

# What Philosophy Owes a Work of Art: Rethinking the Debate Between Heidegger and Schapiro

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There are not even clods of soil from the field or the field-path sticking to them, which would at least hint at their use. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more.

—Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*

In "The Still Life as a Personal Object: Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh," art historian Meyer Schapiro has argued that Heidegger's famous example of Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes was based on a crude misinterpretation of the painting which led Heidegger to an unfounded metaphysical conception of art. Since its publication in 1968, Schapiro's attack on Heidegger has become, principally because of the response by Jacques Derrida, a well known "episode" and a common point of reference for theory.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, keeping with Derrida's glib "Restitutions," this episode has never been discussed as genuinely relevant to the central questions of the contemporary debate.<sup>2</sup> Schapiro's criticism has had no impact on our understanding of the relation between philosophy and art history, on our understanding of Heidegger's philosophy of art, or on our ideas about the place of the visual in theory.<sup>3</sup> This is because the sheer historicism of Schapiro's note has rendered his text philosophically irrelevant. In other words, the facts that so concern the art historian are not especially important to philosophical reflection on art.

Consider a few examples. "I am not concerned with any art historical controversy about this painting," writes Flint Schier, after briefly referring to Schapiro's objection to Heidegger, "but rather, like Heidegger and Derrida, with a philosophical question. My question is this: what is the point or value of looking at Van Gogh's painting?"<sup>4</sup> This strict distinction between the program of the philosopher and that of the art historian is symptomatic of a general philosophical attitude toward the Schapiro-Heidegger polemic, one that views the possibility of an art historian transcending the boundaries of his or her discipline with suspicion and irony. Hence, for Robert Cummings, Schapiro's text exemplifies just "how ill-matched the art-historian and philosopher themselves are"; "They make an odd couple: there is so little correspondence between what Schapiro says about what Heidegger says about the shoes and what Heidegger himself says. I know of no other demonstration as effective as Derrida's of how awkward an art historian can be when he tries to put himself into the shoes of a philosopher."<sup>5</sup> From a

different perspective, W. J. T. Mitchell describes Schapiro's "notorious Note" as "one of the most depressing episodes in art history's continued failure to engage with theory and philosophy in the twentieth century." For Mitchell, whose own work, unlike that of Schier or Cummings, is motivated by a conviction that the history of art cannot do without a theoretical basis, Schapiro's response to Heidegger is "the clearest moment of ... [a] resistance to theory," testimony to the art historian's "unwillingness to engage in the theory and philosophy of art."<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I wish to show why Schapiro's critique is relevant to our understanding of Heidegger<sup>7</sup> and, in corollary fashion, why I think that the polemic between these two thinkers serves as an important case study for contemporary philosophical discourse on art. I shall begin with a re-examination of Schapiro's critique of Heidegger which I find, in the spirit of Mitchell's response, to be ultimately ineffective. Yet, in contrast to Mitchell, I would like to argue that the critique's apparent failure teaches us something important about the philosophical invulnerability that is characteristic of Heidegger's text and of his attitude toward the visual. Hence, the main part of this paper is devoted to a close reading of the manner in which the Van Gogh example functions in Heidegger's text. My aim is to show that the Heideggerian form of textuality leaves no room for the visual, and furthermore that Heidegger's discursive style promotes a predominant mode of theoretical reflection that subjects the visual to the textual. I shall thus try to explain why I find this mode of reflection to be ethically problematic.

### **Schapiro on Facts and Empty Concepts**

Among the few examples of specific works of art discussed by Heidegger in *OWA*, a Van Gogh painting of a pair of peasant shoes is central, and functions as a leitmotif in the Heideggerian text. The Van Gogh painting is first mentioned by Heidegger in passing, as part of an initial discussion of the "thingly character" of works of art. Hanging "on the wall like a rifle," shipped "from one exhibition to another ... like coal from the Ruhr and logs from the Black Forest," the Van Gogh painting serves Heidegger in clarifying the sense in which "works [of art] are naturally present as are things." The actual content of the painting only becomes significant for Heidegger when he seeks to clarify the notion of "equipmentality" or "instrumentality." For Heidegger the shoes in Van Gogh's painting are not only "a common sort of equipment" which illuminates the nature of equipmentality. They also provide an image that enables him to develop the thematics of "earth" and "world" that are so central to his text. Hence, in an important "moment" in *OWA*, Heidegger writes:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by the raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening rain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself arises to its resting-within-itself.

While first serving as means of elaborating the relation between "earth" and "world," the Van Gogh painting continues to figure again and again in Heidegger's general discussion of the artwork, eventually serving as the epitome of Heidegger's conception of art as the occurrence of truth. For Heidegger, "truth happens in the Van Gogh painting." "The reference to Van Gogh's picture" is an attempt "to point to this happening" and, "with regard to it," gives rise to "the question as to what truth is and how truth can happen" (*OWA*, 19, 34, 56, 41).

In his critique of Heidegger, however, Schapiro seems wholly uninterested in this agenda. What concerns Schapiro instead is the painting itself. Since Heidegger "does not identify the picture he has in mind," his argument seems, according to Schapiro, to depend on a reference that is too vague and obscure to make any real point. Yet as Schapiro culls additional details concerning the painting, his objection grows. According to Schapiro, the philosopher's exemplification process is inconsequential since the specific example he considers does not actually exist. Schapiro contends, and attempts to demonstrate, that Heidegger fails to identify the reference of the depicted shoes for the shoes Van Gogh painted are not artifacts of peasant life. They are, rather, the artist's own shoes—"the artist by that time a man of the town and the city"—and they carry a specific biographical significance. "Alas for him," Schapiro writes, "the philosopher has deceived himself."

[He] has retained from the encounter with Van Gogh's canvas a moving set of associations with peasants and the soil which are not sustained by the picture itself. They are grounded rather in his 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.<sup>8</sup>

Schapiro's criticism of Heidegger is in many respects symptomatic of his general suspicion of speculative thinking which, in his view, tends to lose sight of facts. In his discussion of Freud's interpretation of Leonardo, for example, Schapiro not only attacks Freud's neglect or misreading of this or that fact, but contends that specific factual errors became the basis of Freud's whole psychoanalytic interpretation of Leonardo and his work. Schapiro is clearly more favorably inclined toward Freud than he is to Heidegger. Yet, as in Heidegger's case, here too he rejects Freud's general conclusions because of their flawed factual basis. In a critical gesture similar to the one directed against Heidegger's reading of the Van Gogh painting, Schapiro bluntly dismisses Freud's reading of Leonardo's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, a painting in which Freud discerns "the form of a vulture in the blue robe of Mary." According to Schapiro, what allows Freud to see in Mary's robe the concealed manifestation of a vulture is nothing but Freud's own conviction that "the key to all of Leonardo's accomplishments and misfortunes lies hidden in the infantile fantasy about the vulture."<sup>9</sup> As Schapiro, following MacLagan, shows, this conviction is entirely unfounded since it is based on a mistranslation of the Italian word "nibbio" which does not conote a vulture, as Freud surmised, but rather a kite whose image—completely unconnected, as Freud claimed, to the Egyptian hieroglyph for "mother"—is central to Leonardo's writings on the problem of flight.

From a methodological perspective, this is the same response that Schapiro has to Heidegger's reflections on Van Gogh. If we focus, for example, on the manner in which Heidegger discerns "on the leather" of the shoes "the dampness and richness of the soil" and "under the soles ... the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls" (*OWA*, 34), we may understand why Schapiro argues that this kind of reading is an unfounded projection of an unjustified preconception regarding that which is actually shown in the painting. For Schapiro, however, Heidegger's misinterpretation of the painted image of the shoes is not simply a case of "a projection which replaces a close attention to the work of art." Heidegger's "mistake" is symptomatic of a kind of speculative discourse that remains empty because it cannot ground itself in the materiality of historical facts. Schapiro's criticism, in other words, is not just directed at Heidegger's carelessness with facts, but at Heidegger's theoretical method which seems to be a recipe for empty concepts. According to Schapiro, Heidegger is a philosopher whose

metaphysics is rooted in pathos rather than in fact. But can metaphysics ever be grounded in facts?

Once we examine the presuppositions that inform Schapiro's critique, it is clear that his disapproval of what he sees as Heidegger's speculative metaphysics is grounded in a positivistic, albeit Marxist, perspective. For Schapiro, in other words, Heidegger's text necessarily operates as one of two mutually exclusive possibilities: either Heidegger's philosophy is a scientific theory (whose concepts are legitimately formed and whose statements meet strict criteria of factual validity), or an expression of a pseudo-theory which, despite its "strong conviction," must ultimately be meaningless.<sup>10</sup>

But Schapiro is not only a positivistic critic of Heidegger. He is also, as Derrida shows in detail, a very poor reader of Heidegger's text. I find it particularly important for our purposes to note how Schapiro uncritically presumes that he understands Heidegger's theoretical project. In doing so, he proves to be blind to the ways Heidegger subverts the positivistic paradigm. Schapiro treats Heidegger as if he were a philosopher who simply fails to meet the positivist's criteria of meaning, whereas Heidegger is a thinker who explicitly labors to problematize the philosophical framework underlying these criteria. In other words, Schapiro reads Heidegger without recognizing that the point of his text was to open up a new possibility for reflection, a possibility both no longer governed by and providing an alternative to the positivistic conception of meaning and truth.<sup>11</sup>

Schapiro is consequently attentive neither to the nuances nor to the main argumentative line of the Heideggerian text, and he facilely and somewhat surprisingly paraphrases Heidegger in a way that reduces *OWA* to a set of statements that are either trivial or senseless. Furthermore, as we consider Schapiro's specific critique of Heidegger's use of the Van Gogh painting, we see that Schapiro is locked into a certain conception concerning the role of the painting for Heidegger. He views it as an example used to support a "theoretical idea" of "the metaphysical power of art," which, being factually flawed, "does not support that idea."<sup>12</sup>

Yet if Schapiro's critique is based on a misreading of Heidegger how could it be philosophically relevant to us? Or, more generally, what lesson is to be drawn from this encounter, or dispute, between the historian and the philosopher? In order to begin thinking about these questions, let us look more carefully at how Van Gogh's painting functions in *OWA*.

### **"A common sort of equipment—a pair of peasant shoes"**

Consider first the manner in which the Van Gogh example becomes relevant for Heidegger.

But what path leads to the equipmental quality of equipment? How shall we discover what a piece of equipment truly is? The procedure necessary at present must plainly avoid any attempts that again immediately entail the encroachment of the usual interpretations. We are most easily insured against this if we simply describe some equipment without any philosophical theory. We choose as an example a common sort of equipment—a pair of peasant shoes. We do not even need to exhibit actual pieces of this sort of useful article in order to describe them. Everyone is acquainted with them. But since it is a matter of direct description, it may be well to facilitate the visual realization of them. For this purpose a pictorial representation suffices. We shall choose a well-known painting by Van Gogh who painted such shoes several times.

For Heidegger, the problem of equipment has just emerged, and it is in this context that he turns to reflect on Van Gogh's painting. Equipmentality itself has become an issue for Heidegger in the course of a discussion of the "thingness of things," a discussion that critically connects three prevalent philosophical conceptions of thingness to a general thesis concerning the tradition's symptomatic patterns of avoidance. Hence, Heidegger not only argues that the predominant models for interpreting thingness "obstructed the way toward the thingly character of things," but also ties our inability to think the "thingly character of things" to the influence of equipmental thought in Western culture. In other words, according to Heidegger, the thing-concepts historically available to us—"the thing as a bearer of traits, as the unity of a manifold of sensations, [and] as formed matter" (*OWA*, 33, 31, 30)—are themselves rooted in a common prephilosophical attitude to things, one governed by the "usefulness" or the "functionality," or by the equipmental character, of our everyday situatedness.

As he turns to explicate his understanding of "equipment" and "equipmentality," however, Heidegger immediately focuses his attention on one specific "example of a common sort of equipment—a pair of peasant shoes," and then on the shoes' "visual realization" in a "well known painting by Van Gogh." Heidegger's decision to unpack the theme of equipmentality via a discussion of a specific example seems to be tied to his explicit conviction that the notion of "equipment" requires a distinctive form of elaboration that avoids "the encroachments of the usual interpretations" by committing itself to a "direct description"—"without philosophical theory."

If we take into account Heidegger's discussion of equipment in *Being and Time*, we may say that the need to avoid standard philosophical language is dictated in *OWA* by the very nature of equipment. In *Being and Time*, the structure of equipment comes to the fore in an attempt to commit thought

to a fundamental dimension of our everydayness that does not reveal itself to a theoretical kind of reflection governed by "objective" categories. That is, in *Being and Time* the philosophical encounter with the equipmental character of our everyday situation goes hand in hand with an opening of a pre-thematic, non-objective domain of meaning, i.e., a world, an opening which in turn is made possible by the rejection and the abandonment of a theoretical starting point which remains external to the lived situation. Hence, while showing how the basic unit of "objective reflection"—the theoretical, person-independent, "object"—distorts the primary meaningfulness of things, Heidegger underscores the need to explicate the ontological status of everyday things which are meaningful not in themselves as fully constituted objects, but because of the place they occupy within the domain of human concern.

According to Heidegger, "[t]he Greeks had an appropriate term for 'Things': *pragmata*, that is to say, that which one has to do with in one's concerned dealings (*praxis*). Yet while "the specifically 'pragmatic' character of *pragmata* is just what the Greeks left in obscurity," Heidegger coins the term "equipment" (*das Zeug*). In using this term, Heidegger makes a gesture toward opening a path for thinking that would circumvent the traditional space of thought dominated by the philosophical notion of an "object." In other words, he suggests a language that would grant "access to the entities which we encounter," while "thrusting aside our interpretative tendencies ... which conceal not only the phenomenon of such 'concern,' but even more those entities themselves *as* encountered of their own accord *in* our concern with them."<sup>13</sup>

In Heidegger's analysis of the equipmental character of equipment, two essential features stand out as relevant to our discussion: (a) "Equipment is essentially 'something in-order-to ...'" which implies that "equipment—in accordance with its equipmentality—always is in terms of its belonging to other equipment." Hence, due to their functional structure, the entities we encounter in our everyday environment are always already caught in a relation of reference to other entities, and in this respect their meaning is never self-contained. The hammer appears as a hammer only in its relation to the nails that it can hammer, and nails in turn are what they are only against a horizon of things such as walls or paintings hanging on walls by the use of nails, etc. The setting of equipment within such relational structures is developed further, however, in the claim that (b) "to the Being of any equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be the equipment that it is." That is, the other side of the intrinsic referential structure of equipment is that the meaning and individuation of equipment is necessarily dependent on an infrastructure of an equipmental totality taking the form of a regulative differential matrix. In other words, the

specific "location" of a piece of equipment within the larger equipmental space of differences is what enables the piece to become meaningful as it does. The hammer, for example, becomes meaningful through the place it occupies in the complex netting of differential relations between such things as handles, knobs, sticks, rods, nails, screws, walls, beams, pliers, gloves of a certain sort—e.g., workmen's gloves, elegant leather gloves, lace gloves—toolboxes—as opposed to jewelry boxes, music boxes—and then cupboards, cabinets, etc. This analysis of equipment, with the implications it carries for a critique of the traditional notions of "essence" and "substance," is dependent on Heidegger's move away from a disengaged, "objective," even Cartesian, perspective toward a mode of philosophical reflection that situates itself within the domain of practical everydayness. Yet whereas the return to the ordinary is necessary for the disclosure of equipmentality, it is in itself clearly insufficient. The disclosure of our being-in-the-world as the originary site of meaning does not take the form of a simple return to the ordinary, nor does it suppose that the structure of the ordinary is simple. More specifically, our immersion in the world is not only the key for understanding the structure of equipmentality but, according to Heidegger, it is also what prevents us from recognizing the full scope and significance of our engagement with equipment. Thus, whereas "equipment can genuinely show itself only in dealings cut to its own measure (hammering with a hammer, for example)," such dealing cannot make "the equipment-structure known as such even in the using. The hammering does not simply have knowledge about the hammer's character as equipment."<sup>14</sup> In particular, it does not allow its user to see that the global condition of equipmentality is a manifestation of what Heidegger understands to be "the dictatorship of the *they*," in which equipmentality marks a place of captivity, an inevitable form of self-alienation or inauthenticity.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, the disengaged thinker and the man immersed in everyday reality are, in differing ways, both distanced from, or blind to, the meaning of equipment. The theoretician is blind to the primary forms of the meaningfulness of everyday entities, while the man submerged in the quotidian cannot see his imprisonment within the matrix of equipmentality. Analogously, we may also say that the meaning of equipment elides both the traditional metaphysician and the pragmatist.<sup>16</sup>

This short discussion of equipmentality should allow us to return to *OWA* and reexamine how the example of the Van Gogh painting serves Heidegger. We have already noticed that in *OWA* Heidegger insists on opening the question of equipment by "simply describ[ing] some equipment without any philosophical theory." This methodological decision can be understood now as a precautionary measure against "the encroachments of the usual interpretations" or, in other words, a manner of avoiding the objectification of



the actual presence of equipment as ready-to-hand. Yet as Heidegger turns to consider an actual example of a "common sort of equipment—a pair of peasant shoes," he immediately and somewhat surprisingly gives up the intention of describing "actual pieces of this sort of useful article," and proposes instead "to facilitate the visual realization of them." It is in this manner that Van Gogh's painting becomes relevant to the discussion.

But why does Heidegger forgo the description of actual shoes? We may be tempted at first to understand his suggestion to "facilitate a visual realization of them" as a call for a more immediate encounter with the concreteness of the shoes, as an attempt to embrace the visibility of the shoes in a non-thematic manner by momentarily suspending the language of description. That is, we may want to see in Heidegger's suggestion a phenomenological gesture that resists reducing the visual to the textual. However, this is clearly not what concerns Heidegger who, having no intention of presenting (supplementing his text with) an actual "visual realization" of equipment, proceeds to describe an unspecified painting of shoes by Van Gogh.

Why does Heidegger ultimately prefer to rely on a description of a pictorial, even artistic, representation of equipment rather than a "direct description" of actual shoes? Our discussion of equipmentality already provides us with a clue. As suggested, a direct description of equipment (as ready-to-hand) is necessary because it provides access to a domain of meaning that is no longer governed by the concept of "the thing" which has predominated in the Western philosophical tradition. Yet the very commitment of such a description to the embeddedness of equipment in its context of use would not allow a presentation of the general meaning of equipmentality. That is, the rule of equipment does not manifest itself to those who are absorbed in the use of equipment. Still, how can we encounter the meaning of equipmentality? Where does the equipmentality of equipment genuinely show itself? As readers of *OWA*, we know where the analysis of the Van Gogh painting finally leads: to the conclusion that by "bringing ourselves before Van Gogh's painting," "the equipmental quality of equipment was discovered." In other words, "the equipmentality of equipment first genuinely arrives at its appearance through the work and only in the work" (*OWA*, 35, 36).

Without opening the important question of how the work of art becomes a locus of disclosure, we can already see why Heidegger makes the deliberate move from actual to painted shoes. Heidegger turns to an example of a work of art since he needs an example of a work of art. That is, because he understands art, in this context, as a comparative, external pole of reference necessary for the explication, or the self-presentation, of equipmentality. Indeed, as Heidegger turns to describe shoes in a painting

he does so by contrasting their appearance to the appearance of actual peasant shoes in their context of use. The presence of the painted shoes—empty, unused, placed in an indefinite space, separated from the “earth” on which they supposedly walk, suspended from ordinary usefulness, “dislocated”—manifests itself in a manner that is radically different from the ordinary appearance of useful things. Thus, for Heidegger, it is precisely through the tension that emerges between these two forms of presence, between these two modes of signification, that the truth of equipment opens up for us.

Yet while Heidegger’s shift to a discussion of Van Gogh’s painting is necessitated by his unique understanding of the workings of the work of art, there is no notice of this understanding when the Van Gogh example is introduced. (Explication of the relation between equipmentality and the work of art comes only after the fact, and is presented as the result of the discussion.) Moreover, as we look more carefully at the rhetorical gesture by which Heidegger turns to the example, we are struck by a somewhat peculiar formulation. Consider again Heidegger’s introduction of the painting: “For this purpose a pictorial representation suffices. We shall choose a well-known painting by Van Gogh who painted such shoes several times.” Following Schapiro, we may underscore the tension here between the reference to a “well known painting by Van Gogh” and the fact that “Van Gogh ... painted such shoes several times.” In other words, we should note that the reference to what at first seems to be an actual, distinctive painting is in fact no more than a vague gesture toward a field of possible artworks. What I find even more puzzling, however, is Heidegger’s choice of the word *genugt*—“suffices” or “enough”—in introducing his shift to “a pictorial representation.” It is striking that Heidegger chose to present the turn to “a pictorial representation” as simply “sufficing” for the desired encounter with equipment.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Heidegger’s phrasing would not have caught our attention in different circumstances, but once we agree that a pictorial representation is necessary for developing the Heideggerian line of argument, the peculiarity of this phrasing becomes apparent. Why is Heidegger speaking of what is necessary for his argument in terms of that which suffices?

Is this conflation of the necessary and the sufficient significant? Consider a person who is in need of a new pair of shoes. Suppose that he needs the shoes because he lost or ruined those he had, and because he wants to participate in some public occasion that necessitates shoes. Would it not sound awkward if this person accounted for his need by saying “for this purpose, a new pair of shoes suffices?” It seems that in using the sentence “for my purpose, x suffices” in place of the more adequate “I am in need of x,” one is essentially effacing one’s condition of being dependent on x,

of being constrained by the lack of *x*. Similarly, I think that Heidegger's phrasing betrays a particular attitude toward—a denial of—the role and status of the pictorial example he employs. To be more specific, in obscuring the fact that the pictorial example is crucial for his thinking, Heidegger levels the complex reciprocal relation of example and philosophical argument, and forces this complexity into a simple instrumental hierarchy according to which examples are mere illustrations—expendable, always subsidiary—for a self-sufficient, self-generating line of philosophical thought.

The manner in which Heidegger slights the significance of his example is in many respects symptomatic of the style of thinking developed in *OWA* and is tied to what Schapiro sees as Heidegger's misidentification, misrepresentation, or perhaps even false presentation, of the shoes in Van Gogh's painting. This is perhaps the time to return to Schapiro's criticism.

### **Van Gogh's Shoes: The Visual and the Textual**

How is it (or is it at all) relevant for the philosopher that the shoes in Van Gogh's painting, the shoes Van Gogh decided to paint, are not the shoes of a peasant woman? Does the irrelevance of that detail have any philosophical relevance here? According to Schapiro, Heidegger's failure in identifying the shoes provokes a misinterpretation of the painting (that is, an interpretation not based on the facts) and ultimately leads to an unjustified conception of the artwork. Nevertheless, "does Schapiro believe," as W. J. T. Mitchell asks, "that Heidegger's 'error' about Van Gogh's shoes invalidates his more general philosophical arguments about the nature of art?"<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it has been contended that despite the correctness of Schapiro's factual point, this does not affect Heidegger's argument as crucially as the former imagines. More specifically, the Heideggerian line of argument cannot be undermined by the factual identity of the shoes since the identity of the shoes is not crucial to what Heidegger wants to say.

This seems to be clearly demonstrated once we notice that the Van Gogh example is essentially replaceable. Heidegger could have accommodated Schapiro's alternative description of the shoes without losing the crux of his argument. At the cost of slightly altering his rhetoric, Heidegger would have no problem developing his line of thought using an example of a painting that depicted the painter's city shoes. On the other hand, had he wanted to retain the image of the peasantry, Heidegger could have also reestablished his argument with a more proper example, a painting by Van Gogh or by a different painter that actually depicts a pair of peasant shoes.

One may go further and claim that Schapiro's criticism does not, and cannot, undermine Heidegger's argument because the painting in its specificity does not really matter to Heidegger's case. The Van Gogh

example functions in calling to mind our more general, or generic, experience as viewers of art, and since the disclosure of the truth of equipment depends on turning from one's ordinary view of things to an experience of looking at pictures of a certain sort (e.g., paintings depicting day-to-day objects), all that is needed is an example that brings about, or carries within itself, the proper analogical contexts: tension between the ordinary object and its visual representation which opens a new vantage point for seeing the equipmental dimension of our human situatedness.

If this is how we wish to understand the role of Van Gogh's painting, we also need to acknowledge that its role for Heidegger is completely heuristic, that Heidegger uses the artwork without any concern for it in and of itself. Is this what drives Schapiro's determinate insistence on the priority of facts? To put it differently, Heidegger is ultimately not interested in a careful attendance to art that would open for us the possibility of disclosure, but rather in our prototypical, even banal, ways of engaging art in order to disclose equipmentality. This implies, however, that despite the rhetoric of liberating art from its traditionally subordinate role, art's ascension to an apparently new status in *OWA* is only made possible in the instrumental form of "in-order-to." That is, it exists only in the form of a service. A service to whom? To philosophy. In other words, we should notice that Heidegger's attitude toward the thing *as* art is based on a form of blindness that is analogous to the one he criticizes. Just as one seems so lost in the context of the equipment one uses that it is not seen as equipment, Heidegger's philosophy of art, on a different but analogous level of preoccupation, promotes a kind of absorption that obscures the singular presence of the thing as art. Allow me, however, to approach the significance of this philosophical blindness from a slightly different perspective.

Having described the standard line of defense against Schapiro's criticism, we can see why a specific factual inaccuracy is not really destructive of Heidegger's argument. However, we are now also in a position to understand that what is problematic in Heidegger's treatment of Van Gogh is not the destructive threat of the actual facts, but rather the inability of the facts to matter at all. Heidegger's conception of the artwork is disconcerting not because of the implications, the refutation potential, of certain factual evidence. It is disconcerting because Heidegger's indifference toward the visually concrete carries absolutely no implications for the validity of his thinking. Hence, the philosophical relevance of Schapiro's criticism does not lie in its ability to expose the vulnerability of Heidegger's thinking, but paradoxically its invulnerability. In other words, Schapiro's criticism becomes philosophically significant when it allows us to see that Heidegger's thinking remains completely unaffected by, and is immune to, the pleas of the examples it employs. Because we are dealing here with a specifically

visual example, we may also say that Heidegger's text exempts itself both from the burden of its own examples and, more generally, from any responsibility toward the concreteness of the visual.

Heidegger's treatment of Van Gogh's painting is not the case of a philosopher who has made a simple perceptual mistake, or who misidentified or misinterpreted what he saw in a painting. Heidegger, rather, is a philosopher who takes for granted that what appears in a painting conforms to what he thinks of the painting. He is a philosopher whose factual error is the outcome, and in this sense a symptom, of a philosophical indifference toward the claims of the visual. This indifference, or neglectfulness, should be understood within the general context of Heidegger's bias against the visual, one that finds its clearest expression already in *Being and Time's* conceptualization of sight as a superficial aspect of our being, as one of the characteristic features of our fallenness, or inauthentic existence.<sup>19</sup>

In the context of *OWA*, however, it is important to note the connection between Heidegger's predisposition toward the visual and the philosophical text he writes, or the kind of textuality within which he expresses himself. For Heidegger, the appearance of the visual is not in itself an origin of meaning toward which the text must make an effort to turn, reach out, or break open. On the contrary, for Heidegger, the particularity of the visual—its unique presence as something that is seen—has no significance beyond what already belongs to the domain of the text. In Heidegger's text, in other words, the visual is allowed to appear only in the form of meanings that language already inhabits, meanings that are in principle already to be found within the space of the text. The reconstruction of the visual in *OWA* is carried out without leaving any trace of resistance, residue, or difference. For Heidegger, a verbal description of the painting indeed suffices, and it suffices in the sense that nothing more is needed—that the text in itself is complete enough (*genugt*)—for a meaningful engagement with the painting's visuality. It is unsurprising, then, that Heidegger sees no need for providing a specific reference to, or even a reproduction of, the painting that ostensibly concerns him. Yet what is missing in Heidegger's text is not a specific pictorial supplement, a visual aid, but a form of sensitivity (or is it a sensibility?) without which philosophy cannot meet the visual. In other words, Heidegger's error is, in my view, a cause for concern because it is a symptom of a philosophy, or of a form of reflection, that engages with, and attempts to think about, the visual without actually looking.

Here we have arrived at the questions that lie at the heart of this discussion: Why is it important for a philosophical text such as Heidegger's to be open to the visual? In what would such an openness consist? What would it mean for a philosophy of art, or for a philosophical text concerning art, to sustain the possibility of looking? These questions are particularly

relevant for contemporary discourse on art which, taking place as it now does within the parameters of postmodernism, often suffers from the kind of structural oversight, visual insensitivity, apathy, or reluctance to look that characterizes Heidegger's treatment of Van Gogh's painting.

These questions are ultimately tied to another question: What do we as philosophers, what does philosophy, owe the work of art? Formulating the matter in this way implies a certain commitment in philosophy's attempt to reflect on art. Indeed, I understand this commitment to be primarily an ethical one, ethical in the sense that philosophy is responsible for the forms that its engagement with art takes. Philosophy can treat the artwork as a mere illustration for a given theoretical position, or it can approach the work of art as a genuine, or primary, form of meaningfulness. It can speak about the artwork (e.g., as an object), but it can also speak to, or with, the work of art (e.g., as a participant in a dialogue). The choices are there to be made. I am not suggesting that there is one proper way to relate philosophically to an artwork, nor that there is an a priori basis for determining the ethical dimension of the philosophical encounter with art. On the contrary, I think that the field of possibilities open for philosophy here is wide, variegated, and dynamic, and that the choices are not mutually exclusive, but rather always dependent on context. At the same time, however, I do think that there are philosophical forms of thinking and writing, such as Heidegger's later work, whose approach to art is ethically problematic.

### **"This painting spoke": The Visual, the Textual, and the Ethical**

I have sought to read Schapiro's critique of Heidegger in a manner that allows us to see the sense in which Heidegger's factual error is symptomatic of an ethical failure. At the beginning of the paper I emphasized the positivistic outlook informing Schapiro's critique. Moreover, we have seen that his preoccupation with the factualness of the painting's reference prevents Schapiro from understanding Heidegger's view on the essence of the artwork. We may go farther and say that Schapiro's own interpretation of the painting remains reductive and unsatisfying since it is dominated by the facts of Van Gogh's biography. In turning to consider Heidegger's use of the Van Gogh example, however, I argued that Schapiro's "complaint" cannot be so easily brushed aside, despite its apparent irrelevance. This "complaint" continues to echo even after we acknowledge that it can do no real philosophical damage to Heidegger's argument. By not so easily dismissing Schapiro's voice, we have thus made room for another, perhaps less obvious, motivation of his critique. That is, we are in a position to consider that Schapiro might be responding so aggressively to Heidegger's error not only because it violates, as Mitchell thinks, the scientific standards

to which Schapiro is intellectually committed, and not only because it triggers his hidden, or repressed, political agenda (which Derrida emphasizes), but rather because he identifies in Heidegger's neglect of the facts an expression of an attitude toward art that he finds unacceptable: a repudiation of the painting's entitlement to be considered as an end in and of itself. Our language, it seems, has become momentarily Kantian, and we may indeed continue with Kant and say that Schapiro views Heidegger as a philosopher who does not respect the work of art. In other words, Heidegger is a philosopher whose disrespect toward the artwork is epitomized in his failure to treat the painting as "an object of respect," as an object that deserves to be treated as an end in itself.

To readers of *OWA*, and of Heidegger's later writings more generally, the charge of disrespect may seem at first to be completely incompatible with Heidegger's understanding of the nature and task of genuine philosophical thinking. Indeed, Heidegger's explicit prioritization of a mode of thinking that does not reify the objects of its inquiry but instead aims to disclose their being seems to match the philosophical demand of responding to the artwork in and of itself. Is this not exactly what Heidegger does in his discussion of the Van Gogh painting as the locus (the happening) of truth? How else can we understand Heidegger's preoccupation with the possibility of allowing the painting to open up and hold forth "the simple 'factum est'"? (*OWA*, 35, 65).

Heidegger's philosophical principle of "letting be" issues from a deep understanding of the need to overcome the structural condition or the predicament of abstract thought. For Heidegger, abstract thought cannot open up to what it posits as its object without eliding it as a thing. In this context the possibility of letting the thing be is the mark of an original mode of thinking that succeeded in releasing itself from this pathology: a mode of thinking that liberates itself in setting free the being of that which it encounters. Heidegger understands the encounter—his own philosophical encounter—with Van Gogh's painting in this manner. The painting offers itself only to the kind of thinking whose openness is not based on appropriation. The encounter with this kind of thinking (e.g., Heidegger's own thinking) allows the painting to open up as it never could or did under the reign of traditional propositional thinking. The painting has been allowed to speak and, as Heidegger tells us, "this painting spoke" (*OWA*, 35).

I would endorse Heidegger's call for a thinking that is no longer dominated by the propositional form and whose *modus operandi* is disclosure rather than representation. The gesture of opening for the artwork the possibility of its own communicability is in itself philosophically appealing, and this is at least in part because of the manner in which it binds together the themes of truth and freedom. At the same time, the Heideggerian

rhetoric of "letting be" creates a dangerous philosophical pitfall, one that is hard to resist and into which I believe Heidegger ultimately stumbles.

In the philosopher's text Van Gogh's painting assumes its own power to speak. "This painting spoke." Where? In a philosopher's text. From a slightly different perspective, it is the philosophical text that functions here as the grounds for the self-disclosure of the work of art. Moreover, as we consider what is presupposed in the framing of the painting's speech, we see that it indeed relies on a particular, a pre-given, understanding of the painting's conditions of speech. According to this understanding, the painting is essentially a mute object whose communicability depends on those singular moments of oracular grace which are inspired by the guidance of the philosopher.<sup>20</sup> What may thus easily hide in the gesture of emancipating the painting's speech is a patronizing attitude that imposes on the communicability of the painting the confines of a philosophical event. To put this differently, we may say that the philosophical setting that supposedly allows the painting to speak does not make room for the ways in which the painting is always already in the midst of speaking. That is, when the philosophical gesture of emancipation becomes the center of the encounter with a painting it typically turns a blind eye to the primacy of the painting's speech, to the unique status of the painting as the ultimate origin of its own speech. This gesture typically suppresses the genuine otherness of the painting's speech, effacing the possibility of a speech that is not born, and does not necessarily develop, within the space of philosophy.

What I am suggesting is that Heidegger's thematics of "letting be" is anchored in an attitude toward philosophy that totalizes the space, or the affect, of thought. In presupposing such a totality of thinking, Heidegger is consequently closed to forms of intelligibility whose origin is not at bottom philosophical. This means that he can only engage with meanings or forms of presence that are already a part of and assimilated into his space of discourse. More specifically, I believe that Heidegger's textuality—characterized by its affect of totality, its forgetfulness of its limitations, and even of the fact that it has limits—prevents the possibility of philosophically encountering Van Gogh's painting on the basis of a dialogue or a conversation. This would be a conversation between two forms of speech or meaningfulness, the textual and the visual, that are truly different, that do not share the same origin, and that do not necessarily coincide. To say this is close to saying what has already been suggested: that Heidegger's later thinking makes no room for looking.

We are now in a better position to understand the relationship between Heidegger's "mistake," his attitude toward the visual, and the problematic ethical side of his textual framework. Heidegger's factual error is symptomatic of a philosophy that cannot sustain the possibility of looking. In this



context, the possibility of looking implies an openness to the claims of a fundamental, non-philosophical—contingent, rich, and heterogeneous—dimension of meaning that philosophy cannot generate from within itself and cannot possess. Looking is the mark of philosophy's inability to possess the visual. It may also, however, signal a recognition by philosophy of a commitment to what it cannot own, to what always remains its other. From another perspective, responsiveness to the visual is an important philosophical measure for resisting the ideal of a self-sufficient, all-encompassing form of textuality. That is, looking helps us to resist the allure of a thinking that fully sustains itself from within. I have suggested that this measure is necessary for a philosophy that acknowledges its ethical commitment to the work of art.

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## Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). Hereafter cited internally as *OWA*. Meyer Schapiro, "The Still Life as a Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh," in *Selected Papers, Vol. IV: Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994). Jacques Derrida, "Restitutions," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). I wish to thank Jeffrey Barash, Vered Lev Kenaan, and Ariel Meirav for their illuminating comments on this paper.

2. For Derrida, the lesson of the dispute between the two thinkers is completely negative. Focusing on the senses in which Schapiro's critique of Heidegger reproduces Heidegger's misuse of Van Gogh's painting, Derrida mocks the very attempt to identify a referent for Van Gogh's painting, and moves to deconstruct the "pair-image" that dominates both readings of Van Gogh. According to Derrida, the conceptualization of the shoes as a pair only testifies to the fact that both thinkers are still caught in a metaphysical picture of the subject.

3. In his influential *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredrick Jameson discusses "Van Gogh's well known painting of peasant shoes," which he takes to be "one of the canonical works of high modernism in visual arts." Underlying Jameson's discussion of the painting, however, is the presupposition that "peasant shoes" are indeed the subject of Van Gogh's painting. Using Heidegger's identification of the painting's subject, Jameson takes its validity for granted, while failing to mention that

this identification is directly borrowed from Heidegger, and that it has been contested by Schapiro.

4. Flint Schier, "Van Gogh's Boots: The Claims of Representation," in *Virtue and Taste: Essays on Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. D. Knowles and J. Skorupski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 189.

5. Robert Denoon Cumming, "The Odd Couple: Heidegger and Derrida," *Review of Metaphysics*, vol xxxiv, no.135, (1981), 492.

6. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Schapiro's Legacy," *Art in America*, 83 (April 1995), 29.

7. Among the variety of responses to Schapiro's "Note," Bary Schwabsky's "Resistances: Meyer Schapiro's Theory and Philosophy of Art" stands out as exceptional in its attempt to examine, rather than take for granted, the consequences that Schapiro's criticism carry for our understanding of Heidegger. Schwabsky reads Schapiro's critique of Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh as analogous to Paul de Man's criticism of Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin. According to Schwabsky, the analogy between the very different texts of Schapiro and De Man illuminates yet another aspect of what may be understood as a general Heideggerian "map of misreading." More specifically, it allows us to connect Schapiro's criticism to a fundamental problem in Heidegger's attitude toward art. See, Bary Schwabsky, "Resistances: Meyer Schapiro's Theory and Philosophy of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 55, no. 1 (Winter, 1997).

8. Meyer Schapiro, "Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh," 136, 138, 138.

9. Schapiro, "Freud and Leonardo: An Art Historical Study" in *Selected Papers, Vol. IV: Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 187, 156, 156, 159.

10. In this context, it may be illuminating to read Schapiro's criticism together with another famous positivistic critique of Heidegger—namely, Rudolf Carnap's "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: The Free Press, 1959). For Carnap, Heidegger is the clearest representative of "metaphysicians of the present or the past" whose "questions and answers are irreconcilable with logic and the scientific way of thinking" (72), and whose work is ultimately meaningless since it violates the basic rules of logical syntax. According to Carnap, a meaningful discourse is dependent on the stipulation of clear criteria for the application of its words, and "if no criterion of application for the word is stipulated, then nothing is asserted

by sentences in which it occurs, they are but pseudo-statements" (61). This is, in his view, the case with the domain of metaphysics in which "logical analysis yields the negative result that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless" (64).

11. The disagreement between Schapiro and Heidegger cuts deeper than the question of the identity of the shoes; it pertains to the foundations of the theoretical practice of these two thinkers.

12. Schapiro, "Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh," 135, 139.

13. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 97, 97.

14. Ibid., 97, 97, 98.

15. To put this differently, we may underscore the change in direction that occurs in Heidegger's analysis of worldhood in *Being and Time*. Hence, while the analysis in sections 12–26 develops as a description of Dasein's actual "home," a further examination of this "home" (beginning in section 27) shows that its structure does not permit Dasein to be true to itself, or one with itself, that it necessarily forces Dasein to lose itself.

16. This point is crucial in objecting to "pragmatic" readings of Heidegger, or more specifically, to interpretations attempting to isolate a pragmatic dimension in Heidegger's work. See, for example, Robert Brandom, "Heidegger's Categories in *Being and Time*," in H. L. Dreyfus and H. Hall, eds. *Heidegger: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

17. "Für diese Nachhilfe genügt eine bildliche Darstellung," in "Das Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 18.

18. Mitchell, "Schapiro's Legacy," 29.

19. The question of the place of the visual in *Being and Time* requires a separate discussion which I cannot develop here. For a discussion of Heidegger's "hostility" toward the visual, see Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 263–75. For an interesting critique of Heidegger's analysis of curiosity—intrinsically associated with sight—see Karsten Harries, "Truth and Freedom," in *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, vol. 18 (Washington: Catholic University of America

Press, 1981).

20. For a discussion of Heidegger's misuse of his philosophical authority in his treatment of poetry, in particular in his choice of Hölderlin as his hero, see Karsten Harries, "The Root of All Evil: Lessons of an Epigram," *The International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol.1, no.1 (March 1993).

