

## Design semantics and Aesthetic experience

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Dear colleagues

I am very pleased and indeed grateful to have the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon. When I was thinking about my contribution, I was somewhat overwhelmed over the possibilities implicit in the subject of design semantics and aesthetics.

So, I have chosen to limit my presentation to the question of how artefacts relate to aesthetic experiences and vice versa.

I think this subject might be interesting to you, since it includes artworks as well as handicraft and industrial products, without differentiating too rigidly between them.

I will approach my question by looking closer at two “holistic” aesthetic theories and discuss some of their supporters. Holistic means here, that both concepts do not only view aesthetic experiences in the light of pleasures of beautiful objects or as interpretations of art. They do not deny these meanings but they claim that aesthetic experiences also possess a potential for individual development and the improvement of the socio-political sphere.

Artefacts can trigger this potential, which is relevant for design thinking too. I would like to discuss with you later on, how these ideas can be transferred to design methods and concepts.

Alexander von Baumgarten’s publication “Aesthetica” from 1750 is said to have established aesthetics as autonomous philosophical discipline. We can distinguish three dimensions in aesthetics:

1. Aesthetics as general theory of beauty.
2. Aesthetics as philosophy of art.
3. Aesthetics as theory of sensual recognition and experiences.

For our purposes, I will not go into the historical development of aesthetic theories but will look at Phenomenology and Critical Theory. While Phenomenology focus on the lifeworld constituting role of aesthetic experiences for the individual, Critical Theory regards them as essential to develop a self-reflective, critical and corresponding attitude towards the social world.

However, before we jump into the philosophy from Heidegger and Adorno, let us first try to give a more general explanation for what is meant by aesthetic experience.

For Aristotle the value of aesthetic experience lies in its subjective character, the individual estimates a situation. The visual aesthetic experience concentrates on a single thing (natural or human-made, landscapes, paintings etc.) and the single thing can only be experienced by *αἰσθησις* (perception).

Aesthetic interest focuses on things, which are considered as special, because their features stimulate emotions and reactions. Notification and attention towards a thing is the first component of an aesthetic experience. They are connected with positive and negative feelings and the intensity of these emotions influences the attitude towards the thing - to avoid it or to approach it.

Even if this description of the experience sounds somewhat theoretical, it is important to realize that the process of aesthetic notification is quite physical, it activates all senses, and touch can for example play a major role for the aesthetic attraction.

We feel enthusiasm or rejection when we look at aesthetic things and by doing so, we often refer to their forms of presentation such as sound, smell and material attributes. Not all of these forms are regarded as aesthetically valuable but, fortunately, there exist no rule for “the” aesthetic value. The relevance of the aesthetic lies in the fact that we cannot define its attributes, we can only explain what it means to us. It is important here, to remember the difference between the beautiful (the attractive) and the aesthetic (the noticeable, which is not necessarily beautiful).

Seen from a recipient perspective we can identify four aspects of the aesthetic related to experience:

1. The aesthetic makes happy and pleases: This experience relates to the bodily and sensual experiences of beautiful objects or sceneries. We experience immediate pleasure in sight, touch or smell without the necessity of interpretation.
2. The aesthetic facilitates the orientation in the environment. The irregularity and diversity of the beautiful things give orientations. As more regulated the environment as more visible and desirable become beautiful things. Beauty functions here as metaphor for the good life and the experience of life-quality.
3. The aesthetic is experienced as a source of judgement, inspiration, imagination and contemplation.
4. ‘That is beautiful’, says Kant, ‘which gives pleasure without interest’. Heidegger and Adorno will agree here, they see the aesthetic experience as a non-instrumental, non-rational (in a scientific understanding of rationality) experience *per se*.

5. For Heidegger, the aesthetic experience allows us to imagine the interrelatedness of beings in our lifeworld. For Adorno, it stirs up our petrified egos, makes us positively aware of the otherness (what he calls non-identity) and let us to reflect critically about our current lifestyle.

In the following we are going to examine the role of artefacts for the aesthetic experience in Heidegger's and Adorno's works.

To present the results before the analysis: for Heidegger is the artefact a mode of bringing forth truth. The aesthetic experience is a way to become aware of truth via artefacts. Even if Heidegger differs between the equipment (product), which has a purpose outside itself, and artwork, which has a self-purpose, all artefacts can potentially contribute to reveal truth, if designed with esprit.

What is crucial here is 1) the objective world of the natural sciences is not the life world of the human being, and 2) any theory of aesthetic experience must derive from the lifeworld, not from the objective world.

## **HEIDGGER**

1. Heidegger's fundamental work "Being and Time" from 1927 is an investigation about the meaning of being (Sein). The human being is called Dasein (Being- there). The genuine constitution of Dasein is "being-in-the-world" which means that individuals experience the world through concerned dwelling (living), not as intangible observers of various phenomena.

Being-in-the-world, as familiarity with the world, is the first characteristic mode of Dasein.

It takes place by interacting with those beings (Seiendes) Heidegger calls "equipment": products for writing, sewing, working, transportation, measurement etc.

The equipment stands in a dynamic context with experiences and actions of its designers and users.

*"We shall call the useful things kind of being ... readiness-at-hand. It is only because useful things have this being-in-themselves, and do not merely occur, that they are handy in the broadest sense and are at our disposal (p.65)..."*

*The work (artefact, M.K.) produced refers not only to the what-for of its usability and the whereof of which it consists. The simple conditions of craft contain a reference to the wearer and the user at the same time... Here the world is encountered in which wearers and users*

*live, a world which is at the same time our world.”( p.66)*<sup>1</sup>

The second characteristic mode of Dasein is called “understanding” and relates to the possibilities to reflect upon one’s existence and one’s interest in the world. Language is the articulation of these reflections of being-in-the-world and being-with, i.e. the relationship to other human beings.

One of Heidegger’s main intentions in ‘Being and Time’ is to argue against the idea of an objective reality, defined by mathematics and natural sciences. From his point of view natural science can not answer questions about Dasein, life, humans, artworks, language aso. On the contrary, if the existence of an objective reality is assumed, the existence of a factual lifeworld, in which those questions arise, has to be denied epistemologically, because it cannot be described in terms of an objective reality. While the lifeworld is filled with meanings and values, these characteristics do not exist the reality descriptions of the natural sciences.

In ‘Being and Time’ Heidegger tries to show that the assumed superiority of an objective reality over a reality of daily life practice is in fact a misunderstanding, based on a concealed philosophical prejudice. The tendency to understand all existence as “objects” occurs already in Greek philosophy (atomism). Descartes strengthens this position with the epistemological distinction between the subject and the object which includes a radical objectivating view towards beings.

In daily life, however, humans as subjects experience things with a different attitude. This is most obvious in aesthetics: few spectators would describe a picture merely as recognition of a colorful object with a certain size and texture. Instead, many will talk about their impressions and perhaps interpret its meaning.

In order to strengthen the argument of a lifeworld as a fundament for knowledge instead of an objective reality, Heidegger uses the example of the “equipment”, which, as we said above, do not only refer to the form and materials of products, but is experienced simultaneously in a special social and cultural situation. It is important to realize that Heidegger understands the referential character of equipment as necessarily embedded in a lifeworld, including the users’ experiences and their cultural practices.<sup>2</sup>

To summarize: the concrete world is not an accumulation of objects as perceived in the natural sciences but a world of equipment – a world of the ready-to-hand (Zuhandenes). The

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<sup>1</sup> Being and Time, translated by Joan Stambaugh, State of New York Press, 1996

<sup>2</sup> Wellmer, A., Sprachphilosophie, Frankfurt 2004. To transfer this idea into design methods see e.g. Øritsland, T.A., A Theory of Discursive Interaction Design, Trondheim 1998.

equipment as the ready-to-hand is not an object which gets additional qualities, but the structure of usefulness in a certain lifeworld is the being of the equipment.

2. Heidegger considers also art as a mode of being. The meaning of art is to reveal truth (aletheia) by making artefacts. This is programmatically articulated in the text 'The Origin of the Work of Art': "Art lets truth originate." (p.77)<sup>3</sup>

Truth can be found in such different beings as art, language, technology and law. However, not all production is also truth revelation. The truth value of the artefact, may it be an artwork or a product, depends on the attitude of its designer. The attitude of its designer, in turn, depends for Heidegger on the ability to reflect the lifeworld perceptively, which means to design with a view on the interdependency of beings.

Heidegger approaches the artwork by considering actual works of art and looking at their thingly character.

*"If we consider the works in their untouched actuality and do not deceive ourselves, the result is that the works are as naturally present as are things. The picture hangs on the wall like a rifle or a hat. A painting, e.g., the one by Van Gogh that represents a pair of peasant shoes, travels from one exhibition to another. Works of art are shipped like coal from the Ruhr and logs from the Black Forest. During the First World War Hölderlin's hymns were packed in the soldier's knapsack together with cleaning gear. Beethoven's quartets lie in the storerooms of the publishing house like potatoes in a cellar." (1975, p.9)*

The term "thing" means not "object" in the natural science understanding of this notion, but refers to the material attributes of the item. Heidegger analyses unlike definitions of the term "thing": Thing as a bearer of characteristics, thing as unity in manifold and thing as formed material. He differentiates between the natural thing, the equipment, and the artwork.

To describe the aesthetic experience of equipment, Heidegger analyses, strangely enough, an artwork, namely Van Gogh's 'Pair of Shoes', painted in 1886.

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, M., Poetry, Language Thought, translated by Hofstædter, A., New York 1975



The picture does not only show a pair of shoes, but it tells something about the life of a farmer, about his work, his troubles and efforts. This is so, because the social world, as we said in the last section, is intrinsically included in the being of the equipment.

The artwork allegorizes<sup>4</sup> equipment's usefulness and by the same it symbolizes its reliability. Many of us might have experienced the feeling of comfort and safety when slipping in old hiking boots to go for a trip in the mountains. The memory of former tours is somehow embedded in these shoes, which is one aspect that makes us see the reliability of the shoes in the picture of Van Gogh.

For Heidegger "reliability" has a twofold connotation. Firstly, we are embedded in a certain lifeworld by using the equipment. Secondly, the equipment has material, thingly attributes which allow access to an "earth", which is a supplement to "world". "World" refers to the disclosedness of the lifeworld, while "earth" (in the Aristotelian meaning of "physis- nature") means "the enclosedness of the totality of being." (1975, p.55)

Heidegger points out that world and earth are continuously fighting and affecting each other, while the world represents the disclosedness of being and the earth the enclosedness of being. By the same time, the world is not disclosedness in itself, but it means a process which creates clearing as the happening of truth.

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<sup>4</sup> Allegory means a concrete representation of an abstract figure (for example a person as allegory for a country). A symbol is a representation that by association or convention represents something else that is invisible (for example the "head of the family").

The equipment on the picture is not explored through its utilization but through its artistic illustration. At the same time, the illustration reveals the being of the artwork: it manifests a certain thing (equipment as well as natural, physical things) in being and thereby it reveals truth. Truth arises through the aesthetic experience of disclosing and enclosing, representing the dialectics of world and earth. But how can truth become visible in the artwork? Heidegger illustrates this by looking at a Greek temple.



The temple signifies for the Greeks what is important and manifests a moral and spiritual space. From this view, each culture gets its own artefacts, which are not merely representations or symbols, but express and create shared experiences and understanding. Art is history as the example of the Greek temple shows and as historical event the creative conservation of truth is done by the artefact.

3. The distinction of artefacts in artworks and equipment becomes quite unimportant in the lecture “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”, from 1951, where Heidegger addresses the relationship between Dasein and the phenomenon of building. This relationship is established in the first part of the lecture via the terms “building” and “dwelling”: “The essence of building is letting dwell.” (p.34)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Building, dwelling thinking, <http://acnet.pratt.edu/~arch543p/readings/Heidegger.html>

Individuality gives meaning to Dasein and every individual who dwells gives meaning to dwelling. Heidegger wants to show that the structure of the individual experience of dwelling is universal and necessarily belongs to the human way of being.

However, nothing which is built serves dwelling immediately. Heidegger introduces here a terminological difference between buildings and dwellings, which refers to the fact that dwelling is more than just inhabiting:

*“Bridges and hangars, stadiums and power stations are buildings but not dwellings; railway stations and highways, dams and market halls are built, but they are not dwelling places. Even so, these buildings are in the domain of our dwelling. That domain extends over these buildings and yet is not limited to the dwelling place. The truck driver is at home on the highway, but he does not have his shelter there; the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there; the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there. These buildings house man. He inhabits them and yet does not dwell in them...” (p.20)*

In order to comprehend existential dwelling, Dasein has to reflect the question on how to live. In this context dwelling relates not only to practical but to also to ethical considerations such as how to preserve the earth. For Heidegger, humans dwell on earth and under the sky, they remain before the divinities and belong to each other (see p.21). The unity of these four (earth, heaven, the gods and the mortals) calls Heidegger the fourfold (das Geviert):

*“In saving the earth, in receiving the sky, in awaiting the divinities, in initiating mortals, dwelling occurs as the fourfold preservation of the fourfold. To spare and preserve means: to take under our care, to look after the fourfold in its presencing. What we take under our care must be kept safe.”(p.25)*

The *fourfold* is the “mirror game” between heaven and earth, divine and mortal. This “mirror game” is the happening of truth.

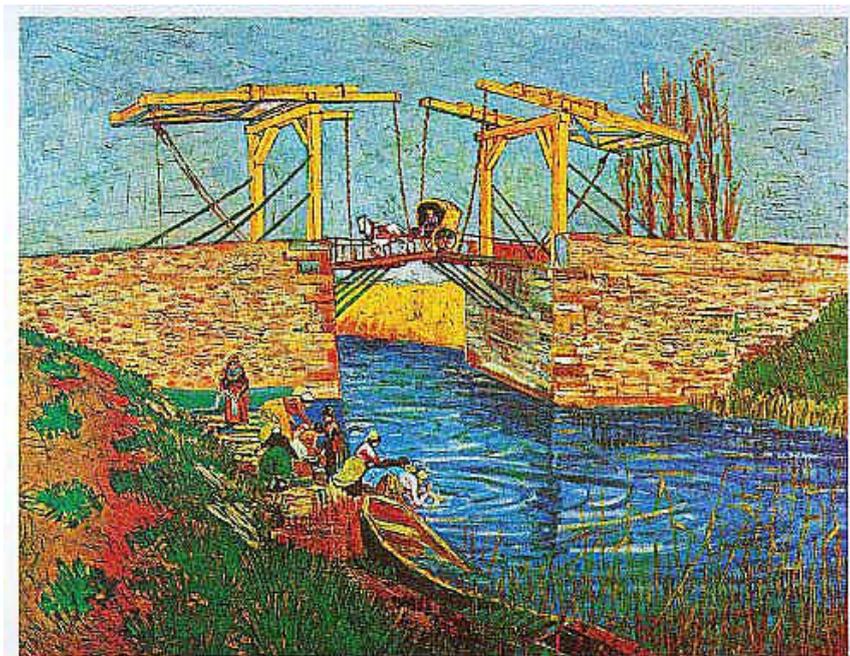
The existential dwelling supports the occurrence of the fourfold as individual caring and nurturing activity. Existential dwelling is accomplished when the individual, even if transforming and changing the world, tries to leave something as what it is. To-leave-something-as-it-is will never be achieved entirely; interpretation and activities generate innovations which in

turn influence their creator. The point is, however, to accept the dialectics of changes and reflect them in ones own work.

In this context Heidegger points to a specific implication of to-leave-something-as-it-is as mode of existential dwelling: expectation (erwarten), which is in German associated with the word “wait” (“warten” also connected with “aufwarten” - to serve).

One can signify “expectation” as openness towards the novel and the alien, which meets us out of the unavailable and inaccessible and cannot be forced. “Expecting” is no passive fatalism, but rather a dynamic reflective activity, which leaves beings the time to reveal the-m-selves. The virtue connected with this activity is to be able to wait, opposed to impulsiveness and impatience.

In relation to the fourfold artefacts gain an existence-ontological status. To explain this status Heidegger uses the example of Van Gogh’s picture “Langlois Bridge at Arles" from 1888.



For Heidegger, the bridge represents the fourfold. Building a bridge is more than just aiming at its expediency. The essential character of the bridge is to be a topological location. The topos (place) is not there before the bridge exists; it comes into being through the bridge. By designing a topos, the bridge contributes to an assembly of the fourfold.

Heidegger’s ideas on existential dwelling and his conception of the artefact as mediator of an assembly of the fourfold has been made astonishingly transparent in architecture.

The example, I like to present here, relates the fourfold rather pragmatically to actions such as location, material and climate conditions, planning quality, user security and use variability<sup>6</sup>.

In this way, the fourfold appears in the following principles:

1. Saving the earth means cautionary use of materials, energy and locations.
2. Receiving the sky considers the conditions of climate in a careful manner.
3. Awaiting the divinities relates to openness for ideas and inspiration in the planning phase and patience in the realization phase of projects.
4. Initiating mortals can be interpreted as solidarity and as reflection about the well-being of others. In practice it means designing appealing surroundings and, in the building environment, not to put human health and life on stake.

## **ADORNO**

In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) Adorno examines classical subjects of aesthetics. Most relevant here are: aesthetic experiences, the autonomous artwork, art and subjectivity, the idea of the non-identical, culture industry, and the artwork's social role.

For Adorno, aesthetic experiences are fundamental to humans. Reflexive and productive activities such as art, design and philosophy are references of these experiences and their exemplifications are vital for the social and cultural development.

Aesthetic experiences are also essential for individual growth. The development of autonomous subjectivity is central to Adorno's philosophy. He argues that what is so alarming in complex, capitalist societies is the extent to which, despite their individualist ideology, these societies in fact ignore and frustrate the individual's experiences of autonomy.

Adorno sees the capitalist society as a mass, consumer society, within which individuals are objectivated and manipulated by highly restrictive institutions which have little interest in the specific individual. He argues that mass culture in contemporary societies pacifies humans in the wrong way. The easy pleasures which come with material possessions make them tame and indolent.

The goal of all industries is to sell their products, and culture industries are factories that produce standardized cultural commodities. The differences between the commodities make them appear diverse, in fact they are just variations of the same manipulation and their goal is *pseudo-individualization*.

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<sup>6</sup> Ein Denkweg an den anderen Anfang des Wohnens, in: *Wolkenkuckucksheim*, 3. Jg., Heft 2, Juni 1998

*"Life in the late capitalist era is a constant initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies himself with the power which is belaboring him... The eunuch-like voice of the crooner on the radio, the heiress's smooth suitor, who falls into the swimming pool in his dinner jacket, are models for those who must become whatever the system wants. Everyone can be like this omnipotent society; everyone can be happy, if only he will capitulate fully and sacrifice his claim to happiness." (The Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1947)*

Critical reflexivity remains the only way to uncover the manner in which subjectivity is repressed. The aesthetic experience of art and nature works here as an antidote against the objectivation of the human life and instrumentalization of the lifeworld. It is considered as a mode of self-understanding and thus it promotes a reflexive attitude towards oneself and society.

*"Certainly, art, as a form of knowledge, implies the knowledge of reality, and there is no reality that is not social. Thus truth content and social content are mediated, although art's truth content transcends the knowledge of reality as what exists. Art becomes social knowledge by grasping the essence, not by endlessly talking about it, illustrating it or somehow imitating it. Through its own figuration art brings the essence into appearance in opposition to its own facade." (1997, p.258)<sup>7</sup>*

The culture industry endangers art by promoting false desires and meanings, created and satisfied by capitalism. Adorno advocates an avant-garde art because it resists commercialization and deny the homogenizing effects of the culture industry.

Instrumental rationality, an utilitarian attitude and the experimental-scientific interpretation of the world possess a power in society that makes it impossible for art today just to illustrate reality. Modern art focuses therefore on the epiphany of truth in the artwork. The epiphany creates a spiritual relation to the world and promises a fulfillment which is not longer to be found in the disenchanting reality.

The autonomous artwork lets truth occur and its aesthetic experience stands in a clear opposition to the spotless and synthetic contentment produced by the mass media.

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<sup>7</sup> Aesthetic Theory, London 1997.

For example, Kafka's work is true by illustrating a genuine index of falsity and advocating a "beauty of failure"<sup>8</sup>.

*"A Little Fable."*

*"Alas," said the mouse, "the world is growing smaller every day. At first it was so big that I was afraid, I ran on and I was glad when at last I saw the walls to the left and right of me in the distance, but these walls are closing in on each other so fast that I have already reached the end room, and there in the corner stands the trap that I am heading for."*

*"You only have to change direction," said the cat, and ate it up.*<sup>9</sup>

The mouse's position is certainly tragic, but a moment of laughter emerges within the agony. It relates to a living subject who believes in fulfilment, a possibility, whose realization is denied in the fable, but which is still remains a promise. Subjective experience and empathy are needed to sense truth in this fable. It lets truth occur by illustrating that the subject does not reject the experience of longing for fulfilment, despite the impossibility of its realization and the knowledge that "only thoughts which do not understand themselves are true"<sup>10</sup>

Artworks are autonomous when they have no outer purpose and are experienced from within. It is possible to vanish into a novel or get lost in a painting, wondering when coming back, that the world is still there. Adorno says: "We don't understand music, it understand us."(1993, p.15)<sup>11</sup>

For Adorno the value of the artwork is to aid the non-identical, which is repressed by reality's compulsion to identity. Non-identity means to overcome conceptual imperialism, which impoverishes experience and make room for new possibilities of thinking.

The artwork allows a surpassing experience with things, an experience which can not happen through their use, but needs contemplation.

By having this potential, artefacts illuminate the "non-identical" and show possibilities to alter ones lifestyle. By the same time they provide a safe way to try out new thoughts.

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<sup>8</sup> From Ziarek, E. , *The Beauty of Failure: Kafka and Benjamin on the Task of Transmission and Translation*. Stanford, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Franz Kafka, "A Little Fable." in *Kafka, Shorter Works*. Vol. I. trans. by Malcolm Pasley. London 1973, p. 142.

<sup>10</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, New York 1995, p. 48

<sup>11</sup> Adorno, T.W., *Beethoven*, Frankfurt 1993

Adorno's thesis is that the non-identity of the world, which artworks mediate, helps the subject to become autonomous, self-reliant and resistant against the manipulations of the culture industry.

Adorno's concentration on artefacts is a movement towards the subject and emphasizes the value of the concrete aesthetic experience. Adorno sees the aesthetic experience with the artwork on the one hand as possibility to overcome the limitations of unified, petrified ego and on the other hand as chance to realize the caricature of reality which the functionalistic trade society presents. Adorno's 'Aesthetic Theory' thus connects individual experiences of the aesthetic autonomy of art with the ideal of reconciliation.

Art is able to hinder the self-destructive process of rationality, the instrumentalization and aesthetic mass-consumerism. The way to do that is to make the repressed and the locked-out visible. In that way art can exemplify the "inner nature" of humans and symbolize reconciliation between the natural and the human made world. While the mere instrumental and strategic rationality remains heterogeneous, and stands thus under "the spell of nature", aesthetic rationality is able to approach the non-identical without the imperialism of explanation.

Thus Adorno puts his hope for salvation of the inner as well as the outer nature on the aesthetic revelation an autonomous artwork can create. Via an analogy between artistic and natural revelation, art becomes an advocate for a non-manipulated reality.

Authors such as Gernot Böhme and Lucius Burckhardt interpreted and continued Adorno's works. After shortly pointing to some of their ideas, I would like to ask some questions for contemporary design too, which I consider important:

- What is the role of design in modern society? Is it artlike or warelike?
- Can designers develop attitudes which counteract the "loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people too"? (2000, p. 39)<sup>12</sup>
- What is the non-identical in design?
- Which connotation has the power of individual experiences, of sensuality and of the search for a meaningful for life for the design of artefacts?

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<sup>12</sup> Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life. London 2000.

## SOME TERMS

### **Aristotle on aesthetic experiences**

Despite my knowledge about art, I will always experience and evaluate single works.  
With all knowledge on ethics as moral theory, I will always have to decide and act in a specific moral situation.

**Artefact:** Artwork and product (equipment)

**Physis:** Natural things, opposed to **Technemé**- human-made things

**Thing:** Natural or human-made item, single or collective appearance (as wholeness), equipment, artworks, landscapes etc.

**Object:** Unit in the natural sciences which possess primary and secondary qualities ascribed by an observer

**Being** = Mode or way of the respective being, “to be” (Seinsweise)

**Beings** = Equipment, artwork, law, technology, basically all that exists

**Dasein** = Human being

**World:** Knowledge about the environment (social, physical, metaphysical) in different forms.

**Earth:** Physis (in Greek also “nature”, M.K.) can be translated with “spontaneous growth”. Aristotle gives the following example: “A human grows from a human, a chair does not grow from a chair.”(Physics, B 2, 193b 12-17, 193 b 8-12, translation, M.K.)

**Truth:** The appearance (Aufscheinen) of the interrelationships between earth and world

**Non-identity:** The non descriptive, implicit moments of otherness in art and nature (also human nature).