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Chapter 4

Sensuality, Materiality, Painting

What Is wrong with Jaspers' and Heidegger's Van Gogh Interpretations?

Christian Lotz

In what follows, I will try to demonstrate that both Jaspers and Heidegger miss the essential dimension of Van Gogh's art by reducing it to its subjectivist-existential (Jaspers) and pseudo-objective (Heidegger) qualities. What both miss is the role of materiality in and for painting. Van Gogh's art is characterized by the attempt to preserve a certain non-representational quality of the sensational experience of the world through the materiality of painting, but this gets lost in Heidegger's attempt to eradicate all traces of subjectivity in Van Gogh. Regarding Jaspers' subjectivist view of Van Gogh's art, his thesis that Van Gogh's change of style during the late '80s goes back to his schizophrenic illness ignores the fact that Van Gogh's change of style emerged out of his attempt to position himself within the new styles of painting that developed at the end of the nineteenth century in Paris. As a consequence, though Jaspers is aware of the material qualities of Van Gogh's painting, he is unable to look at the paintings *as* paintings, and, instead, he recedes to an expressivist position. Similarly, Heidegger's thesis that the work of art establishes a unique synthesis of earth and world—for which he uses Van Gogh as an illustration—ignores the role of the materiality and expressiveness of Van Gogh's painting, and thereby ignores the subjective and specific element in painting. As a consequence, Heidegger reduces the paintings to *pictures*, which is especially odd if we compare his treatment of architecture with his treatment of painting. Accordingly, while Jaspers is ultimately more truthful to Van Gogh, insofar as he points to the formal style of Van Gogh's art, unfortunately, he reduces the new way of painting that Van Gogh developed in the '80s to his psychic de-personalization and alienation.

Jaspers and Heidegger do not see the materialist vision behind Van Gogh's art that leads to a new conception of images as emerging from their intrinsic features as paintings. As T.J. Clark puts it,

Existing from positivism—casting aside the possibility of art's going back to the moment at which sensation becomes sign—is in practice exiting from the hope of art's inhabiting a public, fully translatable world. And that [...] had been the utopian motor of modernism from Courbet and Manet to Seurat and even van Gogh. (There is no "event" about it, in fact. Van Gogh believed in the material world, and art's responsibility to retrieve the shock of it, and to translate the shock into a new and fully public language, as no one had ever believed before. He was the Prince Myshkin of positivism. That after his death he became the model of alienated individuality, and the patron saint of visionaries, is I guess what simplicity gets for its pains.)¹

What T.J. Clark refers to as the sensational-material quality of Van Gogh can also be analyzed in terms of color and stroke, as Van Gogh's paintings can hardly be understood without taking the relationship between drawing and painting into account. The strokes are essential to Van Gogh's style of painting, insofar as Van Gogh was not a colorist. In a letter from September 1889 he says about another artist: "And he quickly loses his touch for *drawing with the brush*. This probably comes from the old training method, which is the same as the current one—in the studios—they fill in outlines."² What Van Gogh means by "drawing with the brush" refers to his own attempt to bring together drawing and painting on a higher level, where neither color nor the outline, the conflict of which played a major role in modern art theory, has priority over the other. The consequence of this is, however, that we need to acknowledge the primacy of the material mark over the represented, since the brushstroke and the paint are significant for the pre-expressionist world that Van Gogh's art invokes. Put in T.J. Clark's terms, the signifier itself becomes meaningful in Van Gogh's art. The result is what we might call *painted drawings*. It is, therefore, even more troubling that Heidegger misses this aspect in Van Gogh's art, as Heidegger's distinction between earth and world could easily be applied to Van Gogh as a *painter* and not, as Heidegger has it, as a picture maker. In what follows, I will first discuss Heidegger's and Jaspers' positions, before I move on to Van Gogh and outline some of the aforementioned principles of this newly established synthesis of materiality and meaning.

HEIDEGGER, PAINTING, AND MATERIALITY, OR WHERE IS THE PAINTING?

Given that Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" essay is well known, I shall only briefly indicate the central aspects that are important for this chapter: let us recall that Heidegger does not fully reject the matter-form

distinction; rather, he gives it a new meaning through a phenomenological reinterpretation (*Auslegung*).³ As we know, in the first part of his essay he argues that the matter-form distinction is derived from and depends upon instrumentality in the form of equipment (*Zeug*). If we understand the work of art by using the matter-form distinction as its ontological basis, then, according to Heidegger, we end up with an understanding of the work of art as an ontological subclass of instrumental objects. In this case the work of art would be reduced to crafts. Against this, Heidegger argues, we need to pose that the work of art goes beyond the matter-form distinction and its being by making something visible *about* this distinction. And it is precisely at this juncture that Heidegger introduces Van Gogh's shoe painting, as he seeks to demonstrate that the being of Van Gogh's painting as a work of art is not simply something (matter) made by an artist (form) for a purpose "X," since the work of art reveals something *about* equipment (in this case the shoes) depicted by Van Gogh and is therefore truth-related. (See Figure 1.)

In order to understand why this move is astonishing let me briefly recall how Heidegger deals with the Greek temple, which he uses after Van Gogh's shoes and Meyer's fountain, as a third, and the most important, example in his essay. In his analysis of the Greek temple, Heidegger argues that the temple, in relation to what he calls "earth," sets forth a world: "By the opening of a world," as Heidegger puts it, "all things gain their lingering and hastening, their distance and proximity, their breadth and their limits."⁴ While the world establishes an a priori framework of meaningfulness in which all entities and relations are established in their basic coherence, at the same time this opening up of meaningfulness is tied back to a concrete geographical and natural setting that does not appear as mere nature, but instead as earthly foundation (*Boden*). In relation to the temple, one might say that Heidegger's conception of art comes very close to the idea that the material bearer is not simply the "matter" for meaning, given that matter, now conceived as a concrete earthly setting, is *itself* signifying.

Given Heidegger's position that the work of art is based on the conflict and strife between earth and world, his take on Van Gogh is odd, since one would have expected Heidegger to look at Van Gogh's painting exactly as he looks at the *Acropolis*. Indeed, it is astonishing that Heidegger does not use the same distinctions that are operative in the case of the temple in the case of Van Gogh's painting. For he suppresses, overlooks, or misses the materiality of the painting, namely, its *paint*. For example, in regard to Van Gogh's depicted shoes, Heidegger writes, "This equipment belongs to the *earth* and finds protection in the *world* of the peasant woman."⁵ It is as if Heidegger looks *through* the painting *into* something else. In this way, he *immediately* identifies the painting with a kind of window. In contrast, in the temple case,

Heidegger refers to the distinction between earth and world as something that shows up *in* the temple as something made with rocks.

I am not alone with my astonishment. As Schufreider has argued, this different handling of architecture and painting is most likely caused by Heidegger's unintentional reduction of the *painting* to a *picture*, especially if we assume that a reproduction in the form of a photograph would indeed take the materiality of the painting away and would transform it into a two-dimensional picture plane. Schufreider writes:

Unfortunately, Heidegger does not view the picture in relation to the paint (as he will the stone of the temple later in the essay) but creates a narrative in which the world/earth correlation is approached pictorially, as he sees the peasants' world in relation to the Earth in the appearance of the shoes as items of gear.⁶

Put differently, Heidegger handles Van Gogh's painting as if it is a photograph or a reproduction of a painting. This, in turn, can also explain why later in the essay Heidegger lists as the "material" of painting "color," which is very imprecise and shows the idealistic vision of painting with which Heidegger operates in the essay. For it is not simply "color" that shines through in a painting; instead, it is the flesh-like quality of paint itself, and, again, it is *precisely* this feature that characterizes Van Gogh's style.⁷ Heidegger writes:

When a work is brought forth out of this or that work-material—stone, wood, metal, color, language, tone—we say that it is made, set forth [*hergestellt*] out of it. But just as the work required a setting up, in the sense of consecrating-praising erection (since the work-being of the work consisted in a setting up of world), so a setting forth [*Herstellung*] is also necessary, since the work-being of the work has itself the character of a setting forth.⁸

Heidegger's list of work-materials is telling, since he thinks about color as if it is the same thing as wood and metal. In my view, he should have listed *paint* (and canvas) at this point. In the same passage, Heidegger goes on and explains that in contrast to useable things, the work of art does not hide its own material qualities; rather, it brings them out by putting them into a conflictual situation with the world that the work sets up. For example, the sturdiness and heaviness of the stone used in the temple shines forth through the setting up of the world and establishes an ongoing conflict between that which enables the world to be *this* precise world (*stone* of a Greek temple) and that which enables the stone to be *this* precise stone (stone of a Greek temple). Furthermore, later in the same passage Heidegger advances that

[I]n the manufacture of equipment—for example, an ax—the stone is used and used up. It disappears into usefulness. The less resistance the material puts up to

being submerged in the equipmental being of the equipment the more suitable and the better it is. On the other hand, the temple work, in setting up a world, does not let the material disappear; rather, it allows it to come forth for the very first time, to come forth, that is, into the open of the world of the work. The rock comes to bear and to rest and so first becomes rock; the metal comes to glitter and shimmer, the colors to shine, the sounds to ring, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of the stone, into the firmness and flexibility of the wood, into the hardness and gleam of the ore, into the lightening and darkening of color, into the ringing of sound, and the naming power of the word.⁹

We can see here that Heidegger operates with the old genre distinctions that we find before the event of modern art throughout non-modern history, since Heidegger assumes that architecture and painting differ from each other because architecture does not depict anything, whereas paintings project a two-dimensional world onto their picture plane through their colors. This assumption, as we know, has been shattered by modern art (though we find it already in painters, such as Rembrandt—whom Van Gogh admired—and Turner),¹⁰ since modern art, as T. J. Clark underlined, is based on a thorough materialism, which is to say, it does not simply posit "colors" as its basis; instead, it posits the materiality of paint (or the canvas) as its ground. Only this shift makes it possible for painters, such as Van Gogh, to start to paint with the paint tube itself. It is this discovery of technique as *visible* property of art that Heidegger's anti-modern position misses. Paint should, *especially in Van Gogh's art*, appear as the *ground* of painting, which, then, also must point to (and here I deviate from Schufreider) other things such as the history of paint, materials, and techniques.¹¹ Put differently, why should the ground of painting *simply* be "paint," as if, by analogy, the material of a symphony would be the instruments, and not the whole *history* of the differences and developments of instruments? Similarly, the "material" in Van Gogh's paintings is not simply "paint"; rather, we should think about it as a *historically* given material, which, as a consequence, also contains brushes, the material of the brushes, painting techniques, and so on. And even if we do not want to go so far (fearing that we need to give up a phenomenological and ontological approach to art and to turn to an aesthetics *à la* Adorno), we should reformulate the earth/world problem that is present in painting with Heidegger.¹²

WHAT DOES THE WORK REVEAL?

As a consequence of what I argued in the last section, we should note that that which Van Gogh's painting *as* painting reveals is not, as Heidegger claims,

The failure of Heidegger to acknowledge the materiality in painting and to apply his own distinctions to Van Gogh's work is even more astonishing if one considers Van Gogh's own words. In a letter to his brother on June 9, 1889, he writes:

When I see a painting that intrigues me, I can never help asking myself, "in what house, room, corner of the room, in whose home would it do well, would it be in its rightful place." Thus the paintings of Hals, Rembrandt, Vermeer are only at home in the old Dutch house.¹³

We can see clearly that Van Gogh himself was well aware that paintings in their specific historical configurations set forth specific worlds, such as the bourgeois Dutch world. All we would have to think about is the specific world that Van Gogh's work sets forth; it is safe to assume that it no longer brings out the "meta-frame" of a whole culture, as Heidegger tries to argue, happens in the case of the temple.¹⁴ Moreover, I do not think that we should read Van Gogh's statement as an arbitrary empirical statement; rather, he is fully aware of the fact that a painting reveals *its world* through its being, that is, that it reveals a *painting* world. Van Gogh's seriousness, which Jaspers also mentions, is not based on his psychological derangement; instead, it is the attitude of an artist who is fully aware of the truth-related aspect of his work. Regarding a painting, the conflict between earth and world comes out, but it can only come out if we understand it as a *painting*, which includes the material structure of the painting. Van Gogh saw his own activity of painting against the background of hard peasant labor, and since he viewed the world and work of peasants as a quasi-religious devotion to the earth and to God, he also understood his own activity of painting in this light. As he says in a letter, "I am plowing on my canvases as they do on their fields."¹⁵ Accordingly, the soil here is not something revealed *in* a picture; rather, with Van Gogh we need to claim that it is *in* the painting, as the *earthly quality of painting*. Indeed, the goal is that "of marking the canvas with tangible signs of a labor equivalent to that of his subject."¹⁶ Hence, it would be more appropriate to speak of Van Gogh as someone who—prior to artists such as Fautrier and Schumacher—literally *works on* his canvases. Similarly, trees in the wind, fields in the sun, or, for that matter, sunflowers, need to be translated into "living paint" that brings out the qualities of the scene or the object in the very way that it is painted. In sum, the fact that Van Gogh painted shoes and how the painting reveals the world of the shoes is secondary, since it is *the way in which* this modern master painted the shoes that (could have) set forth a specific world, just as the temple-world contains references to the sky, to the holy, to rocks, and to the Athenian people.

primarily the world of the peasant; for this world only comes forth in the painting as a picture. Instead, we should claim that the painting *in the very way in which it is a painting, that is, painted*, sets up a world to which the paint as paint belongs and which comes into the open through the world that it sets forth, namely, that which might be called a historically specific *painting world vision*. Van Gogh, for example—in his later work—used to start his painting by directly applying the paint from his paint tubes onto the canvas, and then, in a second step, he used to make the paint move through his brush strokes. (I shall come back to this point in the last section of this chapter.) At this point, however, it is important to note that the way in which Van Gogh handles the paint sets forth a *painting* world, and not, as Heidegger argues, a world in the painting as a picture. As the temple *builds*, a painting *paints*. It projects, so to speak, a world established by and through this specific way of doing paintings (similar to how a temple provides, founds (*stiften*), and projects the Greek world).

It is hard to understand that Heidegger totally suppresses the *poetic* moment in painting. It is, of course, difficult to determine exactly what kind of world Van Gogh's work sets up, since it might no longer be comparable to what we receive as the unity of the "Greek" world that the temple sets up, but it is safe to claim that Van Gogh's work sets up a *specific* post-impressionist and pre-expressionist modern world in which subjective moods and feelings are experienced as objective properties of the world. All we need to do is to imagine a cultural world in which the meaningfulness of that world would be established by Van Gogh's painting (instead of a temple). It would be a world in which nature, especially in the form of landscapes, would have another status. My suspicion is that, as a consequence, we would see that Van Gogh's paintings project a specifically *modern* world. For example, Van Gogh's handling of the tube as a brush brings out a specific *industrialized* world in which painters need to *buy* paint in tubes and are able to carry around their materials and work outside their studios. Put differently, it contains a different relation to the inside and outside, as well as a different relation to nature. The way in which one paints does not simply refer to a world; rather, it *contains* in it a world, which, if we would further analyze it, would also contain social and political relations. For example, the tubes that Van Gogh uses, that is, *the possibility* of painting the way he paints, includes references to a specific mode of production. The genius of Van Gogh is that he, even if not always explicitly, somehow realizes that his new way of approaching the world has to do with the way in which paint becomes paint in the (modern) world in which he lives. Paint, for Van Gogh, is a paste. Moreover, the expressiveness of this paint establishes a mythic environment that is in some sense "alive." So, in this larger sense, Van Gogh's painting belongs to a specific "sub-world" of the modern age.

JASPERS, PAINTING, MATERIALITY, OR WHERE IS THE PAINT?

Let me now briefly turn to Jaspers. Interestingly, though I am skeptical in general about Jaspers' reduction of art to existential and psychological expression, his understanding of Van Gogh is far superior to Heidegger's understanding, especially because Jaspers is fully aware that without a careful analysis of the way in which Van Gogh puts the mark on his canvases, major aesthetical insights get lost. In the framework of Heidegger's philosophy of art we are forced to treat Van Gogh's painting as an illustration for a specific ontology of art. Undoubtedly, with Jaspers we are moving closer to the *specific* nature of Van Gogh's art. Nevertheless, Jaspers' otherwise enlightening attempt to push the reception of Van Gogh away from his "madness" and "sickness" by claiming that his sickness together with his art led to an important and internally coherent projection of a meaningful existence (*Sinn der Existenz*) and to a realization of an existential "ethos," in the end, falls back onto a position that reduces the materiality of Van Gogh's art to the outcome of psychological factors.¹⁷ As Marlene Putschner has it in her review of medical literature on Van Gogh, taking into account the psychological condition of Van Gogh could perhaps render more understandable some of the themes that Van Gogh selected, or it could perhaps help us understand the mood of some landscapes, but this approach to Van Gogh is unable to help us understand the *artistic form* as that which, in German, is called the "Gestaltungsprinzip," that is, the *formative principle* of his works.¹⁸ Despite the fact that Jaspers has a clear understanding of Van Gogh's realism, and his attempt to show the transcendent *in* the real, and Van Gogh's deep sensualism, Jaspers misses this principle.¹⁹

To be fair, Jaspers' thesis is not simply that Van Gogh's work is the expression of his psychic illness; rather, he tries to merge both together with his idea that we can understand the schizophrenic condition better *through* the world of the artist, which, for Jaspers, is a whole psychic and existential world of an individual who sees reality and life even more truthfully than others. Nevertheless, this "reverse" relation between art and existential projection underestimates that the formative will that underlies the art of Van Gogh needs to be interpreted as an expression of the schizophrenic *Dasein*. This therefore underestimates that the true advancement of Van Gogh's art is not his existential authenticity, but, instead, his push towards a new position in the history of painting. Seen from this point of view, Van Gogh's art is authentic because it gives us a new way of understanding how painting can project a world, and a new way of how painting and a painted world can be seen and carried out. Similarly, Beethoven's and Schoenberg's authenticity

lies in their redefinition of music composing and of their handling of the material of music.

Similarly, Jaspers' existential interpretation misses the most significant aspects of Van Gogh, namely, that he is a *painter*. In addition, the idea that paintings are the "expression" of something psychic, even when seen as an existential totality, overlooks that every work of art is mediated by the materials (broadly construed) and techniques. It took Van Gogh years to develop his specific style of painting and drawing. He worked in an extremely disciplined and reflective way on his painting techniques, and all of this happened in an ongoing exchange with his contemporaries after he discovered the amodernity of his earlier work in the 1880s. This exchange with his contemporaries is based on the attempt to redefine painting itself. Not only the different drawing and painting techniques, but also the different brush types and pens have to be included here, as they are *not* arbitrary. But Jaspers is still deeply tied to a "genius theory of art," according to which the artistic productivity comes directly out of the nature of the artist and not, as is clearly the case with Van Gogh, through hard labor, work, and observations of what others around him are doing. As one commentator has it in regard to Van Gogh's creative process:

First, van Gogh's practice of painting repetitions was far more extensive and vital to his creative process than many people realize. Second, contrary to the deeply ingrained perception of van Gogh as an artist who always painted before nature in a flash of emotional excess, his approach to the creative process was often more deliberate, controlled, and conceptual than the popular stereotype suggests.²⁰

In addition, as we know, Seurat, for example, was very interested in nineteenth-century scientific color-theory and, as such, he prioritized the attempt to paint natural light.²¹ Van Gogh, however, followed Gauguin in his attempt to relate color to match psychological and emotional properties, though this is not due to Van Gogh's sickness, as it goes back to developments within nineteenth-century art theory and artistic practice. The danger of Jaspers' interpretation, therefore, is the possible loss of Van Gogh's work as a work of art as well as the dismissal of Van Gogh's attempt to push the development of art and the possibilities of painting forward, through a new way of combining color, paint, and drawing.

Jaspers' reduction of Van Gogh's way of painting to existential expressions overlooks that Van Gogh tries to capture *objective* qualities of his objects and themes. For example, the "mood" of a landscape or an "anxious" situation is not necessarily something subjective; rather, it can be conceived as a property of the object, although this property is subjectively perceived. A dangerous

looking lion is not dangerous because I feel fear when I see him; for "being dangerous" is a property of the lion that I discover through my fear. Similarly, Van Gogh is an anti-impressionist because he is not interested in the subjective impression of a scene; instead, his turn to lines and strokes, and, finally, to painted lines and painted strokes, is a turn towards the object, the real, and reality. To be fair, Jaspers seems to acknowledge this fact at least sometimes. For example, referring to Van Gogh's famous coffeehouse paintings, he says that Van Gogh wanted to display the coffeehouse as a place in which one can commit crimes.²² Painted colors, hence, do not have a subjective meaning alone, given that they are the way through which one can discover something that had so far been unseen in a scene, an object, or a landscape.

THE MATERIALITY OF VAN GOGH'S PAINTINGS

Finally, let me briefly mention a few central aspects of Van Gogh's art that, I think, get lost in Jaspers' and Heidegger's interpretations of his work. Van Gogh's art depends upon a totally new way of constructing the image as something that is independent from its relation to a constructive principle found outside of the image, though he does not reach this point through what we later find in Cézanne, for whom the painting emerges out of its elements, namely, painted "spots."²³ Nevertheless, Van Gogh already tries to let the image emerge internally through its own genesis, which, in his case, is only possible because in some of his later works he moves away from treating drawing and painting as two different things, that is, he revolutionizes the function of the outline. As such, Van Gogh tries to bring both together and treats paint as if he would be drawing. In a letter to his brother on June 9, 1889, he writes:

But there you are, to get back to the point, since the Egyptian artists thus have a *faith*, working from feeling and instinct, they express all these intangible things: goodness, infinite patience, wisdom, serenity, with a few masterly curves and marvelous proportions. That's to say once more, when the thing depicted and the manner of depicting it are in accord, the thing has style and quality.²⁴

It is very clear, then, that Van Gogh tries to reveal something about his objects, themes, and scenes by evoking it through a specific way of treating paint and painting itself. The revolutionary change of painting into painted drawings, the attempt to draw with the brush, as well as the idea that the thickness, length, expressiveness, and shape of the strokes determine the thing depicted, led to a totally new way for how painting can be related to what is painted. Moreover, that which is painted is no longer simply "out there" to be copied, given that the image can only evolve out of its own

painterly genesis. One commentator calls this procedure *imitating the material* (*materialmimetisch*), since Van Gogh tries to wrestle the picture out of the materiality of painting.²⁵ The method of drawing by painting allows Van Gogh to abstract the essential from what he perceived as reality. He thereby discovers the qualities of the reality *in* his own painting marks. Paint, in other words, becomes meaningful through itself. In this sense, T. J. Clark's remark about Van Gogh's materialism is absolutely correct. For example, Van Gogh speaks of the "rustic quality" of his paintings and of the "smell of the earth" in them.²⁶ Again, Van Gogh painted in the same way that peasants labored. We can see here that the irony of all this is that the role of labor, the relation to nature, the peasant's world, and so on, that is, that which Heidegger mentions in regard to the depicted shoes could be more properly applied to Van Gogh's paintings themselves.

During his time in southern France, Van Gogh especially improved his pen-and-ink-drawing, which he developed in a way that is similar to how etchings are done. In a letter to Theo on January 1, 1883, Van Gogh compares different forms of drawing with different music instruments.²⁷ The properties of certain objects, accordingly, depend upon the way in which the property is handled and brought forth. Line and color are supposed to be one, in order to achieve the goal of drawing with color, or, to be more precise, in order to *draw with paint*. For example, for some paintings of trees and landscapes, Van Gogh presses the stems and branches of trees *directly* out of the tube in order to reveal their inner quality. Again, we can see here that it is not simply color that we need to take as the "material" of painting; instead, it is the paint itself, and Van Gogh brings this out by handling painting as if it would be drawing. Color, for Van Gogh, is a *paste* that needs to be treated, formed, destroyed, and distributed. It is only the latter move that pushes Van Gogh away from impressionist painting. Similarly, the *speed* and the *rhythm* of how he "plows through the paint" are equally important. In this connection, we can see that during his Paris time, Van Gogh thinks painting in the form of points, lines, and strokes. His language is characterized by a rhythm of movements that have to do with the different speeds for how he distributes the paint throughout the canvas.²⁸ The conflict between color and line, between *couleur* and *dessin*, plays an important role in nineteenth-century theory of art, and it deeply influenced artists such as Van Gogh.²⁹ In regard to his famous *Olive Tree* painting Van Gogh even refers to woodcuts for his arrangement.³⁰ Accordingly, in this case the attempt is to paint "woodcut style." In the same letter, he writes:

All in all the only things I consider a *little* good in it are the Wheatfield, the Mountain, the Orchard, the Olive trees with the blue hills and the Portrait and the Entrance to the quarry, and the rest says *nothing* to me, because it lacks personal will, feeling in the lines [*de lignes senties*]. Where these lines are

close together and deliberate the painting begins, even if it may be exaggerated. That's what Bernard and Gauguin feel a little bit, they won't ask for the correct shape of a tree at all, but they absolutely insist that one says if the shape is round or square—and my word, they're right.³¹

What is translated as “feelings in the lines” really means that the lines are sensed like wind, and, accordingly, the lines need to be painted in a “windy” style.³² As T. J. Clark reminds us, “Modernism was materialist where it really counted. [...] its essence lay in the immediate sensation, and it operated under the most drastic possible reduction of the visual act.”³³ As I tried to demonstrate, this reduction is not a reduction of meaning to materiality; instead, we should understand Van Gogh's art as the attempt to make materiality, that is, painting, itself meaningful. Clark adds, “The stuff of painting was interesting only if it was recognized as the raw material for meaning—what we should call the signifier of some complex, intractable world. Matter was a moment of signification.”³⁴

Though a simple juxtaposition of art history and philosophy is certainly insufficient, my main argument against Heidegger's failure to understand the essence of Van Gogh's art forces me to agree with Schapiro's well-known comment that Heidegger projects his philosophical framework into Van Gogh's painting. Heidegger's comments on Van Gogh, Schapiro claims, “are grounded rather in his own social outlook with its heavy pathos of the primordial and earthy. He has indeed 'imagined everything and projected it into the painting.' He has experienced both too little and too much in his contact with the work.”³⁵ The same, I submit, is true for Jaspers.

NOTES

1. Timothy J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 130.
2. Vincent Van Gogh, *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*, ed. Nienke Bakker et al. (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2009). Accessed August 6, 2016. <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/Letter607>. Italics mine.
3. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–56.
4. Heidegger, “Origin of the Work,” 23.
5. Heidegger, “Origin of the Work,” 14.
6. Gregory Schufreider, “The Art of Truth,” *Research in Phenomenology* 40 (2010): 355.
7. For the magic relation between painting, vision, and flesh, see Georges Didl-Huberman, *Die leibhaftige Materie* (München: Fink, 2002). He points out that it had

long been the dream of painters to use colors as the “material substrate” of a surface since doing this is supposed to bring out the object itself in its “flesh-like” qualities. Dolce is supposed to have said about Titian that he used real flesh for his colors.

8. Heidegger, “Origin of the Work,” 24.
9. Heidegger, “Origin of the Work,” 24.
10. For example, Wagner characterizes very well Turner's famous painting *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844) as a “war with the material(s)” (*Materialschlacht*); for this, see Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst: Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne* (München: Beck, 2001), 188.
11. Schufreider, “Art of Truth,” 356.
12. On a more philosophical level, the status of materiality could be discussed in relation to Adorno and Gadamer, as Gadamer tends to overlook the negative aspect of the materiality of art, whereas for Adorno this is constitutive. Heidegger also underestimates the fact that the “earth” is a negative moment that “disturbs” the process of understanding. For this, see Christoph Menke, *Die Souveränität der Kunst: Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 36, 43.
13. Van Gogh, *The Letters*, Letter 779.
14. One commentator of an earlier draft of this essay remarked that the reference to “culture” might be misguided, given that Heidegger himself does not use the term and that the term “culture” is generally problematic. What I have in mind in using this term is the problem of how we can determine and speak of separate “worlds.” For example, in the art essay, Heidegger refers to “the” world of “a people” and “the” world of “the Greeks.” See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–56. As such, there is a way in which he assumes that there is such a thing as “one” world or, in my terms, “one” culture that makes everything “in” this world meaningful in the same way. Though I have some sympathy for Heidegger's claim, I am not sure whether we can go so far as to claim that “the” world of the Greeks shows up in “the” temple (especially since Heidegger clearly refers only to a specific temple). In reference to another example by Heidegger, it is doubtful whether the Heidelberg bridge and the *Schwarzwald Hof* to which Heidegger refers to in his essay on building and dwelling really bring out “the” world and the “Fourfold” in a manner that is what I call above “mega-frameworks.” See Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 152–58. It seems to me that Heidegger “experiments” most successfully with specific worlds in his interpretation of Trakl's poems. See Martin Heidegger, “Language,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 187–210. Moreover, the question of whether there are “paradigmatic” artists for paradigmatic worlds (such as Hölderlin) should also be asked. In this vein, one would need to ask whether there is only “one” artist for “one” world? Is Hölderlin the poet of the West or of Germany, or of all speakers of German? Is there a Hölderlin for Swahili? Finally, all of these questions tend to end up in questionable metaphysical distinctions that (initially) were meant to be “bracketed,” including the distinction between “the” West versus “the”

East, and so on. Similarly, the claim that "the" modern world is rendered visible in Van Gogh's art seems to be problematic, although, again, I would like to leave this question open.

15. Quoted in Debra Silverman, "At the Threshold of Symbolism: Van Gogh's *Sower* and Gauguin's *Vision after a Sermon*," in *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, ed. Mary Tompkins Lewis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 273.

16. Silverman, "At the Threshold," 277.

17. Karl Jaspers, *Strindberg und van Gogh: Versuch einer vergleichenden Pathogenese* (München: Piper, 2013), 146, 162.

18. Marlene Putscher, "Jaspers und van Gogh—Oder über Krankheit und Kunst," *Janus* 67/1 (1980): 162.

19. Jaspers, *Strindberg und van Gogh*, 165, 166. One commentator of an earlier draft of this essay remarked that Jaspers does not reduce Van Gogh's art to a subjective or psychological interpretation and that my take on Jaspers is reductive. As I mention above, Jaspers' take on Van Gogh is in many regards superior to Heidegger's "use" of the painter. However, what I want to claim in this essay is that Jaspers does not focus on the world projection that is implied in how the world comes out in the way in which the paintings are painted. The fact that Jaspers acknowledges Van Gogh's empiricism and the primacy of perception and seeing, that is, his attempt to overcome any kind of symbolic and mythic understanding of painting, differs from the question of how this "realism" comes about in and through materiality. For example, in his *Philosophy*, Jaspers refers to Van Gogh as an artist who finds transcendence through his realism, which is a claim with which I agree. See Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie*, vol. 3: *Metaphysik* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2008), 197. However, Jaspers does not deal with the constitution of this position in the painting *through painting*. Accordingly, against Jaspers, we might claim that Van Gogh does not find transcendence in reality; instead, he finds transcendence in his way of painting and in how he "finds" the world in paint. Put differently, for Van Gogh the world is steeped in paint and, as a consequence, I disagree with Jaspers' claim that, although true to our times, Van Gogh's painting is somehow "poorer" than paintings that refer to external transcendence. I do agree with the commentator that we should neither simply juxtapose Heidegger and Jaspers nor reduce Jaspers to a psychopathologist, especially given that Jaspers' thinking about art is more complex than it may seem from his famous essays on Strindberg and Van Gogh. See Karl Jaspers, *Strindberg und van Gogh: Versuch einer vergleichenden Pathogenese* (München: Piper, 2013).

20. William H. Robinson, "The Artist versus the Legend: Repetitions and Madness," *Van Gogh: Repetitions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 8.

21. See Fred Leeman, "Lignes senties—van Gogh in Diskussion mit Gauguin und Bernard in Arles und Saint-Remy," in *Van Gogh: Gezeichnete Bilder*, ed. Klaus Albrecht Schröder and Heinz Widauer (Köln: Dumont, 2006), 93.

22. Jaspers, *Strindberg und van Gogh*, 159.

23. For the principle of inner genesis in modern painting, see Max Imdahl, *Reflexion, Theorie, Methode, Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 303–81.

24. Van Gogh, *The Letters*, Letter 779.

25. Thanks are due to Monika Wagner whose reading of modern art through its relation to materials taught me much. See Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst*, 32.

26. Quoted in Silverman, "At the Threshold," 273.

27. Van Gogh, *The Letters*, Letter 298.

28. Klaus Albrecht Schröder, "Gezeichnete Bilder," in *Van Gogh: Gezeichnete Bilder*, ed. Klaus Albrecht Schröder and Heinz Widauer (Köln: Dumont, 2006), 13.

29. See Leeman, *Lignes senties*, 85.

30. Van Gogh, *The Letters*, Letter 607.

31. Van Gogh, *The Letters*, Letter 607.

32. One commentator on an earlier draft of this essay critically remarked that I am in danger of falling back into a hylomorphism and that Heidegger tries to overcome hylomorphism. Though this problem would require a longer response, let me respond for the sake of brevity in the following way: I would argue that neither Heidegger nor Jaspers (or for that matter, any philosopher) can simply "overcome" the dualities that we carry with us whenever we use metaphysical concepts. However, having said this, I see the task of phenomenology and hermeneutics in untangling what is contained in metaphysical distinctions. As such, at least in my mind, Heidegger does not operate beyond the form-matter distinction, but his phenomenological interpretation of art tries to reveal where this distinction emerges and comes from, that is, his distinction between earth and world seems to be based on the claim that we can trace back certain metaphysical distinctions (which, for him, lead to an instrumentalist conception of art) to a non-instrumentalist phenomenal "ground" of the distinction where the distinction itself no longer makes sense. Put differently, Heidegger tries to show that the metaphysical dualisms are a misinterpretation and covering up of the original phenomena and, as a consequence, ontology can be "corrected" by phenomenology. Similarly, Heidegger does not simply reject epistemology and the subject-object distinction in *Being and Time*; rather, he subjects these conceptions to a phenomenological analysis and shows that they are, if we take them to be the "primary" phenomena, misconceptions of ourselves and our being. Accordingly, I would argue that Heidegger does not "overcome" epistemology in *Being and Time*, as if he shows that epistemology is simply false; instead, he shows that any attempt to define ourselves epistemologically and to define access to our being epistemologically should be taken as a secondary approach to asking the question of what it means to be the entity that we are.

33. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 129.

34. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 129.

35. Meyer Schapiro, "The Still Life as a Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh," in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society, Selected Papers* (New York: Braziller, 2010), 138.

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Chapter 5

Pointure mal,

OR

If the Shoe Doesn't Fit . . .

K. Malcolm Richards

Jacques Derrida's "Restitutions de la vérité en peinture," the final essay in *La vérité en peinture*,¹ brings together, as a pair, Martin Heidegger's "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" and Meyer Schapiro's brief text, "The Still Life as a Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh," a relationship triangulated through a painting by the Dutch born artist Vincent van Gogh.² (See Figure 1.) The pairing of Heidegger and Schapiro is not unexpected, given that Heidegger's text is the pretext for Schapiro's text, yet Derrida's reading of these texts opens an array of questions pertinent to aesthetics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, art history, art criticism, and art. Given the complex and challenging quality of Heidegger's essay, the position of Schapiro in the history of art history, and Derrida's exhaustive, if for some exhausting, reading of their texts, I don't propose to exhaust the possibilities or suggest that they are exhausted, something requiring a great deal of space and time.

Rather, in the midst of this exhaust, I want to trace some of the broader lines of discussion that Derrida's text provides, in order to then situate three texts. The first text is Meyer Schapiro's "The Apples of Cézanne," a text that is intimately related to "The Still Life as a Personal Object," but one not considered by Derrida in his reading.³ The second and third texts are Derrida's "Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference (*Geschlecht I*)" and "Heidegger's Hand (*Geschlecht II*)," essays written shortly after "Restitutions," but whose topics are broached elliptically in some of the seemingly marginal passages of the earlier text.⁴ In tracing out these interconnections, I am not seeking to resolve the tensions between these texts and especially between the work of Derrida and Heidegger, but, instead to make these tensions more productive and conducive to a continued challenging of the fields impacted by their respective thought.

Van Gogh among the Philosophers

Painting, Thinking, Being

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David P. Nichols

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