

1998

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Taylor, C. (1998). The Self-Growth of Vision and the Self-Repose of Color: A Heideggerian Meditation on the Studio Paintings of Jean Koeller. *(Re)Soundings*, 2 (1).
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**The Self-Growth of Vision
and
the Self-Repose of Color:
A Heideggerian Meditation
on the Studio Paintings of Jean Koeller**

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An unopened DietCoke floats in water; a Coke Classic does not. On being asked for an explanation, a grade school student suggested that the cause was that Coke Classic has more calories. The instructor (telling this story on National Public Radio's Morning Edition) explained to the students that "calories are not real things but rather a measure of something" and that the real cause is that DietCoke is sweetened with NutraSweet while Coke Classic uses corn syrup and corn syrup is more dense than NutraSweet. All of this is of course correct. One can, however, ask another question: what does **more dense** mean? The definition of "the ratio of mass to unit volume" pops up from memories of our own science classes; yet, is density a thing and therefore a different kind of **thing** from a calorie such that more calories cannot cause a soft drink can to sink but more density can? How is it that we understand the word "density"?

How is it that we know that, if a follower of Andy Warhol had sculpted a can of Coke Classic out of marble, that sculpture would sink faster than the real can or that if the piece had been made of Styrofoam it would float even better than the DietCoke? At first the answers seem rather simple. When we trace this understanding we have back to its roots we end up returning to something like our having held in our hands similarly-sized objects which nevertheless produced radically different sensations of the tendency to fall. Being handed a jar of mercury in a science laboratory we are surprised by its difference from a jar of water whose familiarity has given rise to the saying, "a pint's a pound the world around." When we say that a calorie is not something real but density is, or when we say that a calorie is a measure of something about things, the distinctions come from the relationship between the **experiences** we have had and the ways we **think** about those experiences.

What becomes worthy of thought in the midst of these questions seems to be thought itself. What has thought done to the sinking of the Coke Classic can in distinguishing it from the floating of the DietCoke? Has thought given us something essential when it presents density as an explanation, or has our typical thought perhaps encroached upon what is fundamental -- by hooking to our observations the kind of transparency which is particularly congenial to thought. The familiarity we feel with this observation, once the initial unexpectedness has disappeared (perhaps through trying the experiment with Pepsi), should not be allowed to conceal this invitation to make our thinking more thoughtful.

"Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," an essay by Martin Heidegger which originally appeared in *Holzwege* (1950), is usually given the English title: "**The Origin of the Work of Art.**" As the translation of "*Ursprung*," "Origin" has something of the correctness that density has in the explanation of a non-floating can of Coke Classic. However, if Nietzsche is correct in calling the Apollonian and the Dionysian artistic forces and thereby understanding art as that which in essence **transforms** then perhaps we should call Heidegger's essay "**The Source from which Artworks Spring.**" This revision involves more than merely a pedantic preference for literal translation. The question Heidegger raises in that essay has to do with, in his language, questions about the kind of Being an artwork has.

Modern science says that an essential part of the Being of a can of Coke is density. We take the Being of things to be clearly available for our inspection, especially if we are inclined to throw soft drink cans into buckets of water in order to observe their behavior. It turns out, nevertheless, that a marble sculpture of a Coke can has density just as does the commercial item. Indeed, works of art share with simpler things the quality Heidegger calls **thinglyness**. A painting on wood is more dense than one on canvas; painting on canvas is different from painting on linen because the thingly qualities of linen and canvas differ. In spite of these important similarities, it is also the case that

works of art differ from simple things.

Works of art emphatically announce to us that they are things produced by the intentional activity of an artist. A soft drink can and a computer, things we might more carefully designate by the term **tools**, also turn out to have been made by the intentional activity of humans. Tools and works of art differ from mere things -- things like the twig we find in our backyard or a rock at the side of a path -- in that natural things were not produced by human activity and seem simply to be here in the world along with us, along with the many tool-things we have added to the world.

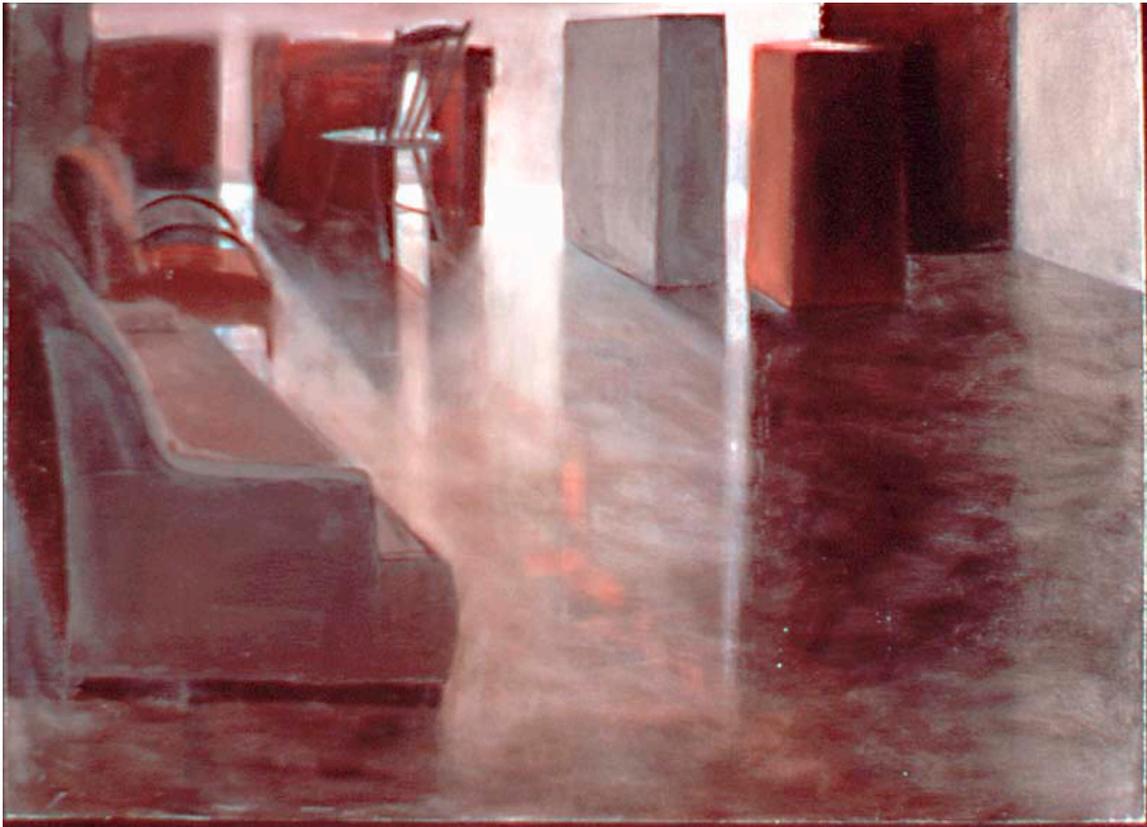
Sitting in my office in front of the computer, I am surrounded by tools: chairs, doors, books, book shelves. There are also paintings hanging on the walls, and there is an igneous rock with a mysterious hole, and a sea shell. These things make up my world. If we ask, following Heidegger, what is the essential nature of the Being of these things which surround each of us, we find answers fairly easily. The Being of the tools is their usefulness, the Being of the rock is impenetrability; density and the Being of the artworks is amusement. Yet, are these answers perhaps as deceptive (in their sufficiency) as the earlier answer that calories cause Coke Classic cans to sink? If it turns out that our first answers, our typical answers, encroach upon our understanding of the Being of things in the world then what path will allow us gather the meaning of these things?

Two of the paintings in my office were brought here by the painter who also brought me the strange rock. The rock can be said to have been brought here for my amusement but the two paintings are here on my request. Both depict her studio. One can see in them the tools which surround her in her work: tables, windows, racks for storing finished paintings. In these paintings one can see the things which make up her world. Her world differs from mine. Hers has no carpeting on the floor, no computers, and only a very few books (which are there only temporarily and are usually found in her home or in libraries and have pictures in them); whereas, most of my books are filled with words.

My **world** is much smaller physically, and it has no windows.

The two paintings in my office are part of a series of works done by Jean Koeller. From 1988 through 1991, she produced 48 paintings, 32 charcoal drawings, 17 ink drawings and 2 prints all of which use her own studio as subject.

Two years ago I borrowed one of this series, and looked at the painting -- of two chairs, a couch and several large box-like shapes all arranged irregularly but yet with the mysteriousness of *Stonehenge*



for some eight months. Six months ago I borrowed two more works from this series. I asked for these two, and then just recently for another two paintings, because it became clear to me as I lived with these paintings that one who becomes familiar with them can begin also to investigate questions about the kind of Being works of art have. This is also the conclusion Heidegger comes to in "**The Source from which Artworks Spring.**" Perhaps beyond the Being of works of art, one can in such inquiries also begin gathering the meaning of the Being of tools and rocks and of cans of Coke Classic as well.

II

Throughout his writings Heidegger was concerned with one question. He wanted to inquire into the Being of **what is**. The most common answer to the question of **What is?** turns out in western culture to be **things**. Things present themselves to us as what is real. We find ourselves surrounded by things. Heidegger asks the question: what kinds of Being do all these beings have? All these entities (beings) can be divided, as was done in Part 1 of this essay, into one of three categories.

There are things which we find in the world that are here independent of human doing. These things seem to have come forth from out of themselves and are usually given the name **nature**. Then there are those things we called **tools**, which are here only through human making and to serve some useful function. Thirdly there are **artworks** which are like tools in having been made but are also like mere things (natural things) in that they can be said to be "self-sufficient". About a tool one can always answer the question **What is it for?** We do not ask what a birch tree is for or what a rock is for (unless we are turning them into tools). Similarly the artwork may be reduced to a tool (to amuse us, to decorate), but when we allow an artwork to be an artwork, it has no pragmatic use. Each of these three kinds of beings has a distinct kind of Being.

Heidegger became persuaded that our thinking about the Being of all beings has changed since the time of the ancient Greeks. This change has not entailed any improvement in our understanding but rather a growth of our misunderstanding. If we are to recover this lost thoughtfulness by making out own thought about Being more thoughtful once again, Heidegger felt we needed to recapture the Greek **experience** of the Being of beings which has been lost. His project is not an antiquarian desire to return to another time but rather an attempt to allow new inquiries. In order to recapture the Greek experience of the Being of beings we must first examine our current understanding as that which has been derived from the earlier Greek experience. If Heidegger is correct in thinking that this forgetting of Being has been a continuous, slow process then we might well expect that any reawakening of this kind of thinking will not occur without difficulty.

The title of the book in which "**The Source from which Artworks Spring**" first appeared, *Holzwege*, names simply a path in the woods. More specifically though, it names the paths that are made by workers in the process of cutting timber and are thus paths which reach a dead-end where the timber cutting has ceased. A "*Holzwege*" is accordingly a path which leads nowhere. To be on a *Holzwege* thus has in German the idiomatic implication of not getting anywhere or of being lost. There is considerable ambiguity about exactly which *Holzwege* Heidegger has in mind in "**The Source from which Artworks Spring**." Is Heidegger discussing the *Holzwege* of western thinking which has lost its way from the path the Greeks began, or is his reference to our own myopic exploration of those dead end paths of the history of western thought, the thought which has repeatedly lost its way when trying to think about the Being of beings. These are not mutually exclusive references. Indeed since Heidegger explored this same question in all his writings, one would hardly expect an absence of ambiguity.

Jean Koeller is asked from time to time to produce statements about her work. Image-makers understandably are not comfortable with having to produce these statements yet at times succeed in putting into words something of the essential in their work. Jean's various statements about the studio works repeat several phrases: "I only paint what is most familiar to me", "... painting the same subject over and over again...", "the studio as subject did not seem like a credible idea at first" and "I began painting objects owned by other people". One of the essential features of any *Holzwege* is necessarily an apparent familiarity. Knowing one is lost from the outset or knowing that we do not know where we are going is a different kind of path from the one we have now embarked upon.

The student who proposed calories as the cause of the sinking Coke Classic can was on at least partially familiar ground quite different from that of the students who "simply had no idea". One can imagine Heidegger, who lived in the Black Forest, finding an unexplored path, branching from his usual one, an unknown path which looks just like other familiar paths: "the one which goes along the side of that crooked little stream and then ends at the south end of the next village" or "the one which goes to that clearing where he usually finds wild mushrooms in the Spring". And so he takes this new path to find out where this one goes, only to find it leads nowhere. Painting only what is familiar, and painting it over and over seem a painter's way of taking walks on familiar paths.

It turns out that if we ask how it is that we **think** about the things we find surrounding us -- in our offices, or in our studio's or even those things found out in the woods -- we think about them in such familiar ways that our thinking is quite like taking the same path for our daily walks or painting the same studio space 48 times. The way we **think** about things today is **derived** from the ancient Greek experience of things and so we are in fact on partially familiar paths even when we ask such unusual questions as what

kind of Being do things have.

There are three primary ways by which we have historically defined things. One could locate these three ways of thinking about things within the history of philosophy but because they are so familiar (once identified) we can simply consider them directly.

The first is that things have **qualities**. The thing I am using to write this essay is a Macintosh computer, but, depending on whether I am at home or in my office, it has the qualities of being a model II si with a two-page gray-scale display or a Quadra 700 with a 16" color display. The first painting of Jean Koeller's *I borrowed, Stonehenge*, has a chair in it; the "same" chair gives its name to *Beth's Chair*,



which dates from the same time in the series. The chair is upholstered in different colors in the two paintings but has the same size, shape and curved wooden arms I think of as "1950's contemporary."

Whatever the color of the upholstery, or the speed of the Macintosh computer being used, all these **things** are here thought in terms of each thing having a specific set of qualities. The **thing** is thus a **base** to which these qualities adhere or a **core** around

which the qualities are assembled. This way of thinking about things is clearly very useful. It allows us to distinguish between the individual things we find in the world. *Beth's Chair* is a vertical painting 31.5 x 43 in. and thus had more white wall surrounding it than did the larger horizontal 55x39.5 in. *Stonehenge* which preceded it on the same wall in my office. My Macintosh II si sits horizontally on my desk at school but my Quadra 700 sits vertically on my desk at home. Both desks are actually not "desks" but old, oak library tables, both have oak veneer surfaces, the one at home is smaller. Obviously, this distinguishing in terms of things as bearers of qualities allows one to catalog the entire world.

Heidegger points out that this way of defining things may, in spite of its effectiveness in distinguishing individual things from each other, turns out to conceal rather than disclose the essential nature of the Being of things. Two questions point to this possibility. First, the structure of things as core + qualities is also the structure of our language. Our sentences have the form of subject + predicate.

"` Stonehenge' is oriented horizontally".

"All the paintings in this series face west, except one".

These sentences add predicates to a subject in the same way that we think of the things the sentences describe as subjects which possess specific qualities. We can then certainly say that the sentence " *Beth's Chair* is a vertical painting" is correct. This sentence is connected to the thing it describes. Yet the question we must ask here is: what is the nature of this connection of verticality and a given painting? Does verticality tell us something **essential** about the painting, or could it be correct but still not reach the essential? In this case, verticality has more significance than merely one choice of shape rather than horizontal, square (or non-rectangular, or non-quadrilateral?).

Among Jean's written statements dating from the same time as *Beth's Chair* and *Stonehenge* one finds: "...the work's vertical orientation slowly crept in throughout (that) year". Since verticality reached the level of explicit expression we can be sure that it does tell us something about what is essential in the work. But let us repeat our question: what is the nature of the relation of verticality to this work? Jean's statements connect the turn to verticality in her work to a severe back problem (which required surgery and still-ongoing therapy), and then, in more recent statements, verticality is attached to the architecture of the studio space and, finally, to the mysteries of looking up and down. Personal medical conditions, spatiality and the intertwining of vision and movement are so different that simple conclusions here seem questionable.

It appears that at this point we can only say that describing the work as things possessing specific qualities like verticality or facing westerly gives us something derived from what is essential in the work.

There is a second problem with the definition of things as **core + qualities**. If the world of things can be divided into mere things, tools and artworks, and if we wish to distinguish the Being of each of these three from the Being of the others then the definition **core + qualities** will not suffice for this dividing. All **tools** are things which possess qualities but so do **things of nature** possess specific qualities and so too do **artworks**. In other words, the definition of things as bearers of qualities applies universally to mere things, to tools and to artworks and it applies to **all** mere things, **all** tools and **all** artworks.

This universality is precisely that which thought finds so congenial. We must ask,

however, whether the universal tells us anything essential. Universal statements about Jean Koeller's series of works using her studio as subject include: "all the work uses the studio as subject", "all the pieces are rectangular", "all the work is figurative". While the three statements are correct, they hardly reach the essential. They could equally apply to paintings produced by those who make a living selling mass-produced formula paintings in colors to match the decor of different homes. Other correct but non-universal statements about verticality or westerly facing may bring us closer to what is essential in this work but they too seem to conceal as well as they reveal. Thus another approach to these **things** seems required; we need to stand in front of the **work**, to look at it. Words, from the artist, or from someone else seem incapable of bringing us into contact with the essential in the work. The act of seeing the work also gives rise to a second basic way in which we think about things.

A thing is a **unity of sensations**. When we review the preceding discussion of things as bearers of qualities we find that we were distanced from those things by that conceptual framework. This distance is produced by thought. **Thought**, Hegel might tell us, **mediates** between us and the thing. It is thought which makes those lists of the qualities of each thing.

"**This** thing is oriented vertically and has a beige, upholstered, '50's contemporary' chair in it, but **that** one is horizontal and has a red, upholstered, '50's contemporary' chair in it". Things are given to us, we experience them, however, not as lists of properties; rather, they are given immediately, in sensation.

Things move us bodily. *Beth's Chair* and *Stonehenge* are first of all unities of sensations given in **vision**. Thinking then analyzes this unified sensation into "horizontal" and "contemporary". In some sense *The Scream*, now occupying the wall in my office once occupied by *Stonehenge* and then more recently by *Beth's Chair* makes this point far more directly.

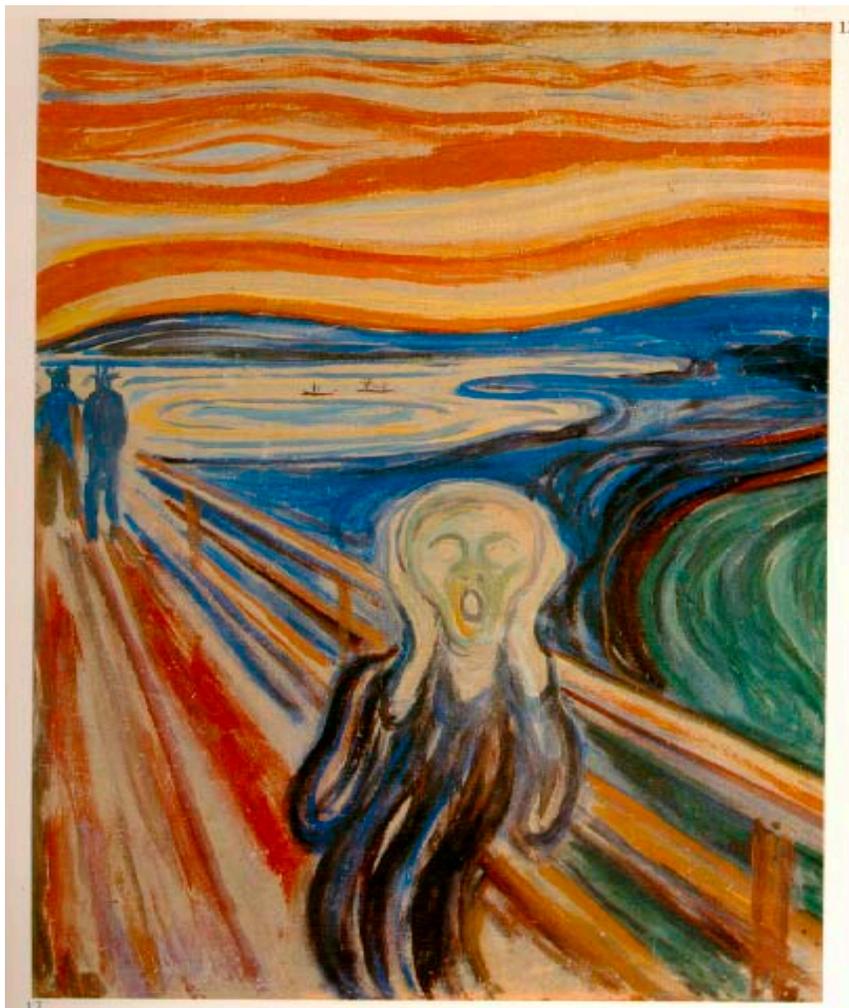
The Scream is one of the most successful pieces in the whole series



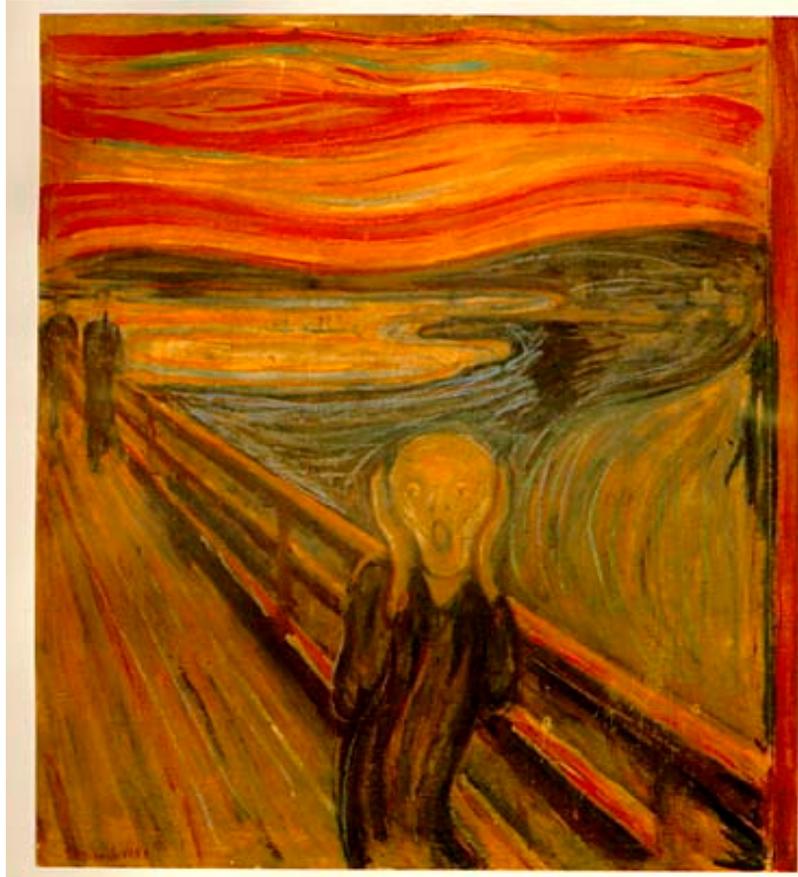
precisely because the visual sensation one has on viewing it is so complete. Its light is conspicuously different from the majority of the paintings of the series, so much so one might question if it were the same studio, or if this studio were not located somewhere else geographically were it not for the presence of the same windows, and the chairs, tables, and storage racks familiar to anyone who either visits the studio or reviews the series of paintings and drawings. More precisely, the light in this work has the quality of making itself noticeable within a context in which the light is indeed already familiar. A similar occurrence happens when we remember how one can drive the same road to and from work for sixteen years and still say to oneself perhaps only five or six times: "Isn't the light strange today!" This is of course the saying of a non-painter merely beginning to understand what color is. All of us are familiar with color, it surrounds us every day; now, it is even ubiquitous on computer monitors. But most of us have "forgotten" what color is in essence, precisely in its familiarity.

Dating as it does from the period of Jean's severe back troubles one could easily make the mistake of interpreting *The Scream's* title too autobiographically. One of the actual sources of this painting is the Munch work of the same name. Munch made 3 versions of *The Scream*,

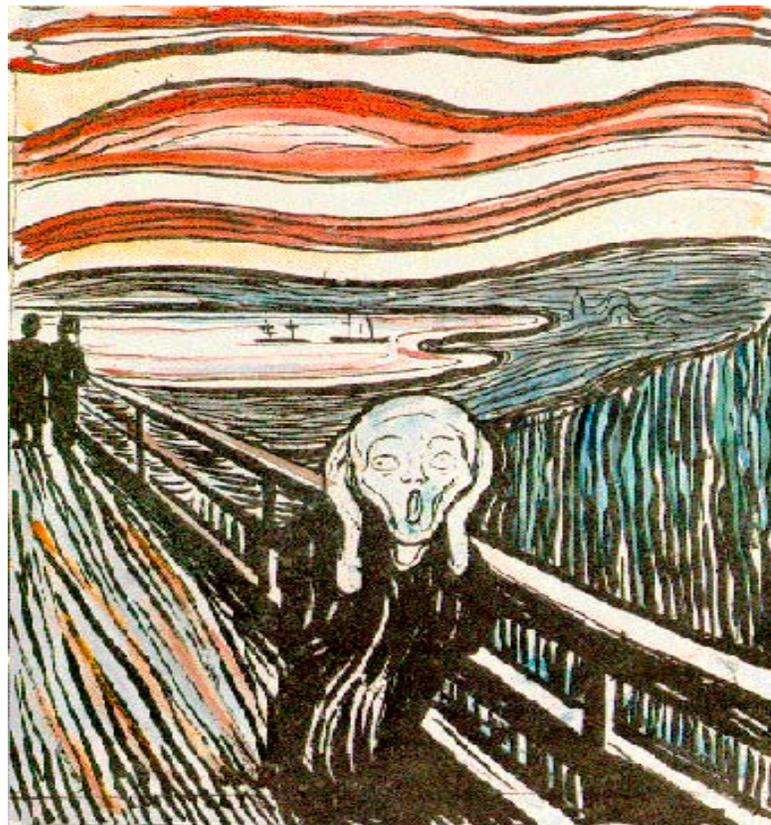
a pastel on cardboard study of 1893,



and then the well-known oil and gouache on cardboard of 1895,



and a lithograph (including a hand-colored version) also of 1895.



Jean's connection to these works of Munch developed while teaching an undergraduate art class in which she wanted her students to **see** what makes Munch's image work visually. The visual force of that piece is due, in part, to the open space of the lake in the landscape in the background -- and not exclusively to the human figure we all remember.

The studio in which Jean paints contains two huge windows on its western wall. These windows are 6.3 ft. wide by 8 ft. tall with gently arching tops which give them, especially in the light of *The Scream*, a Mediterranean appearance. These windows appear in many of the works prior to *The Scream* but in this painting they acquire a far more central status. In the foreground of the painting one sees the familiar chairs, tables, racks which, like Munch's human figure, seem to be the focus of the painting. In order to make sense of Jean's *The Scream* one has to see the work, see that an essential part of the unified visual sensation is the blue sky and the edge of a near-by building which appear in those windows. The windows are themselves also closer to the viewer than in previous works.

We are now indeed far closer to the thing than we were when we list its qualities: oil on canvas, 31x53 in., or damaged by carelessness while on display in a gallery. Has this proximity finally brought us near the essential?

The move from **thought** making lists of qualities to the immediacy of sensation has clearly changed our manner of investigating the Being of things. In spite of this change we can still notice a similarity to the first definition of a thing. When we think of a thing as a unity of sensations this perspective is correct for all things. **All** things give sensations. Rocks give sensations, and so too do the chairs we sit in (or paint), and of course artworks give unified sensations. Here too, then, we have a universality which is both congenial to thought but also incapable of separating mere things from tools and from artworks. In the first definition we made lists of the object's qualities, now we seem tied to the sensations experienced by the subject. And here too we must ask what is our relation to these sensations? Heidegger points out that we never hear a **throng of sensations**; what we hear is **the spinning fan and hard disk drive in my computer**.

At home I have three mechanical clocks, two are weight-driven and one, spring-driven. When I listen I can hear, not **a bunch of noise**, but three clocks, ticking simultaneously. One sees in *The Scream*, as stated above, not visual impressions but "a window with a blue sky and the edge of a near-by building in it", or "framed finished paintings on storage racks". What we experience immediately then, turns out to be **things** and not **sensations**. In order to hear noise or to see mere color, in order to have **sensations**, one has to listen or look abstractly, and this abstract perceiving is to perceive under the guidance of **thought**. Here too we might well expect that the Being of things will be concealed as well as revealed. This closeness of **things** may be too close for us to allow their Being to stand as it is and not be mediated by our subjectivity. The 8-ft. tall clock in my dining room is a replica of a Shaker clock made by a local clock-maker. I am having trouble getting it to run properly. My trouble comes from my being unable to hear that kind of ticking which its maker calls **in beat**. Here things are too close, the reversal of the distance from things which we encounter when they are understood as collections of qualities. Reversal does not guarantee achievement of our concern to uncover the Being of beings. To allow things to be what they are in themselves we need to encounter them as neither too remote from us nor too close; we need some middle ground.

The third way we typically define things is to say they are the combination of matter and form. The **matter + form** definition of a thing gives us what seems to be this desired

middle ground. In fact one can discover several preferences for this definition. First of all thinking of the thing as having **matter** gives back to the thing its distance from the subject which understanding-rooted-in-sensations does not allow. Secondly, the **matter + form** pair is peculiarly suited to approaching works of art which are the specific kinds of things we are investigating. One of the most familiar ways of thinking about art works is to think of them as matter which is given form by the artist. One says that Jean Koeller works in color; she works with oil on canvas (or rarely, on linen). We call the forms she creates **figurative**. The appropriateness of the **form + matter** definition of things to an inquiry into the kind of Being artworks have also gets support from the fact that this kind of thinking has a long history.

Under the influence of Neoplatonic thought Albrecht Dürer understood his creative activity as an artist, his giving form to matter, as a second way in which he could think of himself as made in the image and likeness of God. Not only do we bear a visual resemblance to our creator



Dürer's Portrait

but like Him we are also creators of form out of matter. God created the forms of the

matter of the natural world, artists create the forms of the matter of the world of art. We can thus extend the definition of thing as **matter + form** to the realm of what has been called mere things, things of nature. Within this perspective we might well ask whether the conceptual pair **matter + form** belongs originally to art or to nature. Was it then transferred from art to natural things? And of course, what rôle does the **form + matter** pair have in the realm of **tools**?

Heidegger argues that the conceptual pair **form + matter** actually originates in the realm of tools and has its defining power in the determination of the Being of tools. Form + matter does not, for Heidegger, have the power to reveal the Being of artworks or of mere things but nevertheless has been extended to artworks and to natural things and thus has contributed to the misunderstanding of the Being of these entities. Just as in the previous two definitions of things, the form + matter definition applies to **all** three kinds of entities. When we ask in which of these three does form + matter reveal the essential, the tool emerges as that thing in which form arranges matter, chooses matter to allow the specific form; the tool connects form and matter more necessarily than does either the natural thing or the artwork.

Jean Koeller said that she painted what was familiar. One reads that statement to mean that she painted **individual** things which were present in her studio. She painted that same "50's contemporary" chair numerous times, occasionally changing the color of its fabric. The things present in her studio which get painted repeatedly are all **tools**: chairs, tables and windows. These things share being created, that is, they share being very specific combinations of **form + matter** in which matter was selected because it makes a specifically formed tool so that something can be done. Perhaps the familiar which gets painted in these paintings is the familiarity of tools and not only specific familiar tools.

The distinctiveness of the Being of tools is their usefulness. What a tool is, how it is present for us, exists in the tool's usefulness. The computer on which I write this essay has as its Being its usefulness. The **What is** to which I relate in my connection to this thing turns out to be **usefulness**. The essential here is not the list of qualities of the computer; neither its processor's clock speed nor the size of the hard disk drive disclose the essential. The essential is the **use** I make of this tool. The computer is obviously a thing made, its materials and its form are all selected for a definite use. Likewise to define this thing as a unity of sensations is possible -- I am experiencing a unity of visual, audible and tactile sensations -- but this definition also misses what is essential, **the usefulness of the computer**. The chair I am sitting in has been useful from the beginning of the writing of this essay but until this moment that usefulness has remained unnoticed. Now my thought makes a list of properties: swivel desk-chair with plastic arms, on wheels, with beige fabric cover -- or, (at home) oak, armless, swivel desk-chair.

I could also make explicit the unity of sensations each chair presents to me and say the old oak chair is more comfortable. The real use of these chairs is, however, what that use is essentially, which happens when I do not notice the use but simply sit here. While **form + matter** brings me closer to the essential Being of my chair, the idea of oak which has been carved still misses the essential.

In working through these three classical definitions of things we have found what Heidegger calls a strange incommunicativeness on the part of the Being of these entities. One response to this incommunicativeness is to try to expand one's own receptivity. Could it be, on the other hand, that what we find occurring here is that incommunicativeness is an essential part of the Being of all entities? The Pre-Socratic

philosopher Heraclitus expressed something of this when he wrote, **Nature loves to hide**. The project of making our thought more thoughtful about that which is so familiar must, it seems, pay attention to this playfulness. Nietzsche connected this Heracleitean insight to the wearing of masks in the theater as a method of trying to expand our openness to **what is**. Here we need to return to paintings for further questioning.

III

We have considered thus far three types of entities: tools, artworks and mere things. Of the three, the most familiar to us is the **tool**. It is the tool that has given us the **form + matter** conceptual framework and this framework is the most effective means we have for making sense of all three types of entities when we think of them as beings. Accepting the possibility that tools nevertheless are like the other two kinds of entities -- in that they are strangely incommunicative about their own Being -- we still seem compelled to proceed with our investigation of **tools** because they are the most familiar kinds of things in the modern world. But how are we to approach tools if we wish to investigate their Being? We might try to examine the **making** of the tool since that making has the eventual use clearly in mind from the outset. We might also try to observe the use one makes of a tool. It seems most appropriate that what we must attempt is to find a useful tool **in use** and to ask about that use **as it is**. In wanting to gain access to the Being of any entity we are looking for that which is near at hand and yet also something undisclosed about that which is immediately before us.

Heidegger presents the argument that we finally gain access to the Being of a tool on none of the just-mentioned paths but rather by standing in front of Van Gogh's painting, *Old Boots with Laces*.



At first, though, we must note that standing in front of this painting clearly allows us to return to the three previously named definitions of a thing. We can list the specific qualities of the shoes Van Gogh painted. Second, we can perceive in ourselves a unified sensation derived from the image of those shoes. Third, we can discuss the combination of form + matter which makes those shoes suitable for a Dutch peasant woman to wear while doing her daily work. What one can discover in standing in front of that painting, says Heidegger, is something else in addition to these correct propositions. What comes into unconcealment while looking at those painted shoes is something closer to their essential Being -- which Heidegger names as **reliability**. We do not get to this reliability by listing the shoes' qualities, nor by paying attention to the sensations the shoes give, nor by considering their specific form + matter. This reliability is there for the peasant woman who wears such shoes -- but for her this reliability remains unnoticed. Thus, Heidegger says that standing in front of Van Gogh's painting one is suddenly somewhere else than one is accustomed to be. Where might that be? One is **not**

- in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam,
- or in some other museum (where Heidegger had to have viewed the painting),
- or looking at the collection of qualities one can list as present in the painting from looking at a reproduction of the painting in a book,
- or paying attention to the sensations the painting gives,
- or (even) the sensations one's own shoes give.

One is, further,

- not standing in those shoes, working and thus in direct contact with their reliability but not noticing that reliability.

One is

in a distinctly unfamiliar place, a clearing in the woods where what has stubbornly remained uncommunicative -- the Being of the shoes -- has come into unconcealment.

What is this **reliability** [*Verlässlichkeit*] which has just come forth only when we stand in front of Van Gogh's painting? *Verlässlichkeit* names something like **allowing**. The computer which I am using at the moment to write this essay is a useful tool which allows me to "process words" more "**use**-fully" than does a typewriter or a felt-tip pen. The computer is matter formed in a specific way to make the task of word-processing possible. But while I am writing, I am not conscious of the superiority of the usefulness of this computer over either the felt-tip pen I might otherwise be using or over my old typewriter or my previous computer. While I am working, the Being of this tool exists for me directly in its reliability which goes wholly unnoticed.

That reliability may be brought to my attention by a "system-error" message which suddenly appears on the screen or even by a power interruption which may produce an unexpected re-boot of the system software. In other words the reliability of this tool remains in concealment throughout my working and only comes into unconcealment when my work is interrupted. But in the re-boot of the computer the reliability still does not fully come forth. If too many re-boots occur, I may decide to purchase a UPS (Uninterrupted Power Supply) device or at least a surge protector. But in doing this I have returned to the form + matter thinking like that which caused me to purchase a Macintosh computer rather than some other brand. The Macintosh is famous for its user-friendliness. But when I am immersed in the use of any computer, of any tool **what is** in

that use is **reliability**. What is nearest at hand while I am working is reliability; when I **reflect** on the usefulness of any tool my relation to that reliability is concealed, encroached upon by my thought.

The ancient Greeks used the word **aletheia** as their name for truth. *Aletheia means*, literally "to unveil," to bring into unconcealment that which was concealed (and perhaps that which most of the time conceals itself). We can also say (in regard to the just mentioned unconcealment which happens in the work of art) that, when we stand in front of Van Gogh's **Boots with Laces**, we are somewhere else even more unfamiliar than where we are accustomed to being. Historically, when we stand in front of a work of art, we have expected to encounter beauty. For Heidegger what happens in Van Gogh's painting is not the occurrence of beauty but rather the unconcealment of the Being of some being, the unconcealment of the **truth** of tools. The unconcealment of the Being of tools does not occur when using the tool or when studying the tool but rather happens when we stand in front of a different kind of thing, an artwork.

Another statement of Jean Koeller's comes to mind just at this point. Elaborating on the use of the same subject over and over again, she writes: "... the subject matter becomes devalued, it is no longer the principle reason for the existence of the painting. Other investigations can occur more readily." The three classical definitions of a thing are at the same time familiar and they are paths which do not lead us to the Being of entities; they are paths of thought which lead us to that **nowhere** in which new investigations can occur. We have to find ourselves someplace other than where we are accustomed to being if we are to allow the strange incommunicativeness of things to become communicative in their own ways. Things such as tools can become communicative about their Being in works of art; thus, it is to artworks that we must return to continue our investigation into the Being of tools, the Being of things, the Being of artworks, the Being of all beings.

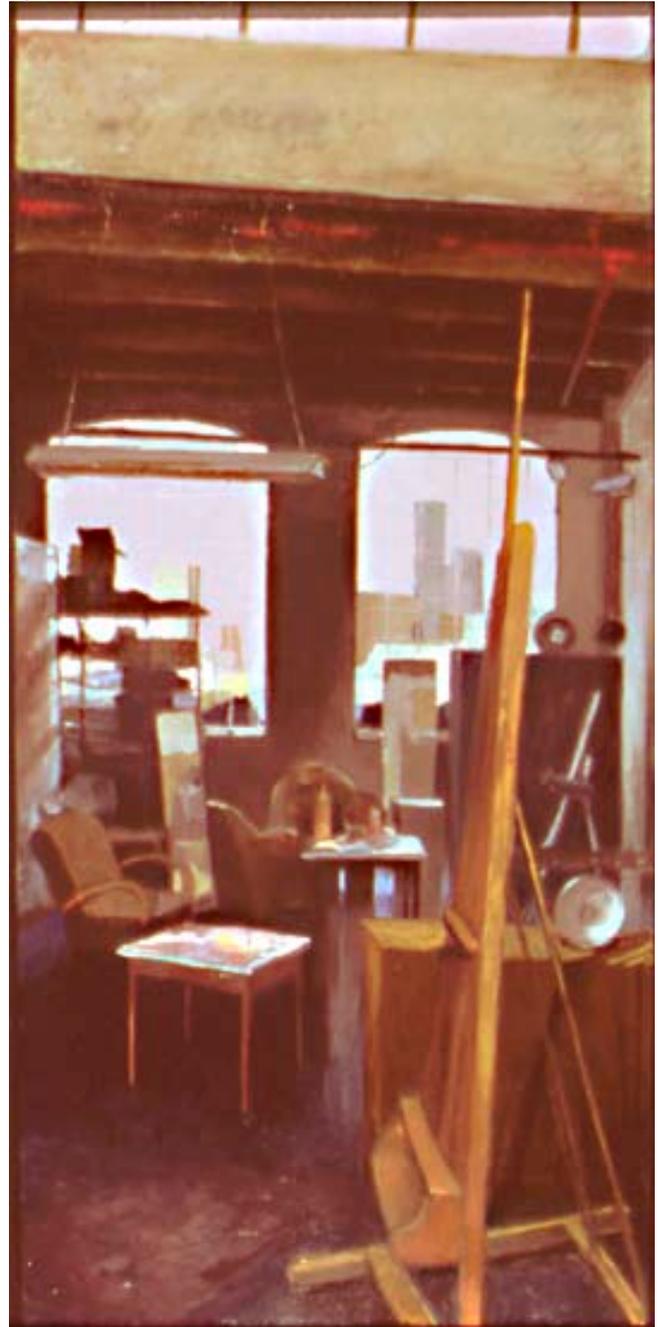
Heidegger's investigation of how it is that truth happens in works of art brings together two perspectives: the work of art **sets up a World** and it **sets forth the Earth**. This pair gives us still closer access to Jean Koeller's series of studio paintings. We can begin by saying that this large body of work sets up a specific World, that of the painter; and it sets forth the Earth. This conceptual pair makes immediate sense in that these artworks show us what a painter's studio looks like and uses the skills and tools and materials (earth) of the artist to do so. We can, in other words, become familiar with the **world** of the artist, of this specific artist, by looking at these images. Most of those who have viewed these works have done so in a different location from the one in which they were created; the paintings are obviously usually viewed in galleries or museums. All of this discussion of the world of a painter makes quite good sense, and like the explanation that calories cause Coke Classic cans to sink, holds us in its very likeliness at a distance from what is essential.

A reproduction of Van Gogh's *"Boots with Laces"* hangs in my office. According to Heidegger, this work sets up the **World** of Dutch peasants who wore such shoes 100 years ago. The painting also sets forth the **Earth** upon which the lives of those peasants took place. It is typical for one who reads Heidegger's discussion of the Van Gogh painting to make sense of this "setting up" by thinking it to mean that the painting, in showing us a familiar **thing** which was found in the world of late 19th-century Dutch peasants, gives us occasion to think of all the other **things** which were also found in that world, their hats, their kitchen utensils, and thus in this recollected collection of such **things** to grasp that **World**. Our usual thought is that their world existed in terms of being filled with things which are absent from the painting but also that that world differs from ours because it was not filled with things like my Macintosh computer. What Van Gogh did was, like Jean Koeller, give us a **representation** of those worlds filled

with their characteristic things.

The other painting of Jean Koeller's now in my office, *Three Lights / Three Women*, accomplishes this documentation of a **World**. Although coming somewhere in the middle of the series of 48 paintings, this painting is one of the first which makes explicit the fact that we are looking at a painter's studio. In the three paintings discussed this far there is nothing which requires one to think one is viewing a painter's studio.

One is obviously viewing a large space in what seems likely an old industrial building (it was in fact an envelope factory). The **things** depicted could easily be connected to numerous other activities. What immediately announces that *Three Lights / Three Women* is a painting of a painter's studio is the easel in the foreground. Once one sees this painting, one then recognizes that *The Scream*, *Beth's Chair*, and *Stonehenge* also document that same studio.





Such observations merely begin to disclose what is fundamentally at work in **Three Lights / Three Women**.

Whenever a visitor to my office would comment on one of Jean's paintings I would invariably say that it was part of a series of studio paintings she had produced. Those visitors would then likely say to themselves that indeed these paintings (viewed prior to *Three Lights / Three Women*) were of a painter's studio although they had not been able to know that until informed of the fact.

Two steps are common here. The paintings seem to document a place which was, and then had been disclosed as, a painter's studio. The world of the painter existed first. The painting documenting that world existed temporally second. The recognition of what the painting documented came last.

The same temporal sequence of recognition seems to apply to Van Gogh's *Boots with Laces*: the world of Dutch peasants existed first, then Van Gogh painted his shoes and finally we view his painting and are invited to think about that world. In spite of the compelling clarity of this (Platonic) analysis, Heidegger proposes that we need to think all of this in reverse. Instead of thinking that the work of art is some new **thing** added to a World already existing -- because that already existing world is filled with things like a '50's contemporary' chair and windows and easels -- we need to consider how it is

also true that the work of art **first** "sets up" a World. This proposal seems so contrary to our usual mode of thought that we must proceed here very slowly.

Thus far in this essay, the word "world" has been used in its familiar form as a collection of things. The world of a university philosophy professor has been described as having things in it like computers and books filled with words and carpeting and strange rocks and no windows. The world of Dutch peasants has things like boots, and hoes for cultivating the crops. The world of a painter has no computers; but it has windows, and no carpeting, and books with pictures. Heidegger questions whether these **lists** of things tell us anything essential about these Worlds. For him, **World** is neither a collection of things nor a framework for a collection of things.

A **World** is not an object, not a thing. A **World** is not something which stands before us such that a list of its properties can be produced or a reproduction of its visual qualities can be created. A **World** is not the kind of thing about which sentences can be made in which qualities are added to that thing or in which qualities are capable of being changed as the color of the upholstery of Beth's chair was changed. We can say Jean Koeller's studio is 20 ft. wide x 50 ft long but her World is something non-objective; it has no physical dimensions.

The **World** of a painter is that to which the painter is subject because one is a painter. **World** means here that which rules and governs. *Three Lights / Three Women* documents the studio space well beyond making it explicit that a painter works there. Most of the earlier paintings place the viewer so close to the individual things depicted that one does not get a "landscape" view of the whole studio. And in her earliest statements about the works Jean mentions painting things belonging to others, and she named them accordingly as in *Beth's Chair*. *Three Lights / Three Women* gives a larger visual perspective, but noticing this more complete view still does not reach what is essential in that painting. *Three Lights / Three Women* brings into the clearing: it sets up the World of the painter **not** as a collection of things but rather as that non-objective realm in which the essential forces of vision and color are allowed to be what they are.

The visual works of Jean Koeller investigate something which is familiar to us all, namely color and vision. The visual world (of my office) within which *Three Lights / Three Women* currently hangs is filled with many colors -- giving vision in that world a multiplicity of individual things to observe. And yet, like the **words** we use every day: to inquire about delayed shipments of computer equipment or to request a letter of recommendation, the colors which surround us retain their familiarity and what we might call their self-seclusion. The "other investigation" which the familiarity of *Three Lights / Three Women* allows to occur can be said to be the investigation of the self-seclusion of the visual.

Earlier, three explanations of the verticality of the many paintings like *Three Lights / Three Women* were noted. One was Jean's back problems, a second was the architecture of the studio space and the third was the mysteries of "looking up and down." As just noted, *Three Lights / Three Women* gives a more complete view of the studio than earlier pieces in the series. Indeed, this painting shows the architectural details of the formerly industrial space. One previously unmentioned architectural feature of that space is a large skylight which stands atop the third of the studio farthest from the windows. By itself the imposing skylight would be a glass-walled room 20 ft x 20 ft x 10 ft tall. A slice of this skylight appears across the top edge of *Three Lights / Three Women* and in none of the other 47 paintings of the series and in only three of the drawings. Like the lake in Munch's *The Scream* and like the windows in Jean's own "The Scream", the small edge of the skylight in *Three Lights / Three Women* is far from an

accidental or mere correct addition to the piece. Appearing as it does at the very top edge of the painting, the skylight makes the viewer look "up and down". This looking up and down is further influenced by the easel which being in the foreground reaches from the bottom of the painting's center almost to the top. As one looks "up and down" while standing in front of this painting one finds oneself someplace that one is not accustomed to being. One expects to be looking at **things** in the world of the painter, but in fact one finds oneself looking at the world **as a painter**, that is, as one for whom vision has become filled with questions. Like the familiar things painted so often that one comes to stand in front of them differently, here one stands in front of an artwork no longer as before a thing, no longer looking with mundane vision but rather as before the opened world of the painter, that non-objective realm to which the painter is always subject.

We must retrieve now the second element of Heidegger's discussion of the work of artists: the artist **sets forth the Earth**. By this time in our inquiry we immediately expect that our usual notions associated with **earth** will be at best only partially useful in following the thinking needed here. We use **Earth** as the name of a specific astronomical body and we use **earth** as the name of raw materials (matter) out of which that planet is composed. Indeed, recalling also the first part of this conceptual pair -- setting up a World -- the two seem a variation on the **form + matter** pair we used earlier as our means to make sense of tools, and then also of art works and of mere (natural) things. So, once again, we are on a somewhat familiar path; and expecting (now) to become lost once more.

Let us also return to our Coke Classic can's sinking. We asked then and did not resolve a question about the meaning of **density**. Now we must ask what it means to say that an artist **sets forth the Earth**. Heidegger gives examples of setting forth: "the heaviness and massiveness of stone", "the firmness and pliancy of wood," "the hardness and luster of metal," "the lightening and darkening of color," "the clang of tone," and "the naming power of the word." There is of course heaviness and massiveness in mere things like the strange rock on my desk and in the sinking of the Coke can. There is the lightening and darkening of color on the computer monitor before me. The presence of the lightening and darkening of the colors on my computer is even conspicuous to me because I have just acquired my first color monitor and thus, writing this essay is not unlike a Dutch peasant woman breaking in a new pair of boots. But for her the reliability of her boots is what it is essentially after the boots are broken in and she simply wears the boots. This "simple wearing" Heidegger insists is not so simple. Is the lightening and darkening of color on my computer screen also not simple (in spite of its technological complications)? How does the artwork set the Earth before me such that this **setting forth** is not accomplished by my computer or by the entire surrounding world of colors to which the computer has only very lately been added?

The title *Three Lights / Three Women* names three lights. These could be the two windows and the skylight. The three lights could also be the light of the outside world, the light of the studio and the light of the paintings created on the now empty easel. In the painting, one can also see fluorescent lights and incandescent, movable shop-lights with metal reflectors, and, of course natural light. The light one sees outside the skylight -- light one only sees by looking up -- differs from the external light one sees by looking (down again) out the windows at the far west end of the studio. If we ask how these two external painted lights differ from the painted light inside the studio (as it distinctly is different in *Three Lights / Three Women*), one might say these three lights are light of different wavelengths. One sees sky outside both the skylight and the windows but the light differs. When we separate these lights by saying they each have differing wavelengths (which one could measure in angstroms) we have returned to density and sinking soft drink cans.

Is the Earth composed of calories and density and angstroms? When we stand in front of *Three Lights / Three Women*, we stand in front of **color** which lightens and darkens, but here color is not what it is on my computer monitor. I even have brightness and contrast controls on my monitor which lighten and darken the things I see but this too takes us away from the setting forth of the **Earth** which happens in *Three Lights / Three Women*...

Colors appear in *Three Lights / Three Women* as what they are in themselves; colors here have come into the clearing, they have come into unconcealment. In *Three Lights / Three Women* color has come into unconcealment in an unexpected way -- as that which is by nature **self-secluding**. Color is in essence that which keeps itself closed up. The color on my computer is also self-secluding -- when I simply use it as well as when I say to myself that I prefer looking at this color monitor. But in this self-seclusion of preferring a color display to a gray-scale display, color remains more like the **unnoticed** reliability of those boots worn by a Dutch peasant woman. Saying I prefer a color monitor has moved me to the reflective perspective of **thinking** about use. When we say "**this** color is light vibrating at 4700Å" or when we say "**that** color makes the room too cold" or that our front door is bright red but our living room walls are not, color has become less self-secluding but remains stubbornly incommunicative -- as do calories and density. So we are saying that the artwork sets the Earth before us **as** that which is in essence self-secluding. Color is usually self-secluding but is not understood as secluded.

Part of this self-seclusion occurs in those familiar circumstances where we encounter an apparent transparency which we embrace willingly. I suspect no reader of this essay would even consider painting their living-room walls the bright red we see on Coke Classic cans (a color that we might well enjoy on our cars or in clothing). We are saying, then, that the loving-to-hide of nature (of color) we considered earlier shows itself to us in the artwork but for the most part secludes itself in simplified apparentness, in simplified familiarity. Heidegger suggests, nonetheless, that the self-seclusion of the artwork is far from an inflexible refusal to disclose. On the contrary, artworks have an inexhaustible variety of ways to unfold their self-seclusion.

Another of the most powerful pieces in the series of studio works, *Sanctuary*, gives one the chance to inquire into the artwork's unfolding of its setting forth the Earth **as self-secluding**. *Sanctuary* was completed in 1990, and measuring 61 x 23 in., it is even "more" vertical than its predecessors. In standing in front of *Sanctuary* one is looking into the southwest corner of the studio at a 45deg. angle, now at only one of the windows at that end of the studio and sees the light coming through it illuminating the adjacent south wall.

None of the **things** inside the studio familiar to



the viewer of *The Scream*, *Three Lights / Three Women*, *Beth's Chair*, and all of the preceding works appear in this painting. On the other hand, through the window one can see, as one can in *Three Lights / Three Women* and in *The Scream*, but in few of the preceding paintings, buildings which are part of the downtown city area on the edge of which stands the former envelope factory now housing Jean's studio. Of *Sanctuary* she wrote, "**Sanctuary** is a very important link to the studio series because it ties my cityscapes, windows and the studio together as one. I've always felt one needed to see the whole series to have a clear understanding, but this painting may be one of the few that can stand on its own. Its subtle handling and use of color was an important breakthrough. This work may seem sparse, but it needs all its parts, you cannot take anything out of the picture plane without it falling apart. This I learned from Matisse."

Also included in her statement on *Sanctuary* are references to the previously-mentioned medical problems -- which in this context name the corner as a place in which to stand and relax. The word sanctuary has layers of meaning in this work. The phrase "subtle handling and use of color" makes it possible for one to ask if there is not a very important sense in which *Sanctuary* is a sanctuary for color. In this work color is color as it is in itself, in its self-seclusion. Here the lightening and darkening of color are present for us, they have a **presence** which is perhaps much studied in the preceding paintings but now allowed simply to be present. And, of course this simple being present is no more simple than is the wearing of boots of a Dutch peasant woman.

IIII

We must return now to the origins of this essay. We began with the need to try to make sense of Heidegger's claim that we have lost the ancient Greek sense of the Being of beings. Heidegger suggests that their notion of **things** was essentially rooted in an experience of **presence**, while our modern notions of **things** think analytically of collections of properties, or unities of sensations or form and matter combined. The ancient Greek experience of things is explained by Heidegger as an experience of the self-growth and the self-repose of things. **Self-growth** reappears in Heidegger's essay in the notion of setting up a World and **self-repose** becomes **setting forth the Earth**. It has also been noted that the conceptual pair form + matter -- which appears to be derived from our thinking about tools and then is transferred to our thinking about artworks and to our thinking about natural things -- can be connected to the combination of setting up a **World** (form) and setting forth the **Earth** (matter). It can be noted as well that western thought since the time of Plato might correctly be described as a meditation upon form. In Aristotle, one even finds an explicit discussion of the form + matter pair discussed here. Aristotle, though, gave as much attention to **things of nature** [*physis*] as he did to things made by **art** (that is, by *techne* when he uses the form + matter categories; one can leave the discussion of his notion of the Being of beings to another time.

Heidegger returns to Pre-Socratic philosophers and turns to Van Gogh to carry out his attempt to make his thinking about things more thoughtful once again. Here, we have added Jean Koeller's series of studio paintings to this Heideggerian project. It has turned out that, when one stands in front of these paintings, one finds oneself somewhere else than one expects to be. In standing in front of *The Scream*, *Three Lights / Three Women* and *Sanctuary*, one begins to understand that Heidegger's question -- about the experience of things as an experience of **presence** -- is a **question** which makes possible its own kind of new investigation just as new questions opened for Jean Koeller when she painted her studio over and over again.



One can begin to name the new inquiry into the Being of beings which has opened for us here by using a not altogether unfamiliar phrase: **a meditation upon force rather than upon form**. The ever-unobjective **World** which is set up in the studio paintings of Jean Koeller might be said to be a World of forces. We have noted that the **forms** of her world can also be seen in those paintings. We can think of the forms present in the studio paintings both in terms of the forms of individual things present and identifiable (like windows, easels, and 50's contemporary chairs) and in terms of the formal qualities in these paintings in their being (figurative rather than, say, abstract). The paintings **speak** (to borrow from the World of the poets) only when one begins to see in them a sanctuary for color. **Color** comes to have a **presence** in these paintings. The presence of color in *Three Lights / Three Women* has the quality of having come into unconcealment; it has that ancient Greek sense of truth as *aletheia*. Here, color which has been distinctly uncommunicative about its Being now unveils itself as an essential force in the **World** of the painter.

Perhaps we need to consider one more element of this series of paintings in order to approach **their** meditation upon force. This final question for us is about presence, and it emerges from looking still more carefully at *Sanctuary*. When the series began the paintings are located inside the studio space. *Stonehenge* comes considerably later in the series but retains the quality of the earlier pieces in not even showing the 2 large windows so significant in the architectural space as well as in the later paintings. Light from those windows is a major feature of *Stonehenge*, but the windows are concealed from our view. In *Beth's Chair* and in most of the other paintings and drawings of the middle of the series, the western wall's windows are major features of the works but the windows have nothing visible through them. In *The Scream*, *Three Lights / Three Women*, and *Sanctuary*, buildings immediately outside the window -- buildings once part of the same industrial area as was the envelope factory -- begin to appear. At first these buildings outside the window seem merely added for the sake of visual accuracy in that the studio space was unlikely to be located in isolation from similar surrounding structures. What slowly comes into presence in those windows at the end of the series is



Keowee Street

the skyline of the city. In one of the last of the series, *Keowee Street*, one of those windows fills the entire canvas so that one is standing at the window looking out at the now identifiable skyline of Dayton, Ohio and not simply at a generic cityscape. One could accordingly construct a story of the sequence of these paintings as the progression from being entirely involved with things inside a studio (located anywhere) through the gradual discovery of the outside world to the conclusion of one's being located in Dayton. This story is correct, but only as **correct** as was the claim that calories cause Coke Classic cans not to float. The emerging presence of a specific location is another version of that initial familiarity every *Holzwege* necessarily includes.

Having looked at **presence** in such a familiar way, and thus having once again begun a path expected to take us somewhere further in our inquiry, we must again ask our questions more carefully. What is the nature of the **presence** in these paintings? To the just considered gradual discovery of a fact always true but only eventually recognized (that the studio is located in Dayton, OH), we can add the statement made about *Sanctuary* that it

seems sparse in comparison to the others. By contrast *Three Lights / Three Women* is filled with many **things** -- inside the studio and outside its windows. The difference noted thusly is, however, probably little more than a quantitative distinction. One can name many more **things** in *Three Lights / Three Women* than are namable in *Sanctuary* but both have a **presence** which elevates them above most of the other works. Another cautionary note. It might be helpful to try thinking **presence** in terms of the unity of sensations definition of things considered earlier. Accordingly, presence could be a designation for something like the ubiquitous (but confusing) aesthetic experience which entered western thought about art in Kant. To ask about the subjective emotional impact that an artwork has upon its viewers is both familiar in our thinking and tangential to this inquiry.

To return us to asking about what **presence** is in Jean Koeller's paintings we can consider another painting coming late in the series and with the awkward title, *What's It Gonna Be?* This painting is immediately disorienting to anyone familiar with the series. Although it shares a 36 x 69 in. verticality with the majority of the works, and has that

same 50's contemporary chair and many other of the usual things found also in the other paintings, *What's It Gonna Be?* shares a separateness like that which makes one think as one does of *Stonehenge*. While virtually all the preceding paintings have a "photographic" quality, in that they seem to represent a scene one could have photographed, *What's It Gonna Be?* depicts its many things as if each were added as to a collage, brought from separate places. Or, to say this another way, all the previous paintings depict things which are subsequently understood as located in a painter's studio and then finally as elements of a painting. The strangeness of *Stonehenge* lies in one's not having any idea why the things are arranged



as they are, their use remains mysterious. The strangeness of *The Scream* lies in the unfamiliar lighting cast upon thoroughly familiar and usable things. *What's It Gonna Be?* in contrast presents itself **first of all** as a painting. In this painting, one notices that there are familiar things, and then finally one realizes that those things too are in the same place as they are in the previous paintings. Unlike the other pieces in the series, *What's It Gonna Be?* is from the first self-consciously a painting.

The light in *What's It Gonna Be?* also stands out in being far more explicitly mysterious, far more strange than the Mediterranean-quality light *The Scream* possesses. Perhaps one might say that what has come into **presence** in *What's It Gonna Be?* is **vision** as such. In contrast to *Three Lights/Three Women*, in which we said that **color** has come into **presence**--as that which is self-secluding--as what exists in self-repose, *What's It Gonna Be?* entails the self-growth of vision which is always intimately connected to the self-repose of color. Thus, the **presence** which one finds in these paintings is not the presence of the familiar, not the presence of **things** but rather the presence of two **forces**, the self-seclusion of color and the self-growth of vision. If we are standing before the opened world of the painter when we stand in front of *Three Lights/Three Women*, in standing in front of *What's It Gonna Be?* we are standing in the opened experience of the **presence** of vision.

We are accustomed to stand in front of collections of qualities, accustomed to having

unified sensations; and, we are accustomed to seeing things which are--for us-- combinations of form and matter. Some artworks, such as those of Jean Koeller discussed in this essay, allow us be someplace we are not accustomed to being. The path we have just finished has disclosed that the Being of artworks is that which in essence transforms the concealed familiar into the openness of vision's self-growth and color's self-repose. The familiarity of density which causes Coke Classic cans to sink remains in concealment.

A web version of this essay first appeared in *(Re)Soundings* 2:1 (1998): online: <http://marauder.millersville.edu/~resound//*vol2iss1/index.html>.