

Introduction: The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy

Reading Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, or Nancy with a view to understanding what it is that drives or structures their thought, one is struck by the fact that their writing steers philosophy in an aesthetic direction. In each of these thinkers one can find the aesthetic attitude that one also finds in Kant's third *Critique*. This aesthetic attitude, which in Kant is determined by the exigency of his search for a satisfactory mode of relation between the forms of material nature and human freedom, becomes the framework that these thinkers rely on in order to philosophise. In this regard, we can cite the aesthetic use which is made of language to phrase philosophical problems, such as Heidegger's understanding of language as a 'showing' in his attempt to articulate the experience of being in his late writing; or the way that in Lacoue-Labarthe's writing the kind of intelligibility that one finds in aesthetic experience is given a foundational status as a resource for the definition of philosophical concepts; or Nancy's use of terms like 'art' and 'artwork,' in the manner that they are defined and developed in the context of the topic of aesthetic reflection, in order to forge a vocabulary able to capture the general features of the genesis of sense and meaning and thus to deal with fundamental ontological questions.

The main point I want to make in this study is that this aesthetic steering of philosophy is best understood as an adaptation of the specific and technical employment of the notion of 'presentation' [*Darstellung*] in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.¹ In Kant 'presentation' is the name he gives to

the problem of how to define a mode of relation able to reconcile human freedom with the constraints of materiality. The exigency of this relation follows from the need of finite beings to render in aesthetic or sensible forms what would otherwise be impotent, errant ideas. If we step back for a moment from the specifications Kant gives to this notion and define its scope in more general or schematic terms, we could say that it outlines the terms of a problem that philosophers have been concerned with since the Greeks.

As a heuristic exercise we can classify the different versions of the schema of presentation in philosophy in terms of the mode and exigency of the relation it shapes in different fields and epochs of philosophical thought. In his commentary on Plato's *eidos* in the essay 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth,' Heidegger writes:

the things that are visible in the daylight outside the cave, where sight is free to look at everything, are a concrete illustration of the 'ideas.' According to Plato, if people did not have these 'ideas' in view, that is to say, the respective 'appearance' of things—living beings, humans, numbers, gods—they would never be able to perceive this or that as a house, as a tree, as a god. Usually they think they see this house and that tree directly, and the same with every being. Generally they never suspect that it is always and only in the light of the 'ideas' that they see everything that passes so easily and familiarly for the 'real.' According to Plato, what they presume to be exclusively and properly the real—what they can immediately see, hear, grasp, compute—always remains a mere adumbration of the idea, and consequently a shadow.²

In this account Heidegger defines the mode of the relation between 'ideas' and material entities in Plato as visual semblance. The exigency of this relation is answered in Plato by the Idea's 'call' or 'index,' which it carries in itself and by which it demands and refers to its appearance, its 'copy,' in the sensible world. The perceptible presentation is thus justified by the Idea's ontological demand, but at the same time it exhausts that justificatory ground, undermining the claims of art as merely secondary copies. The lesser claims of art can be put in the vocabulary of representation: as they do not respond to the Idea's call, they are also detached from the participatory relation to ideas that perceptible presentations claim.

In Christian theology, the problems that were raised under the topic of Christology, which adopted many of the features of neo-Platonic metaphysics, may also be approached in terms of the notion of presentation.

In each of these traditions, the question was asked: why and how was the intelligible or the divine related to or embodied in the sensible? What was the exigency, what was the mode of this relation? In the case of Christology, the divine takes the form of visual semblance, but this semblance is restricted to the mode of embodiment in human form.³ Further, the question of the exigency of this relation is taken up in the frame of the history of redemption: it is because human resources are unequal to the task and goal of salvation that the divine is compelled to be presented in the world.

From this schematic outline we can draw out some of the distinctive features of Kant's approach to this topic and also see why it is that 'presentation' is not an active problem in Cartesian thought. Heidegger understands the term 'representation' as it takes shape in modern philosophy with Descartes as the reduction of 'what is' to the terms of its representability as an 'object' by and for a 'subject.'⁴ The distinction between presentation [*Darstellung*] and representation [*Vorstellung*] in Kant provides an important perspective on this definition. Kant defines representation in terms of the schematising powers of the subject. This definition places in view the fact that the theme of 'presentation' in the third *Critique* identifies and treats, retrospectively as it were, 'representation' as itself a problem in its inability to provide a comprehensive orientation for the self. To simplify, representation, which we might say is reducible to the subject's formal powers of apperception, contrasts with Kant's definition of 'presentation,' which explicitly suspends the claims of the subject's powers over material forms and inquires instead about the 'favours' that the subject enjoys and that are extended to it by the material forms of nature. In this respect, the reflection on presentation extends to material forms the possibility of a relation to a comprehensive orientation of meaning. Finally, the account of presentation that, in Kant, describes the extension to the subject of nature's 'favours,' and thereby attempts to embed the self in a comprehensive meaning-context, elucidates the different emphasis in his approach to the question of the mode of relation to the intelligible and distinguishes it from the relation of semblance/participation (Plato) and semblance/incarnation (Christology) in ancient and Christian thought. In Kant the mode of relation to ideas is analogical, but the fact that the work that presentation performs is analogical should not obscure the significance of the terms of his approach to this problem and its difference from that of the doctrine of ideal forms in Plato. In Kant what is important is not just that the accent

is on the sensibilisation [*Versinnlichung*] rather than the idea, but also that he describes this sensibilisation of ideas as *aesthetic*. The exigency of presentation in Kant is the dependence of finite beings for worldly meaning and in fact worldliness on aesthetic forms, but he adds to this the claim that the specific field of experience in which this mode of sensibilisation occurs is neither cognitive nor practical, but aesthetic.

I would now like to explain the specific thesis of this work. My thesis is the simple idea that the thinking of Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy can (and perhaps in a significant sense must) be understood as ways of addressing the *problem of presentation* as framed by and inherited from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. To put this thesis somewhat crudely and in terms that will require qualification: these thinkers alter the defining characteristics that Kant's third *Critique* had given to the aesthetic as a specific mode of experience within a typology of different spheres of experience. In their hands the elements of this specific mode of experience are generalised: the aesthetic attitude and the vocabulary used by Kant to describe it are brought to bear on things in general. The impetus for this ontological status is, in each case, a specific understanding of the topic of presentation as it comes from Kant. In these introductory remarks I would like to explain why I think that the alteration to the terms of Kant's conception of the aesthetic in these thinkers is itself based on an understanding of the Kantian problem of presentation, and thus must be assessed in light of this problem.

Let me briefly recall the context of this issue in Kant: the problem of an aesthetic presentation of ideas of reason is the Kantian formulation of the modern philosophy's problematic of dualism. This problem receives a technical solution in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, in the sense that Kant understands it as a matter of coordination of self-same terms (even if, it is true, one of these is a morally required postulate) and a definite typology of their relations of coordination. In the peculiar metaphysics that structures his final *Critique* Kant needs to find a principle able to mediate the necessity of the natural world and the freedom that defines the domain of practical reason. There are two aspects to the third *Critique* that facilitate this goal: on the side of the subject, Kant expands the conception of the faculty of judgment from its role as a faculty of determination in the first *Critique* to account for its ability to follow the exemplary: those instances which precede the rule governed the procedure that determines objects of

cognition. On the side of nature, it is the ‘free beauties’ of the natural world, what is also described by Kant under the category of ‘form’ and thereby differentiated from the materiality of sensuous nature, that provide the occasion for such ‘reflective’ uses of judgment. Here Kant provides a nascent phenomenology where the centrality of a cognitive relation to nature is suspended at the same time that an insight into the subject’s powers is won through that suspension. It is precisely nature’s independence from human purposes that provides the opportunity to make of it an articulate vehicle for the presentation, by analogy, of reason’s ideas. This impulse receives its most extensive treatment in the second part of the *Critique of Judgment*: the ‘Critique of Teleological Judgment.’ It is here that Kant considers the possibilities for the speculative use of reason when it treats nature under the idea of ‘art.’ Without the speculative use of the idea of purposive unity—borrowed from art in its broad sense of purposive construction—the cognitive interest in nature would falter. Mechanistic precepts, Kant argues, would be unable to explain how even a blade of grass were possible without the use of a concept of purposiveness (CJ, §75, 282–83). Under the threat of this obstacle to cognition the concept of purposiveness is admitted into the lexicon of theoretical reason although cognitive aims do not prescribe its limits. Rather, the concept of purposiveness is used for a reflection on human ends in nature as well as our status as the ultimate end [*der letzte Zweck*] of nature. The metaphysical claims attached to the progressive realisation of human culture as nature’s end in the ‘Teleology’ has its condition, in the first part of the *Critique*, in the notion of the cultivation needed to train the mind for the reception of the beautiful in the forms of nature. Kant uses these themes to carry out his intention of bridging the gap between ideas of reason and their meaningfulness for a finite being. This problematic can be described as one of ‘aesthetic presentation’ under which the links between the two parts of his third *Critique* can be gathered together. Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* does not simply offer the first formulation of the core problem of aesthetic presentation, but it makes this problem more fundamental than any ontological issue. Indeed one can go further and argue that under the pressure of providing systematic unity for his philosophy, Kant substitutes for traditional metaphysical terms, such as freedom, the existence of God, and the nature of the soul, the technical question of how to provide an orientation and analogous form for these ideas in an aesthetic presentation. In provisional terms

it is possible to say that Kant's category of 'form' opens up the possibility for this project in so far as it intensifies the aesthetic field and allows, thereby, singular forms of beauty to model or 'present,' albeit analogically, more than merely sensuous or material representations.

The aesthetic features of experience first described by Kant in the third *Critique* underpin a number of diverse theoretical positions within modern philosophy. In particular, critical thinkers have used the features identified by Kant as elements of the aesthetic field for projects of social criticism. In these thinkers, the type of 'ideal' reference given by Kant's category of form to material representations is turned into a binding claim on one's mode of existence, individual or social. Such an inflection of the Kantian tradition can be found, for instance, in Adorno's conception of the negativity of aesthetic experience, where the critical capacity of art follows from the paradoxical features of its autonomy in the modern epoch. The historical emergence of an art market frees artists from their preautonomous dependence on patronage as it places art within the circuit of economic exchange. In Adorno's writing political interests are annexed to this paradoxically autonomous domain because art as a nonfunctional production engages critically with a society won over to the values of utility.⁵ Adorno thus models the view that the material forms of art can exercise a critical effect precisely because he assumes, along with Kant, that such forms carry more than mere material representations. Lyotard's use of the Kantian category of the sublime can also be cited in this regard: the painting of Barnett Newman exercises a critical function because, for Lyotard, its technique of abstraction retreats from the logic of realisable forms that define the operation of 'techno-scientific capital.' In this way it does not just differentiate itself from the latter logic, but does so by singularly rendering the idea of indeterminacy: an idea that makes painting more than its mere material form.⁶

This idea of abundance and unruliness through indeterminacy is also common in theoretical discussions of the essence of modern literature. In these discussions the view that the indeterminacy of meaning carries critical effects is treated as a topic for critical reflection, but the structure that attributes an ideal reference to material representations remains intact. For Derrida, the indeterminacy of literary meaning corrodes its critical function: at once the literary is critical on account of its excess to a single meaning or purpose, but this very excess also hollows out its critical capacity

precisely because this excess is only ‘fiction.’⁷ The logical consequence of this ambiguity is prominent in the writing of Böhler. Böhler is sceptical of the ability of art to contribute to historical utopian projects, but he still hopes to save a place for literary avant-gardism. In effect, satisfaction is to be had in literary moments, but these moments, which are unable to sustain a critical posture beyond the moment, also model in their quality of ‘suddenness’ a departure from the quotidian that cannot be had elsewhere.⁸

The major political ideas of modern philosophy also keep in play these aesthetic features of experience first described by Kant. The central theme of Schiller’s early use of Kantian aesthetics for the nineteenth-century anthropological project of an ‘aesthetic education’ of ‘man,’ the promise that aesthetic experience could mould political institutions or behaviours, remains strong in contemporary thought. Marxist and post-Marxist theory depend on the aesthetic dimension of experience in order to discharge the function of criticism as well as to model an alternative anthropology and the social arrangements that could support it. This is the case with Marx, who, in the words of Jaus, ‘evidently interprets the practical creation of an objective world according to the paradigm of the production of works of art.’⁹ Further, Marx’s criticism of division of labor and specialisation of productive roles is based on an aesthetic conception of personality.¹⁰ Even in Habermas, who is otherwise scrupulous in following Kant’s intended separation of spheres, there is evidence that the aesthetic still claims, as it does in Kant, a function in excess of its field: against the ‘culture without thorns’ easily ‘absorbed by mere needs for compensation’ ‘[a] *not*her kind of transcendence is preserved in the unfulfilled promise disclosed by the critical appropriation of identity-forming religious traditions, and *still another* in the negativity of modern art.’ The exceptional place of religious traditions and modern art follows from their capacity to open up ‘the trivial and everyday . . . to the shock of what is absolutely strange, cryptic, or uncanny. Though these no longer provide a cover for privileges, they refuse to be assimilated by pregiven categories.’¹¹ Like Böhler, even though and precisely because its promise is unfulfilled, for Habermas modern art still has an exceptional position since it offers satisfactions and a power of critique beyond the register of bare material needs.

I do not mention these recent uses of the features of Kant’s approach to the question of presentation, in which aesthetic experience is credited with critical capacity, in order to document the breadth of the relationship

between Kant's question and subsequent philosophy, and still less to rehearse once more the well-known influential status of the third *Critique* in post-Kantian philosophy. Rather, I would like to mark out the crucial difference between these cases of influence and those figures of twentieth-century thought for whom Kant's question in this *Critique* becomes the core problem for philosophical thinking. In Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy, the assumptions in play in the critical-theoretical uses of the aesthetic are in the foreground and, on occasion, subjected to scrutiny just because aesthetic forms and their supposed critical capacity are considered in the context of a thoroughgoing questioning of the topic of presentation.

Heidegger is a thinker of particular significance for this project. Not only can his own thought be read in terms of this problem of presentation (the problem of how to present the relation between human being and being will be read in this study as the problem of thinking, as such in Heidegger), but the itinerary of his path of thinking, I will argue, is determined by his reading of Kant and his view that Kant retreats from the consequences of the problem of presentation. Kant occupies a singular position in Heidegger's analysis of modern philosophy on account of the way he formulates the problem of presentation. In Descartes, and the rationalists who followed him, including Spinoza, the question of presentation as a relation of thought and matter is raised downstream from the problem of defining these elements in their essence and is resolved theologically. German Idealism, generally speaking, tries to resolve this problem by pressing the presentative relation from a limited, say, analogical relation in the direction of perfect embodiment. This is especially true of the so-called Jena Romantics. Heidegger criticises German Idealism and Romanticism for suppressing the problem of presentation entirely in the interest of the representation of the theologically inspired 'absolute.' But Heidegger is also critical of Kant, who, with his faith in reason, suppresses the difficult consequences of this problem and retreats from his insight in the A version of the first *Critique* into the primacy of the presentation over the terms it 'presents.' In Heidegger's thought, presentation is taken to precede the problem of the representation of the 'absolute,' which is itself corroded by the concomitant historicisation of the relations of presentation. Thus, in Heidegger, the problem of presentation becomes the focus of thinking, as he defined it in his later work: namely, a reflection on the epochal relations under which things appear as such. In this respect Heidegger sets the frame

for the conception of presentation in Nancy and other post-Heideggerian thinkers who consider the question of presentation the proper task of critical thought. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe reposition traditional political and philosophical themes as matters of presentation. The technical approach taken by Kant thus gives way to a questioning of the stakes of the core metaphysical question of his philosophy: rather than relating the independently defined terms of sensible nature and the idea of freedom in, say, an analogous sensible presentation able to give form to an otherwise empty idea, relations of presentation are conceived of historically, and these relations become the object of critical reflection.

Heidegger, along with the prominent writers of French deconstruction, sustains and extends the Kantian formulation of presentation *qua* a problem as the matter for thinking. On this basis alone, this thinking may be differentiated from other traditions of thought which one way or another approach this topic not just from the perspective of a burden to be removed but in terms of the absolute that grounds historical relations and precedes and sculpts any sensible presentation. In Heidegger and French deconstruction what breaks down, more generally, is the coherence of the dualism of ideas and sensible form, or of meaning and sensuous matter.¹²

In Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy the topic of presentation retains the status it has in Heidegger as the core problem for thinking. Nonetheless, in contrast to Heidegger, these thinkers recall that Kant's approach to this problem was developed in the context of his aesthetics. In their return to the original thematics of this problem, each of these French thinkers directs the question of presentation in such a way that literature and the arts become the privileged ground for a critique of philosophical concepts and styles. At the same time as this topic can provide a shared lineage for their work, it acts as a fault-line by which the substantial differences between these thinkers may be marked. In other words, the critique of Heidegger's destinal thinking and the dependence of this on a quasi-transcendent meaning supports in each case a distinctive project. Lacoue-Labarthe's work is focussed on the topic of the mimetic sources of identity, and the prominent themes in his work are the literary, theatrical, and musical devices that render identity as the secondary product of a primary technique. In his work the topic of presentation becomes a reflection on the primacy of the literary and rhetorical dimensions of thinking such that ideas owe their power

to convince or make sense to their literary formation. The nineteenth-century approach to anthropology, still current today, is thus criticised by Lacoue-Labarthe, who tries to show that 'man' is the product of, rather than the term behind, 'literary' forms of presentation.

Nancy, while sharing the emphasis in Lacoue-Labarthe's work on the arts and the themes that arise from philosophical aesthetics as the privileged context for the posing of the problem of presentation, develops an ontology that gives an operational force to Heidegger's conception of artwork. 'Art' is used in Lacoue-Labarthe's writing to convey the plastic sense of a formation that is without any originating model or idea; his work tries to chart the effects of this primary plasticity of expressive form in poetry and philosophy. In contrast, Nancy's ontological project identifies in the arts the occasion of a 'presentation' of meaning. It is in the arts, Nancy believes, that this presentation is staged because it is here that the genesis of meaning as a 'coming-to-presence' rather than as a relation to a 'present thing' is presented. For Nancy rigorous attention to the question of presentation makes it necessary to think the world of sense and appearance without any prior point of orientation. Hence the significance of art as that which shows sense in the process of *emerging* from the senses. It is this showing of sense as emerging from the senses and thus as a process rather than a stable form that Nancy believes is the forgotten dimension of sense and meaning. This dimension of sense, he contends, is addressed in a singular way in art's presentation *of* presentation. The view that the arts phrase the general question of sense in a genetic way distinguishes Nancy's project from Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstructive approach to the figural forms that first sculpt and present the identity of the human as a 'type.'¹³ Nancy argues that Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of figural forms seems to suggest a 'beyond' to figuration. In contrast, Nancy's approach to the topic of presentation as it is raised in the arts holds to the 'exigency' of figuration as the very point at which presentation can be raised and sustained as a question.¹⁴

The fact that the topic of presentation is sustained in a prominent way in some of the most significant strains of contemporary European thought raised, for me, a number of questions that the existing literature on the influence and internal form of Kant's third *Critique* did not address. Despite the enormous interest in the category of the aesthetic as the distinctive frame for important themes in modern political philosophy as

well as movements such as hermeneutics, deconstruction, and phenomenology, this interest is seldom connected to the project of presentation in Kant's work or, when it is, to the substantial amendments made to this project in recent European philosophy. This connection is important because the understanding of the artwork or the aesthetic domain as 'an exception' to instrumental or cognitive paradigms is itself historically based on a particular understanding of the question of (aesthetic) presentation in post-Kantian German Idealism and Romanticism.

This gap in the literature seemed to me in the process of writing this book to be intimately connected to another: studies on Heidegger and French deconstruction tended to assume that Kant was a mainly negative figure in the itinerary of their concerns. Despite the fact that it has become something of a commonplace to mention the points of connection between Heidegger and French deconstruction, the precise terms of this relationship remained either vague or phrased in terms internal to the French tradition. It was, then, partly my curiosity about how this relationship might be explained by way of an operative use of concepts from the philosophical tradition that motivated this project. In turn, it was my dissatisfaction with the conclusions reached by those approaches from the 'history of ideas' that viewed Kant through the lens of the 'resolution' of the critical system in German Idealism, or considered the category of the aesthetic in isolation from the project of presentation which, in Kant, shapes it, that led me to question more closely the precise terms of the relation between the core metaphysical problem of Kantian thought and the central concerns of some of the major figures of contemporary thought.

This book argues for the general claim that the Kantian topic of presentation is an enduring topic within contemporary European thought. Beyond this general point I hope to show how attention to this topic can place the work of some of the significant figures of recent European philosophy and some of the problems treated in their work in a new light. Accounting for the impact on Heidegger and some of the prominent figures of recent French thought of the chief problem of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* allows us to supplement the Nietzschean frame in which these figures are generally considered. The perspective adopted, then, frees a space for us to question the complex role of Kant and the pivotal position of his conception of aesthetic presentation within twentieth- and twenty-first-century post-aesthetic thought.

In particular, the analysis of the contemporary inflection of the originally Kantian question of presentation will, I hope, help to illuminate the motive force that structures and guides these authors' reflections on diverse topics, such as the significance of aesthetics in modern Western philosophy, as well as important contemporary political themes, including technology, capital, and the problem of social criticism. At the same time, I want to elucidate the more fundamental philosophical trajectory that brings art to the position of exception from which it claims a uniquely potent critical voice in recent European philosophy. Although this position is the heritage of the Romantic and Idealist reinterpretations of Kantian thought, which the authors treated in this study revise, nonetheless in each, the use of the defining elements of Kant's conception of aesthetic presentation maintains 'art' in a position of unique significance.

My argument proceeds in three parts. The first part examines the stakes of the problem of presentation for the aspiration to system of the Kantian philosophy. The two chapters of this part focus, respectively, on the two parts of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. My analysis of the 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgment' focuses on the different types of presentative relation outlined in this part of the *Critique* by Kant. I argue that Kant's approach to the problem of presentation finally falters because his inquiry into aesthetic presentation is subordinated to what may be called a doctrine of anthropological reason. In the case of the 'Critique of Teleological Judgment' this doctrine takes the form of a melding of nature itself into the project of the presentation of 'man's' final ends [*Endszweck*] as nature's ultimate end [*der letzte Zweck*]. Kant's *Critique* undoes its aim of presenting moral subjectivity by casting this subjectivity in the form of an aesthetic object.

The second part presses for a reconsideration of Heidegger's thinking in terms of the question of presentation. Here I argue that this question is far more than a theme. It is in fact the reflective impulse that drives and structures Heidegger's thinking. This discussion falls into two chapters: first, I interpret Heidegger's 'turn' as a consequence of his discovery of presentation as a core philosophical problem in Kant's critical philosophy; second, I examine the consequences of this reading of Heidegger's 'path of thinking' as a reflection on relations of presentation for his conception, respectively, of the artwork and technology. Despite Heidegger's own use of the artwork as a contrastive value to illuminate technological relations,

I argue that such a contrast is not licensed in his thinking and that it is the status of the problem of presentation in his thought that shows this to be the case. Indeed, rigorously pursued, the question of presentation opens up the distinction between Heidegger's use of Kant's conception of disinterest for his own understanding of truth as a 'letting-be' and the historical approach to the question of being in which precisely this understanding of truth is itself no longer able to sustain a contrast with calculative relations.

This issue of the contrast between the artwork and technology in Heidegger sets up the terms for my treatment of the topic of presentation in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in the third and final section. In Chapter 5, my discussion of Lacoue-Labarthe interprets the topic of presentation as the general orientation for his critique of philosophy in literary and artistic terms and examines how this topic influences his famous critique of Heidegger's thought as an 'originary mimesis' that commits him, among other things, to his notorious engagement with National Socialism. The chief consequence of Heidegger's inadequate analysis of the topic of presentation is, for Lacoue-Labarthe, his implicit conception of the political as the project for the founding of an identity able to precede and guide its 'presentation.' In Lacoue-Labarthe's writing, the task of analysing 'presentation' opens up the issue of the political not as an 'aesthetic' question, but as a question disclosed by reflecting on literary and artistic techniques and practices.

Next, and following once again the thread of Heidegger's influence on the contemporary interpretation of the question of presentation, Chapter 6 shows how Nancy's ontology can be understood as a radicalisation of Heidegger's core theses on the artwork. Although Nancy's thought is generally described as a reworking of the category of *Mitsein* in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Nancy, I argue, uses the staging of presentation as a question in Heidegger's artwork essay as a type of genetic accounting for the general ontology his thinking describes. However, unlike the substantial ambiguity on the critical potential of art cultivated in Heidegger's late work, Nancy's view that sense is not given but a 'praxis' tries to twist free of the metaphysical dualism that gives the arts a place exceptional to the prevailing schematisation of experience in the contemporary conditions of techno-capital. In this respect, the rethinking of presentation in Nancy's thought, even despite its aesthetic orientation, offers the first outlines of a critique of the doctrine of art's exceptionalism that Heidegger's rethinking of the topic of aesthetic presentation had hinted at but failed to deliver.