

HEIDEGGER, HANDLABILITY AND PRAXICAL KNOWLEDGE

Barbara Bolt School of Creative Arts University of Melbourne

Theorists or logicians of practice tend to approach the task of theorising practice as a dressmaker approaches the task of making a garment. Using theoretical schemas or patterns, shapes are "cut out" from the continuous flow of practices. These shapes are inverted and then become metonymic for the practices they purport to describe or explain. The part becomes the whole. In the totalisation of theory, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) claims, the "fuzziness" of practice is replaced by the demarcation of semi-academic artefacts.

The focus on artworks, rather than practice, has produced a gap in our understanding of the work of art as process. Working with Martin Heidegger's notion of "handlability", I propose that in creative arts practice, "research" commences in practice – in our dealings with the tools and materials of production, rather than a self-conscious attempt at theorisation. By focusing on enunciative practices, that is, the systems of fabrication rather than systems of signification, I argue that there is a possibility of opening up the field of an "art of practice" from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. According to such thinking, such logic of practice follows on from practice rather than prescribing it.

Heidegger's notion of handlability is orientated around a constellation of praxical terms. He suggests that the primary relationships we have with the world are those things that we deal with, noting that the kind of dealing which is closest to us ... is not bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use.... Such entities are not thereby objects for knowing the 'world' theoretically (Heidegger 1962:95). Through such dealings, our apprehension is neither merely perceptual nor rational. Rather, such handling reveals its own kind of tacit knowledge.

Two aspects become clear in this statement. Firstly, the radical potential of Heidegger's philosophy becomes apparent in his notion of concerned dealings. In setting forth what it means to be a particular sort of being that takes care of things in its dealings, Heidegger suggests that concerned dealings extend beyond the purview of human beings. Secondly, Heidegger initiates a praxical dimension to the way we come to understand the world. Martin Heidegger argues that it is not consciousness that forms the basis of our understanding. He proposes that we do not come to know the world theoretically through contemplative knowledge in the first instance. Rather, we come to know the world theoretically, only after we have come to understand it through handling. Thus, it is only through use that we gain access to the world. Heidegger makes this distinction between theoretical conception and praxical understanding clear when he argues that it is through active use, we establish original relations with things. He cites the example of the using a hammer to support his contention:

The less we just stare at the thing called hammer, the more actively we use it, the more original our relation to it becomes and the more undisguisedly it is encountered as what it is, as a useful thing. The act of hammering itself discovers the specific "handiness" of the hammer.... No matter how keenly we just look at the "outward appearance" of things constituted in one way or another, we cannot discover handiness. When we just look at things "theoretically," we lack an understanding of handiness. But association which

makes use of things is not blind, it has its own way of seeing which guides our operations and gives them their specific thingly quality. (Heidegger 1996:65)

The kind of being which equipment possesses comes to light in the context of handability. I can look at pots of different coloured paints, a camera or a computer screen and take pleasure in contemplating them, but it is only in use that they begin to reveal their potential. I can lay out my brushes and set a fresh canvas before me, but until I actually begin to work with them in making a painting I can not understand their Being.

When Heidegger talks of understanding, he is not referring to understanding as a cognitive faculty that is imposed on existence. Understanding is the care that comes from handling, of being thrown into the world and dealing with things. Levinas notes that the originality of Heidegger's conception of existence lies in positing a relation that is not centred on the self-conscious subject. He says 'in contrast to the traditional idea of "self-consciousness" [conscience interne], this self-knowledge, this inner illumination, this understanding ... refuses the subject/object structure' (Levinas 1996:23). This relation of care is not the relation of a knowing subject and an object known. Rather what is critical to Heidegger's notion of understanding is that understanding emerges through the care of handling. In this way, handling as care comes to supplant the instrumentalist in-order-to that defines the contemporary engagement of humans with the world.

What then makes art a special case of handling? Surely everyday is concerned with handling, whether it is with tools, emotions, ideas or other beings. We understand, for example, that children learn to ride a bike by riding it, not by being told how to ride it and that the instructions that come with flat packs are no substitute for the trial and error that it takes to put something together. How is art any different? Heidegger suggests that in the everyday our handling of things tends to become habitual. When we become habituated we forget the wonder of it all. Our handlings become a means to an end. The privileged place of art arises from art's capacity to create an open space of possibility. And in creative practice, as I will show, it is through handling as care that tools, materials and processes become co-collaborators in opening that space.

In relocating our thinking in handling as care, we can address the question of art practice. Thought this way, painting materials (paint, brushes, turpentine and canvas), sculpting materials or computers are not a means to an end, the motif or the idea is not conceived as an object for a human subject and nor is the artwork merely an end. Handling as care produces a crucial moment of understanding and that understanding reveals possibility in its very possibility. This, not the completed artwork, *is* the work of art. In all of this, Deleuze and Guattari note, 'tools exist only in relation to the interminglings they make possible or that make them possible' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:90). Thus rather than focussing on the artwork, the emphasis shifts to the precise state of interminglings

The two-way action or mutual reflection between practice and theory, in what has become termed praxis, becomes central to my rethinking of the relationship of theory and practice in creativity. Following this logic, I would argue that art can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice. It is not just the representation of an already formed idea. In this

formulation a praxical engagement with tools, materials and ideas becomes primary over the assumed theoretical-cognitive engagement (Ihde 1979:117).

In creative practice, handling as care comes to supplant the instrumentalist means-to-an-end that defines the contemporary engagement of humans with the world. Here artistic practice involves a particular responsiveness to, or conjunction with, other contributing elements that make up the art ensemble. What is critical to creative practice is the type of insight that emerges through this handling. In artist-tool matrix, engagement with tools and technology produces its own kind of sight. Heidegger terms the kind of sight, through which we come to know how to paint, to dance or to write, 'circumspection' (Umsicht). For Heidegger, it is through circumspection that the "new" emerges. In this way, adds Levinas, 'we gain access to the world in an original and an originary way (Levinas 1996:19). This is the loci of creative art's research.

Heidegger's assertion that handability or equipmentality does not follow upon representational logic provides the first critical turn in my attempt to rethink the work of art as practice. In his essay 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1954), Heidegger makes another and, in my opinion, more radical move which enables us to recast the relations between artist, materials and tools altogether. In this essay he questions the contemporary instrumentalist understanding of the human-tool relationship—using tools and materials as a means to an end—and in a challenge to this relationship of mastery, posits one of co-responsibility and indebtedness. In a reversal of the causal chain of means and ends, artist, objects, materials and processes are posited as co-responsible for the emergence of art. In this reversal Heidegger recasts our everyday understanding of causality. Tools are no longer conceived of as a means to an end, but rather are co-responsible (along with other elements) for bringing forth something into appearance.

This refiguration of the tool-human relationship can be brought to bear on our understanding of the complex relationship between humans, objects, tools, ideas and materials in artistic production. In the relation of care that characterises production, the artist or craftsperson is no longer the sole creator or master of the work of art. Argued from this perspective, artistic practice shows us that the artist's relation with her/his tools is not one of mastery, nor is it instrumentalist. Rather, the artist is co-responsible for bringing art forward into appearance. Artistic practice involves a particular responsiveness to, or conjunction with, other contributing elements that make up the particular art ensemble. For Heidegger, this conjunction can set something free and start it 'on its way into arrival' (Heidegger 1977:9). In the process of making art, it is art in itself that is set on its way. Through this dynamic and productive relation, art emerges as a revealing. According to this conception, then, each event or occasioning, involves a unique encounter of inexhaustible complexity that can neither be known in advance nor predicted.

The relationship of care and concerned dealings signals a different way of thinking the precise state of the interminglings between humans and technology. In the modern world, ecological necessity has re-awakened a concern to establish a different relation to the technological. If humans continue to posit the world as standing reserve (i.e. as a resource in reserve for use by humans), the real danger is that we will not have a world at all. Heidegger's critique of technological thinking and his ability to rethink the human relation to technology offers us a way to differently configure the relations involved in art practice. In this paper I am concerned with how the precise interminglings that occur between objects, artist, materials and

processes in artistic practice, can be seen to exemplify this particular relationship of care that Heidegger sees as critical to developing a different relation to technology.

In order to effect the shift from instrumentality to care, Heidegger looks to creative practice and cites the example of the making of a silver chalice. Instead of discussing this production in terms of mastery and attribution, Heidegger establishes that the artistic process is one of responsibility and indebtedness. Further, he claims that the artist is not alone in causing art to come about. In his estimation, a number of contributing elements, or conjunctions are attributed with responsibility. In the example of the making of the silver chalice, Heidegger identifies the other responsible elements involved in the process as matter, aspect and circumscribing bounds (Heidegger 1977:6). Together with the artist, these ways of being responsible do not make an artwork, since art, like technology, is not concerned with making. Rather, they enable or bring-forth something into appearance. Heidegger believes it is through this bringing-forth, that occasioning enables 'the growing things of nature as well as whatever is completed through the crafts and the arts [to] come at any given time to their appearance' (Heidegger 1977:11).

Heidegger derives his understanding of bringing-forth or occasioning from Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes. Although an instrumental interpretation of the four causes involves a reduction of means to an end, Heidegger's interpretation produces a quite different dynamic: one that shifts the terms from mastery to care and indebtedness. In order to achieve this move, Heidegger first sets out the terms of Aristotle's doctrine of causality clearly and precisely. Secondly, he reverses the chain of causality arguing that indebtedness, rather than causality allows us to rethink our relation to technology.

According to Aristotle, the first cause is identified as *causa materialis*. This is the matter or material out of which something is made. In Heidegger's example of the making of a silver chalice, the *causa materialis* is silver. The second cause, *causa formalis*, relates to the form that the thing takes or the shape into which the material enters. The forming of a chalice can be contrasted with the forming of a book, a wheel-thrown pot, or a digital print. Thus, for example, the centrifugal force of the pottery wheel will cause a thrown pot to take a particular form whilst the digital process will cause a digital print to take a very different form. The third cause in Aristotle's doctrine is *causa finalis*. The *causa finalis* is the end or the purpose for which the thing was made. This end determines the form of the thing and thus its relation to *causa formalis* becomes immediately obvious. Thus the sacrificial rite for which the silver chalice was required determined, to some extent, its form and matter. The fourth cause is the *causa efficiens*. The *causa efficiens* is that which brings about the finished object. In the conception of the four causes, it is the silversmith who brings about this effect (Heidegger 1977:6).

In the theory of means and ends which has dominated our understanding of technology (including the making of art), we have focused on the cause that brings something about, the cause that gets results. It is for this reason that Heidegger suggests that it is the *causa efficiens* that 'sets the standard for all causality' (Heidegger 1977:7). According to this accepted view, the artist and craftsperson is the one who obtains results and consequently the one who is assigned authorship and ownership for the work. In harnessing means to ends, the artist justifiably can sign her/his name as the one who has made or caused a work to come into being.

However, this explanation does not satisfy Heidegger. In a move that effectively reverses the chain of causality, Heidegger introduces the notions of indebtedness and responsibility. His argument unfolds as follows:

Silver is that out of which the silver chalice is made. As this matter (*hylē*), it is co-responsible for the chalice. The chalice is indebted to, that is, owes thanks to, the silver out of which it consists. But the sacrificial vessel is indebted not only to the silver. As a chalice, that which is indebted to the silver appears in the aspect of a chalice and not in that of a brooch or a ring. Thus the sacrificial vessel is at the same time indebted to the aspect (*eidōs*) or idea of chaliceness. Both the silver into which the aspect is admitted as chalice and the aspect in which the silver appears are in their respective ways co-responsible for the sacrificial vessel.... But there remains yet a third that is above all responsible for the sacrificial vessel. It is that which in advance confines the chalice within the realm of consecration and bestowal... Finally there is a fourth participant in the responsibility for the finished sacrificial vessel's lying before us ready for use, i.e., the silversmith. (Heidegger 1977:8)

Heidegger's move derives from his questioning of the essence of causality. He argues that the essence of causality is not, as modern thought would have it, a simple case of cause and effect. He suggests that thought as the Greeks thought it, causality is 'the letting of what is not yet present arrive into presencing' (Heidegger 1977:10). Through a careful unpacking of etymology of the term *causa*, Heidegger traces it back to the Roman and then the Greek. Whilst *causa* was the Roman designation for cause, the Greeks used the term *aition*. In Greek thinking, *aition* carries with it a different sense. Here, according to Heidegger, *aition* means 'that to which something else was indebted' (Heidegger 1977:7). From this analysis he concludes that the doctrine of four causes can be rearticulated and the trajectory of means and ends reversed. In this refiguration the four causes 'are the ways, all belonging at once to each other, of being responsible for something else' (Heidegger 1977:7).

This thinking unhinges our customary ways of thinking about the artistic relationship. The artist's responsibility neither derives from her/his role in creating the work, nor because in working s/he brings about the finished object. Heidegger contends that the silversmith is co-responsible for bringing the silver chalice forth into appearance (Heidegger 1977:8). Heidegger teases out a different relation between the silversmith, the silver and the chalice. As matter is co-responsible for the chalice, so the chalice is indebted to the silver (Heidegger 1977:7). In his thinking, the other ways of being responsible are also indebted to the efforts of the 'silversmith for the "that" and the "how" of their coming into appearance and into play' (Heidegger 1977:8). In a similar way, the silversmith is indebted to matter, aspect and circumscribing bounds for this bringing into appearance.

Where we have come to accept the view that humans use materials and methods to achieve an artistic end, Heidegger makes the claim that the four ways of being responsible (rather than the four causes) let something come to lie ready before us. In his example, the silver chalice comes to 'lie ready before us as a sacrificial vessel' (Heidegger 1977:9). In bringing something into appearance the four ways of being responsible set something on its way:

They set it free to the place and so start it on its way into its complete arrival. The principal characteristic of being responsible is this starting something on

its way into arrival. It is in the sense of starting something. (Heidegger 1977:9)

In his discussion of indebtedness and responsibility and later in his elaboration of *techne* as *poiesis*, Heidegger suggests a different relationship or engagement than that of instrumentality. As Lovitt observes in his introduction to 'The Question Concerning Technology', it is 'in *techne*, through art and handcraft that humans can participate in conjunctions with other contributing elements in the bringing forth of a thing into being' (Lovitt in Heidegger 1977a:xxiv). In this statement and also in Heidegger's use of the term concerned dealings with the environment, there is the suggestion that the relationship between humans and tools involves an ethics other than the ethics of mastery.

CONCLUSION

I have asserted that Heidegger's elaboration of handlability, provides a key to rethinking the conditions of possibility of creative practice. I have suggested that this form of understanding, with the "hands and eyes", operates in a different register from the representational paradigm of man-as-subject in relation to objects. Handling is a relation of care and concerned dealings, not a relation where the world is set before us (knowing subjects) as an object. It does not set forth the things that we encounter and place them in an epistemic relation to self. In proposing that it is through use that we come to understand the being of technology, Heidegger's work on handlability, co-responsibility and indebtedness enables us to rethink the relation that we have come to know as artistic practice. Further, in the example of the making of a silver chalice, Heidegger's attribution of responsibility and indebtedness to the silver and to the chalice grants agency to both. In doing so, he opens the possibility for theorising a very different relation between humans, materials and tools in artistic practice. In this relationship, the work of art is the particular understanding that is realised through our concerned dealings with ideas, tools and materials of production. The work of art is not the artwork.

REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. *The Logic of Practice*, trans. R. Nice, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Heidegger, M. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt, New York: Garland, 1977.
- Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*, trans. J. Stambaugh, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Levinas, E. 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology', *Diacritics*, Vol 26, 1996 No 1: 11-32.