for a brief time, the viewer from the world, because the artwork is a representation of the world. Levinas states that “[i]n imagination our gaze then always goes outward [from the art object], but imagination modifies or neutralizes this gaze: the real world appears in it as it were between parentheses or quotation marks.”<sup>43</sup> Not only does the imagination of the artist work by modifying the world in the artwork, but also the artwork requires that the viewer experiences the world through the imagination of the artist. Furthermore, the viewer is neutralized in his activity since he cannot interact with the images.

Since the artist does not use concepts in art *work* she does not use symbols. Symbols relate to concepts to convey a particular meaning. One may argue that symbols are directly related to language as long as the symbol is used in an understood context. Even though the artist represents the world or an image there is no concept attached to the image; the image is not a symbol rather it is allegory. Thus for Levinas, it is impossible to access truth or knowledge from artwork alone. We can only acquire knowledge through the use of concepts, which we only can access through interaction in the real world.

Regardless of the ethical problems that art presents, Levinas does not want to entirely dismiss art since it can serve a higher good. In order to save art it is necessary to view art as allegory. The difference between allegory and

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 134 .

symbolism is the relation of meaning. Symbols immediately infer a particular meaning, i.e., a concept, whereas in allegory the meaning is not immediate. “An allegory ... represents what in the object itself doubles it up. An image, we can say is an allegory of being.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, what is presented to the viewer may appear as a symbol, but since it does not directly relate to a concept it is understood as allegory. The viewer knows that what is represented is not real, i.e., that the actual object is not there, the image appears as though it were something, but has no concept for the viewer to grasp. The viewer then contemplates the allegory. By evaluating the allegory the viewer is able to compare the artwork to the real world. By understanding that the artwork is allegory one is obliged to evaluate it and engage in the world. The viewer is required to act.

Therefore roles of the critic and the philosopher are vital for Levinas. He recognizes that despite Kant’s philosophy on art<sup>45</sup> one is “[n]ot content with being absorbed in aesthetic enjoyment, the public feels an irresistible need to speak”<sup>46</sup> for it is difficult to enjoy art without interest. The role of the critic is to bring language to art. In this movement the critic frees art “from its

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>45</sup> In the Critique of Judgment Kant argues that art out to be viewed with disinterest in order for us to be able to judge the work of art.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.,130.

irresponsibility ... [and] treats the artist as a man at work.”<sup>47</sup> It is the task of the critic to address art through language. In his criticism the critic brings “intelligibility” to the work – he connects concepts to the image through interpretation. Although critique “does not attack the artistic event as such, that obscuring of images, that stopping in the meanwhile,”<sup>48</sup> by bringing intelligibility to the art, the critic justifies the existence of the artwork and connects the image to the real world.

The role of the philosopher is to assess the art object through philosophical investigation. The philosopher treats the artwork as myth; the value of art is related to the value of myth. By treating art as ‘myth,’ philosophy can use art as a source for philosophical inquiry.

Myth is then at the same time untruth and the source of philosophical truth, if indeed philosophical truth involves a dimension of intelligibility proper to it, not content with the laws and causes which connect beings to one another, but searching for the work of being itself.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, because art is merely an image it is “untruth,” but it can provide truth through philosophical investigation, if it is true that philosophy is ultimately concerned with understanding “the work of being.” Even though artwork, for Levinas, is a source of untruths only philosophy is capable of analyzing the work

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

and thus unveiling philosophical truths that can be garnered from the artwork through interpretation.

### **Heidegger and Art**

Levinas does not want to dismiss artwork as it plays an important role in his philosophy. Artwork, for Levinas, is a valuable source for philosophy, which is exemplified in Levinas' own philosophical work on ethics. His position is not in great opposition from Heidegger's. In "...Poetically Man Dwells..." Heidegger says art is necessary in order for us to live the good life. "Poetry is this measure-taking – its taking, indeed, for the dwelling of man."<sup>50</sup> We need art to gauge our lives. It provides us truths about our being that would be otherwise unknown. The work of art is able to isolate an aspect of the world and show us its truth. In the "Origin of the Work of Art" Heidegger addresses Van Gogh's painting of peasants' shoes and how the painting is able depict the shoes in a different context than when the peasant simply uses the shoes.<sup>51</sup> The painting tells us something about the shoes that one would not otherwise see. "Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes,

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<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, "...Poetically Man Dwells..." 221.

<sup>51</sup> Heidegger does not indicate a particular painting of Van Gogh's peasant shoes.

is in truth. This entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being.”<sup>52</sup> For Heidegger, it is through the painting that the truth of the shoes is revealed. We are forced to look at the shoes in a different matter. “The art work lets us know what shoes are in truth”<sup>53</sup> because it places the shoes in a different perspective. The image of the peasant shoes is elevated from the everyday, which in turn allows us to acquire knowledge from the shoes.

It is the work of the artist to bring forth the truth of the shoes via the painting. The work reveals truth. For Heidegger, art work creates an opening for truth. “The work belongs, as work uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself. For the working of being is present in, and only in, such opening up. We said that in work there was a happening of truth at work.”<sup>54</sup> Artwork’s uniqueness is its display of work and thus situates the revealing of truth within the context of its work. Truth is revealed through artwork, for Heidegger. The artwork is a display of the struggle between the world and earth.

Heidegger’s idea of world and earth is best explained by example of the Greek temple. A temple is a created structure; it is part of our world yet we make it out of earth. The world for Heidegger is something that we as beings create. Earth, however, can be thought of as a product of nature. We exist, ground, and

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<sup>52</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Perennial, 2001), 35.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 40.

create our world, out of earth. It is through our work that we clear the earth and set our creations. The temple is made out stone and mortar and other earthly things that are shaped by us. The temple is a product of our work and “to be a work means to set up a world.”<sup>55</sup> However, is the temple a work of art or simply just a work? It depends on the context. When we are in the world the objects such as the temple take on an everydayness quality. They become usual, like the shoes become usual to the peasant, but when we stop using the temple for its intended purpose our view of the temple is altered as well. When viewing the temple of the Ancient Greeks we gain knowledge of the Ancient Greeks. Truth is in the temple, but this is only because we created the temple. Truth is dependent on our existence; it does not exist prior to us waiting to be discovered. We reveal truth through our work. Artwork provides an opening that allows for truth to be revealed. This is the work of poetry.

The process of art work is, for Heidegger, rooted in poetry. The uniqueness of poetry lies in its relation to truth and language. Poetry, for Heidegger takes on the Greek definition of *poiesis*, which means making. It is through making that truth enters the world. Language in general, for Heidegger, is part of the making and not just limited to communication.

But language is not only and not primarily an audible and written expression of what is to be communicated. It not only puts forth words and statements what is overtly or covertly intended to be communicated;

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 43.



language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time.<sup>56</sup>

The original role of language, which Heidegger also refers to as projective saying<sup>57</sup> or primal poesy,<sup>58</sup> is to present an opening up between world and earth and presents what was once unknown. Through the opening up, language presents us with what is unknown and unsayable and simultaneously makes the unsayable sayable. Language presents and names what was once unknown. “Language, by naming beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming beings *to* their being *from out of* their being.”<sup>59</sup> By naming the unknown it becomes sayable. The projective saying reveals what is unknown and yet it is the unveiling that allows us at the same time to discuss what has just been revealed. Naming in this sense is both the revealing of what is unknown and at the same time gives us the tools to address what was unknown. Naming provides us with the word for what was unknown. It is the activity of poesis that makes the saying possible.

Language is necessary for being. “[O]nly speech enables man to be the living being he is as man. It is as one who speaks that man is – man.”<sup>60</sup> This is

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Language” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Perennial, 2001), 187.

not to say that language is what brings man into being, rather it is an activity of man that allows for expression, presentation, and representation.<sup>61</sup> The poet, in his saying is the one who secures the opening by saying what others do not. The saying of the poet presents or represents what is before us, which in turn allows us to address the work before us. The poet names things.

As the calling that names things calls here and there, so the saying that names the world calls into itself, calling here and there. It entrusts world to the things and simultaneously keeps the things in the splendor of world. The world grants to things their presence. Things bear world. World grants things.<sup>62</sup>

Although there is a difference between things and world there is a meeting between the two, which the saying names. “For world and things do not subsist alongside one another. They penetrate each other. Thus the two traverse a middle. In it, they are at one. Thus at one they are intimate.”<sup>63</sup> The naming brings together the two yet it also maintains the distinction between the two. For Heidegger this is dif-ference:

The dif-ference is the dimension, insofar as it measures out, apportions, world and thing, each to its own. Its allotment of them first opens up the separateness and towardness of world and thing. Such an opening up is the way in which the dif-ference here spans the two. The dif-ference, as the middle for world and things, metes out the measure of their presence. In the bidding that calls thing and world, what is really called is: the dif-ference.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 200.

The saying is difference. The saying brings forth the relationship of thing and world, which is the task of poetry.

In his essay “What Are Poets For?” Heidegger states that it is the poet who through his work is able to secure a place in the Opening. “The daring that is more venturesome, willing more strongly than any self-assertion, because it is willing ‘creates’ a secureness for us in the Opening.”<sup>65</sup> It is through this opening that allows us to step back from our everydayness, the materiality of our production.

As long as man is wholly absorbed in nothing but purposeful self-assertion, not only is he himself unshielded, but so are things, because they have become objects. In this, to be sure, there also lies a transmutation of things into what is inward and invisible. But this transmutation replaces the frailties of things by the thought-contrived fabrications of calculated objects. These objects are produced to be used up. The more quickly they are used up the greater becomes the necessity to replace them even more quickly and more readily. What is lasting in the presence of objective things is not their self-subsistence with in the world that is their own. What is constant in things produced as objects merely for consumption is: the substitute – *Ersatz*.<sup>66</sup>

Objects are meant for our consumption and thus we do not have access to truth through our work. Our work then is a recursive circle of production and consumption, which all that is made is a replacement for what was consumed and it is to be consumed as well. We are unable to get past this movement alone; it is the work of the poet that breaks us out of this circle by providing an Opening that

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<sup>65</sup> Martin Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Perennial, 2001), 118.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

allows for truth to be revealed. This is done through his use of language. Language elevates us beyond objects. It is the poet who uses language to do this. “They dare language.”<sup>67</sup> The poet ventures to say what other’s do not. In his saying the poet identifies what is present to him. In the presentation of the saying, which is inexhaustible, the poet brings forth what is present.<sup>68</sup> By naming the poet secures the opening for artwork.

Art takes place in the open that is provided through language. Art itself does not create the opening between world and earth, but its work takes place within the opening. The work of art discloses truth about being, through its preservation of work.

Not only the creation of the work is poetic, but equally poetic, though in its own way is the preserving of the work; for a work is in actual effect as a work only when we remove ourselves from our commonplace routine and move into what is disclosed by the work, so as to bring our own nature itself to take a stand in the truth of what is.<sup>69</sup>

The making of art, its poetic quality, discloses truth, because it preserves the work of the artist, which is only possible if the artist separates himself from his everyday activities. In other words, truth is disclosed in the act of preservation. The uniqueness of the work of art is that the work preserves truth because it preserves its work. The very activity of the art work, for Heidegger, is the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 129 - 130.

<sup>69</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 72.

preservation of the work and thus truth. This is possible because art, poetry in particular, happens in the Opening that is created by language or more precisely by the projective saying. Thus language and art are closely connected. Language provides the opening for art, but it is through art's preservative nature that truth is disclosed.

Levinas disagrees with Heidegger. We cannot gain knowledge or truth from art because it presents us with an obscuring of reality.<sup>70</sup> Truth can be revealed only through dialogue with the Other.

Truth is sought in the other, but by him who lacks nothing. The distance is untraversable, and at the same time traversed. The separated being is satisfied, autonomous, and nonetheless searches after the other with a search that is not incited by the lack of proper to need nor by the memory of a lost good. Such a situation is language. Truth arises where a being is separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him.<sup>71</sup>

Since language allows us to reach out to the Other without subsuming her we can engage in a dialogue with the Other. We only gain access to truth by reaching out to the Other. Therefore, we only have access to truth via dialogue. This is not to say that the Other is the one who has the truth alone; rather the truth can only be discovered through conversation. Furthermore, objects do not display truths; rather, truths are only discovered if language is brought to the object. In other

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<sup>70</sup> Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 132.

<sup>71</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 62.

words, the object needs to be discussed. Thus Levinas rejects Heidegger's claim that art reveals truth alone.

Although Levinas disagrees with Heidegger's claim that art reveals truth, Levinas' position on language is not drastically different from Heidegger. For Levinas, language, the saying, gives us our subjectivity. The saying of the Other reveals difference. The saying reveals the presence of the Other, which brings us out of ourselves and into being. For Heidegger language is not the foundation of the subject, but it is the saying that allows for being to be expressive. The saying brings being out of his surroundings and allows being to live as man. Furthermore, it is only through the saying that the unknown is revealed. The work of the poet is to reveal what is unknown. It is only because of the work of the poet that artwork, for Heidegger, is possible. The artwork is situated within the saying.

### **Experience and Truth**

Language is a necessary link to truth, for Levinas. It is only through a relationship with the Other that truth can be revealed and the relationship is only established through language. Although Levinas and Heidegger agree that language is prior to art, Levinas is too quick to dismiss Heidegger's claim that artwork reveals truth. The critic and the philosopher may reveal truths about the

artwork through language, however I believe that there are particular truths that can be conveyed via the experience of the artwork.

Levinas fails to address how we initially access the artwork, which is a necessary step if one is to critique or philosophize on art. It is necessary to experience the artwork before we can engage in a dialogue about the artwork. If Levinas' goal is to redeem the work of the artist, then he first needs to address how one accesses the work of art. There are at least two ways that we can address experience and art. The first is through the experience of the subject. The second type of experience that I propose is that the experience is not subjective, meaning that it is the subject who experiences, but that experience is in the artwork itself. Subjective experience is necessary for philosophy and critique, especially since these are activities that are done by a subject whereas non-subjective experience relates to the truth of art.

In subjective experience we initially access the art via our body. Although we may philosophically interpret the work we still need to experience the work. Description does not give me an intimate connection to the work of art. I can attempt to describe a painting by saying that it is painted in the surrealist style and there are several figures in the painting, which appear to be dismembered. Take for example the following description of Picasso's *Guernica* from an art history textbook:

Picasso's depiction of this incident is a stark surrealistic nightmare focusing on victims. Expressively distorted women, one with her dead child, wail at the carnage. Above a fallen, broken warrior is a screaming horse, symbolizing the suffering republic. To our left is a bull, thought to symbolize either Franco or Spain. An electric light and a woman holding a lantern suggest Picasso's desire to reveal the event in all its horror. The work is black and white, however, like the newspaper photos that also publicized the atrocity.<sup>72</sup>

From this description I only get a very generalized idea of what the painting looks like, but it is abstracted from the painting. I do not feel the need to really respond to the painting based on this description alone. Any analysis, whether philosophical or generally critical, falls short unless we can point to the artwork. I am unable to critique or do a philosophical analysis of the artwork unless I have already experienced the painting. The description is not a substitute for experience. However, this is not to say that art history is not necessary; it is important in regards to critique and philosophy. Art history can provide us information on the circumstances of when the work of art was created thus aiding the philosopher and the critic in discovering truths regarding the painting. For example, an excerpt on Picasso's *Guernica* from the same art history book informs us of the following:

Shortly after accepting the commission from the legitimate republican government, Picasso and the world were shocked by the world's first aerial bombing of civilians: German pilots fighting for Franco had bombed

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<sup>72</sup> Marilyn Stockstad, *Art History*, vol. 2, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1999), 1090.



and strafed the peaceful Basque town of Guernica, killing hundreds of men, women, and children.<sup>73</sup>

By situating the painting we come to understand what the images represent. Then we can start to discuss truths, but are we still discussing the painting or are we discussing the history that the painting is situated? My inclination is to say that if we base our discussion of the artwork solely on the description of *Guernica* we are merely talking about the history that surrounds the work of art and not the actual painting itself. Even if we do as Levinas' suggests, by treating the artwork as myth and evaluate it against reality or in this case history we still need to view the artwork first hand at some point. I need to have the image of the painting in mind in order to truly respond to the painting alone. If I do not know what the painting actually looks like I am unable to evaluate it against reality. I cannot really discuss whether Picasso's work achieves what one may claim it to achieve if I have only a description of the work.

I may be able to respond to the description and question truths that another person may access from the painting, but I am personally unable to respond to the painting. I need to be in the presence of the painting to truly be effected by the work of art, otherwise it remains as an abstract idea to me. However, when I am in the presence of the painting I can directly respond to it. A detailed description of the painting becomes unnecessary. When I look at *Guernica* I have an

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

immediate response to it. I acknowledge the chaos that is depicted in the painting and the disorientation of the figures. Moreover, I immediately sense that the emotion that is being depicted is one of suffering not of delight. I may not be able to describe my immediate reaction in words completely, but I do have an immediate reaction. I can build upon my reaction, however. I can seek out the situation of the work. I can later learn what the horse and the bull represent and why Picasso painted in such a manner. I can seek out these truths for myself and not have to depend only on a description. But, unless I am in the presence of the painting I do not have a reaction. I am unable to address the work of the artist and therefore I ultimately ignore the artist. The description of the painting leaves me with an empty sense of the suffering that was endured. I do not have an emotional response to the painting based on the description. For this reason, experiencing the artwork is necessary if we are concerned with truth and art.

A goal of art is to convey something about the moment to the viewer. However, for Levinas, art treats the Other as an object, thus what is depicted and appears to be similar and known to us, is an obscuring of reality: “the real world appears in it [art] as it were between parentheses or quote marks.”<sup>74</sup> If art, however, was merely about depicting what is known or what can be known about the Other then description would be a fair substitution for experiencing the artwork. However, artwork shrugs away from simple description. One must

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<sup>74</sup> Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” 134.

experience the artwork to be able to apply philosophy or critique. When Levinas says that the public is “not content with being absorbed in aesthetic enjoyment, the public feels an irresistible need to speak”<sup>75</sup> he has to acknowledge that this urge only occurs after the aesthetic experience.

Levinas, however, has a different take when it comes to non-representational art or conceptual art in general. In this form the artistic project typically revolves around a concept. The concept is part of language. For Levinas, modern painting does not use representation; instead of producing recognizable images, modern painting depicts the matter of painting itself.

In the representation of matter by modern painting this deformation, that is, this laying bare, of the world is brought about in a particularly striking way. The breakup of continuity even on the surface of things, the preference for broken lines, the scorning of perspective and the ‘real’ proportions between things, indicate a revolt against the continuity of curves. From a space without horizons, things break away and are cast toward us like chunks that have weight in themselves, blocks, cubes, planes, triangles, without transitions between them. They are naked elements, simple and absolute, swellings or abscesses of being.<sup>76</sup>

Modern painting explores the elements of painting. We are presented with paintings of white squares or multicolored splatters. Conceptual paintings deal with ideas of materiality in painting itself. Unlike representational art, these

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<sup>75</sup> Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” 130.

<sup>76</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, tr. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 50-51.

works shun naming at various levels. As Levinas points out, we recognize the work, yet we are unable to name the work.

Despite the rationality and luminosity of these forms when taken in themselves, a painting makes them exist in themselves, brings about an absolute existence in the very fact the there is something which is not in it turn an object or a name, which is unnameable and can only appear in poetry.<sup>77</sup>

This is the only form of painting, for Levinas, that can be given as language. In its undertaking of forms and matter, modern painting engages in philosophy. It addresses the function and manner of painting within the painting. The work that we are presented with is a painting about painting.

Herein lies the difficulty regarding modern painting and conceptual art, is it necessary to experience conceptual art if it is only dealing with ideas in general? We are as viewers presented with an object, but what does it mean to simply view a canvas of paint splatters? I believe that it is important to view the artwork, but it is also necessary to seek out the intentions of the artist. We do not really understand what the painting is about simply by looking at it; we need to both know the history of the painting and experience the painting. It is not sufficient to say that Jackson Pollock's work is a form of "action painting" unless I have also seen the work. If I also see the painting, I will have a better understanding of how Pollock's work depicts the action of painting. This distinction becomes a bit more

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 51.

difficult when it comes to paintings like *Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow* by Piet Mondrian. Mondrian may tell us his intention of the painting, but it can be unclear as to how his intention and the work necessarily relate. Regardless, most art enthusiasts are still driven to see the works of Pollock or Mondrian and are not content with simply knowing the about ideas on which the work is based. First hand experience of the artwork is necessary for critique and philosophy because it provides one with knowledge about the artwork/art-object itself.

However, can we claim that it is necessarily the “I” who experiences, if we are concerned with truth and art? In order to be faithful to Levinas’ philosophy we still need to maintain his view on alterity. By addressing artwork solely from a subjective point of view we fall into a discussion on ethics and art that is more like a Kantian ethic with imperatives. We need to avoid imperatives especially when it comes to art. If we attempt to create an imperative regarding experience or artwork we limit the artist and the viewer. More importantly, it is impossible to create an imperative regarding artwork, because in we are not in control of the artwork. The artwork goes beyond the artist and the viewer. Furthermore, to discuss the experience of the artwork from a subjective point of view we run into problems regarding universal claims that we would like artwork to hold. If I discuss art from a subjective point of view alone, it is easy to say that my experience is unique from your experience. This finds us in uncomfortable territory when we want to claim that the experience of artwork that is universal.

In other words, when we encounter a painting or any particular work of art there is something that holds true universally. Experience then must be non-subjective. If we understand that experience is not in the subject, but in the painting itself, then we are better situated to make universal claims regarding art. Additionally, this removes us from the need to address art history and it ensures that we are unable to substitute description for the artwork.

Given the two types of experiences relating to art, subjective experience and non-subjective experience, we may surmise that there are at least two types of truths that relate to the artwork. Subjective experience contributes to the revealing of philosophical truth and non-subjective experience is the revealing of truth in the artwork itself. Non-subjective experience is closely akin to language. The artwork is the saying. Subjective experience, however, is closely connected to the role of the artist and the viewer. In order to understand the truths that relate to subjective experience we must address the role of the artist and the viewer in terms of the art process.

One understands that when working the artist usually does so with intention. The artist works with the assumption that the viewer is going to experience the artwork. Levinas, however, believes that the artist removes herself from the world to work, thus ultimately evading her ethical responsibility, and, furthermore, treating the Other as an object while working. Therefore Levinas believes that the artwork needs to be justified via language, since language

connects the artwork to reality and recognizes the artist. However, it is unclear to me how an artist is able to work removed from the world if she works with the viewer in mind.

For Heidegger the artist is not removed from the world, art is what connects her to the world. "Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling."<sup>78</sup> She is aware of what is occurring around her, which affects her work. If the artist were removed from the world while working, she would not be able to create art. Levinas seems to believe that the artwork comes through the artist and yet is not controlled by the artist. For Levinas, it is as though the artist is unaware of what she is creating when she is at work. However, this is questionable; one example of artists responding to their surroundings is the rise of some forms of conceptual art such as Dadaism. In the Dadaist Manifesto of July, 1918 Tristan Tzara ultimately rejects the relationship between art and beauty as a protest to WWI. Arthur Danto in *The Abuse of Beauty* cites Max Ernst's account of the Dada movement:

To us, Dada was above all a moral reaction. Our rage aimed at total subversion. A horrible futile war had robbed us of five years of our existence. We had experienced the collapse into ridicule and shame of everything represented to us as just, true, and beautiful. My works that period were not meant to attract, but to make people scream.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Heidegger, "...Poetically Man Dwells....," 216.

<sup>79</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and The Concept of Art*, (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 48.

Dadaism was a direct response to what was going on around the artist. The events of WWI had an impact on how they made art and what they depicted. Their moral concern was creating beautiful art for those who created war. What did it mean to produce something that appeared to be beautiful during war, which is inherently ugly? Thus the Dadaist ceased to make beautiful art as a form of protest, but they did not stop making art altogether.

Additionally, Levinas does not take into consideration that an artist works on perfecting her craft. The artist may start with a natural born talent, but it is improved through an education. As Kant points out in the *Critique of Judgment* “if the imagination is left in lawless freedom, all its riches [in ideas] produce nothing but nonsense, and it is judgment that adapts the imagination to the understanding.”<sup>80</sup> An artist thus, for Kant, must hone not only her talents, but also other faculties in order to create works of art. Although Kant had in mind that this is necessary to produce ethical art, which is not the goal of my thesis, it is important to note that in order to work the artist has to educate the same faculties for ethics in Kant’s system. Even though Levinas’ ethics is given in opposition to Kantian ethics, it is possible to argue that the artist, through education, learns to take into consideration her responsibility to the Other, whether it is the viewer or a muse while working. She learns to critique, but the critique is not meant as a

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<sup>80</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 188.



justification, but is given as evaluation of her work. She is to take the evaluation and apply it to her work, whether it be future works or in terms of changing a particular work.

The artist frequently will place herself in the position of the viewer while evaluating. Through constant reflection while working she very much does bring in the outside world. In other words, the artist is constantly stepping back evaluating the work and changing it. She may ask herself the following questions while evaluating: how does this look, what am I attempting to convey, what do I convey, etc. These questions always have the Other in mind. The artist strives to be successful in reaching out to her viewer. She does not create in a vacuum. She is aware of her Other, who is either her viewer or her muse. She enters into the creative act aware of her obligations to the Other, because she is constantly questioning her work. Since, she is aware of any ethical responsibilities, she works within the framework of ethics. Therefore it is not necessary to redeem the artist, because she does not proceed unethically.

Furthermore, the artist usually works with intentionality; there is an ultimate goal that the artist strives to achieve. He works in hope that his goal will be achieved. His goal for the work may shift, but nonetheless he does strive towards an end. Although it may depend on the audience to assess whether the artist succeeded, this does not indicate that the artist did not work without his audience in mind. Usually the artist wants to convey something to his audience.

His ultimate goal may not always be clear and it can be debatable by the viewers, but it does not preclude that there was not intentionality in his work. Thus if we are concerned with truth in art we also have to be concerned with the intention of the artist.

In looking at an artwork, the viewer ought to acknowledge the artist who worked to create the work of art. Again this is not to justify the artist, but to acknowledge that as a viewer, we have an obligation to address the work of art in a serious manner. Levinas seems to hint at the Kantian idea of viewing an artwork with disinterest. Levinas points out that it is impossible to look at art disinterestedly because we always have a desire to discuss the work of art. I agree with him. To merely view the art with disinterest is an unethical endeavor because it would be a form of ignoring the Other: the artist, who worked, and the Other who is depicted. Thus we can say that the viewer is obliged to discover the intentions of the artist.

Without knowing the surrounding history of the artwork it is possible to overlook some of the truths regarding the artwork. This does not mean that knowing the historical situation is necessary for all artwork, but merely to point out that in some situations knowledge of the history surrounding the work of art is beneficial to understanding the artist's intention. Once more, take for example, Picasso's *Guernica*, we don't know that the painting is about the Spanish civil war by looking at the painting. In order to understand what the painting is

referencing we need to know the history. However, by looking at the painting we do understand other topics that Picasso was attempting to get across to the viewer. We see what appears to be destruction and suffering in general. Because we know about the history of *Guernica*, we can interrupt it is as a form of witnessing.<sup>81</sup> *Guernica* is in some regards Picasso's testimony on the Spanish Civil War. The painting in no way represents something that immediately appears to be like reality to us, but there are images and truths that we do recognize.

While viewing the painting the viewer can be an active participant and does not passively view the artwork. She is very much interested in the intention of the artwork and the artist. The viewer wants to connect with the artist. First, she is able to do this in part because feelings are invoked by experiencing the artwork, which are human feelings that we all share. Second, she is able to understand the artist's intention by addressing the historical situation. Knowing the historical situation does not necessarily intensify the feelings or make the work more significant it just adds to the context of the work thereby creating another link between the artist and the viewer. This allows us to address one type of truth that is based on the narrative of the artist. In this case we as a viewer are seeking out the artist. The type truth that we gain from subjective experience is

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<sup>81</sup> I should note that this is not the only way one can interpret *Guernica*.

relevant to historical truths about our existence as beings and is connect to the artwork, but it is not the truth of the artwork itself.

The truth of the artwork is revealed in the saying of the artwork. Ultimately the intention of the artist is irrelevant to the saying of the artwork, since the work of art goes beyond the individual. To access the saying is to experience the work. Thus the second type of truth that artwork exposes is wrapped up in experience. When we experience a work of art we have a response that we are unable to put into words. Yet, we assume that others also experience a similar reaction to the artwork. If we all respond to a painting the same way we can then surmise that the painting does convey something, but is it necessarily communication? Traditionally one would argue that this would account as a form of communication from the artist, however artwork often goes beyond the intentions of the artist. In other words, the artwork often says what was unintended by the artist.

The artist did not create the saying of the artwork. It is in this very capacity that we can say that the artwork is not communication. The artist may work with intention, but the artwork ultimately takes on a role of its own. Sometimes an artist may call this a “happy accident” in that the work does more than what the artist even meant it to do. If artwork only portrayed the intention of the artist artwork then it possibly would function like communication. However, since art takes on a role that is distinct from the artist intentions, we can say that

the artwork itself speaks. In speaking the artwork reveals truth. The truth that is revealed in the saying of the artwork may escape everyday dialogue, but it is given through the experience that is in the artwork. In experience artwork speaks, which in turn allows the Other in artwork to speak. The Other maintains a voice that is only heard in speaking. The artwork is the saying of the Other not the artist.

## **Conclusion**

Levinas' main concern with artwork is how the other is depicted and treated by the artist. He believes that by depicting the image of the Other that the artist has treated the Other as an object. Thus Levinas' concerns regarding art are primarily based on how he believes the artist to be working. Levinas argues that the artist elevates herself fantastically above reality thereby freeing herself of any ethical obligations that she has to the Other. By treating the Other as an object the artist fails to acknowledge the source of her subjectivity and the subjectivity of her Other. Ultimately for Levinas the artist treats the Other as an object because her only concern is to depict the materiality of the Other and while doing so fails to acknowledge the Other's otherness. An object for Levinas is something that can be grasped and therefore known in its entirety. However, it is impossible to

completely know the Other. The Other is what cannot be known for Levinas. We cannot grasp the Other.

The Other is what gives us our subjectivity, which we acquire by acknowledging the Other through language. The saying is for Levinas the ethical act. The presence of the Other implores us to speak. Through language we establish a relationship with the Other, which takes place only in the present. Thus the saying is the activity that brings forth the present. Additionally, it is only through our relationship with the Other that one is able to access truth. Art for Levinas is not part of the saying nor does it present itself as a beginning for dialogue, therefore it also does not reveal truth.

Although Levinas believes that the artist has acted unethically in her work, he does not want to dismiss artwork altogether. He believes that if justified artwork can serve a general purpose. Language has to be brought to the artwork. It is the role of the critic and the philosopher to justify the work of art and the artist. The critic attempts to bring a sense of intelligibility to the work and treats the artist as an individual at work. The critic discusses various aspects of the work thereby justifying the artist. The philosopher, however, treats the artwork as a myth. By treating the artwork as a myth the philosopher is able to analyze the art and compare it to reality. In doing so the philosopher is able to use the artwork as a source for discovering philosophical truths. This is in part why we constantly see reference to artworks in Levinas' philosophy. Levinas commonly

uses art, especially Shakespeare, to demonstrate what he views as philosophical truths regarding ethics and being. Thus Levinas does not want to dismiss art, but he wants us to acknowledge that it is not the source of Truth nor is it a form of language because it enters the world completed.

I agree with Levinas on several accounts on the role of philosophy and use of art in critique, I disagree on a few of his other points. First, I do not believe that the artist removes herself from the world to work and thus acts unethically. I believe that the artist does work with the Other in mind. The artist learns to work within the framework of ethics, which is done by learning how to evaluate one's own work during the artistic process. The artist learns how to step back and consider how her work may be perceived and how she is depicting the Other. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the artist is able to create what could be successful art if she only viewed the Other as an object. The artwork would potentially turn out as one-dimensional and uninspiring.

Second, there are truths that we can access through experience of the artwork. However, we must be careful in addressing experience. Experience can be discussed subjectively or the non-subjective. Subjective experience of the artwork is necessary if we are concerned with truths that are concern our being. In this case a description of an artwork will not provide us with access to the truths that we discover through subjective experience. If we take Picasso's *Guernica* as an example of Picasso's testimony on the Spanish Civil War, we

need to experience the painting in order to understand the form of destruction and suffering that Picasso is attempting to convey. If we only have access to a description of Picasso's painting, then the work can be easily ignored since we do not have an emotional reaction to the description. Furthermore, it is the obligation of the viewer to address the intention of the artist and the historical setting of when the artwork was done. In doing so the viewer is better able to understand the work of art. Thus if one is concerned with acquiring truth from the artwork it is necessary to first experience the work of art and then seek out the intention of the artist. The truth that one gains from subjective experience is rooted in history and the narrative of the artist, but not the artwork.

The truth of artwork is revealed in non-subjective experience. If we are concerned with experience and artwork we need to be careful to realize that it is not the subject, the *I*, who does the experiencing of the artwork. Experience is in the artwork itself. When we talk about subjective experience in artwork we are unable to make universal claims regarding the artwork because each subject has a unique experience. However, to claim that the experience of the artwork is universal we must conclude that experience is in the artwork. When we experience the artwork we are experiencing the saying of the Other in the artwork. The artwork speaks. Thus experience and the saying of the artwork can only be done in the present, which is when truth is revealed.



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