

Beyond Claims of Truth

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ARTICLE INFO

Available Online January 2014

Key words:

Truth;

reality;

fact

ABSTRACT

Pursuing the truth, the virtue and the beauty is the supreme realm of art, and it has become a general concept deeply rooted in our mind. However, is the truth that art pursues a fact that is faithful to actuality, a reality that is existent, or a truth that is logical and thus widely accepted by the general public? Heidegger, a German philosopher, intended to examine the truth of art through "A pair of Shoes", a master piece of Van Gogh, in his paper "The Origin of Work of Art". Nevertheless, Heidegger's point was challenged by an American art historian --Schapiro. Schapiro criticized that Heidegger had misjudged a pair of Van Gogh's own shoes as a peasant woman's. Schapiro's criticism drew French philosopher Derrida into the debate. In his article "The Truth in Painting", Derrida presented his layer-by-layer deconstruction of Heidegger's and Schapiro's blind pots in their argumentation on the truth of art, using his renowned technique for word games; at the same time, his thinking mode became instantly a target for deconstruction when he tried to turn the tangled concepts into clear distinct words. In this article, we aim to explore statements regarding the "truth" of art in aesthetics theories through the debates among Schapiro, Heidegger and Derrida. We wish to seek a new position for "truth" in art and investigate its significance to art, especially to visual art.

Preface

In his book *This Is Not a Pipe* (1983), Foucault points out two principles that have ruled Western painting. The first concerns the divorce between visual resemblance and linguistic reference (p. 32). The second is related to the concept of the representational theory of art. He claims:

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The second principle that long rules painting posits an equivalence between the fact of resemblance and the affirmation of a representative bond. Let a figure resemble an object (or some other figure), and that alone is enough for there to slip into the pure play of the painting a statement... "What you see is *that*." No matter, again, in what sense the representative relation is posed... (p. 34).

The title of this book derives from surrealist painter René Magritte's famous work, *Ceçin'est pas une pipe*, in which Magritte employs the image of a pipe, combined with a note "This is not a pipe," to challenge visual representation itself. Foucault argues that from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, people have been falsely positioned within an overwhelming notion of linking visual representation with reality.

The earliest version of Foucault's *This Is Not a Pipe* was published in 1968. That same year Schapiro presented an essay to criticize Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of Work of Art," wherein Heidegger discusses the truth in the work of art through van Gogh's painting, *A Pair of Shoes*. Schapiro's argument, along with Jacques Derrida's later commentary, was entangled with the ontological debates of visual art, especially on the query between Heidegger's central topic of the essence of Beings and Schapiro's conventional notion of representational art criticism. My essay will retrace this event and explore their crucial contentions in the argument, so as to discuss the radical issue of the essence of art.

An Overview and Comments on The Arguments About Van Gogh's *Shoes* Painting

By using an orthodox, meticulous biographical approach, Schapiro attempts to verify that the shoes in van Gogh's painting were owned by the painter himself and do not, as Heidegger asserts, belong to a peasant woman. If one only reads Schapiro's essay, one might feel sorry for Heidegger and query why he, who, as Derrida (1987) notes, "was always very severe on this conceptualism" (p. 309), would make this mistake. But if we read through Heidegger's full text, we will find that the ownership of the shoes is not Heidegger's concern. Schapiro doesn't hit the key point. Then, in "Restitution of the Truth in Pointing ['Pointure']," Derrida shows up, uses his magic language to deconstruct van Gogh's painting, restitutes Schapiro's credulity and Heidegger's naivete, but leaves us with a suspending question: what is the truth of art?

In "The Still Life as a Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh" written in 1968, Schapiro is successful in employing the method of biography to explore the reality of van Gogh's painting. The biographical approach assumes a direct connection between artist and works and it relies on texts

concerning the artist's life (Adams, 1996, p. 101). Following this principle, Schapiro first writes to Heidegger to confirm the exact painting to which he refers in "The Origin of the Work of Art." After excluding van Gogh's other similar but unfitted works, Schapiro illustrates the most likely one in his essay. Then he quotes Gauguin, who shared van Gogh's dwelling in Arles in 1888. In Gauguin's reminiscences, van Gogh explains that the shoes he painted are a relic, the memory of a long trip from Holland to Belgium when he left his family. Schapiro (1968) maintains that "Gauguin's story confirms the essential fact that for van Gogh the shoes were a piece of his own life" (p. 431). As an art historian, Schapiro seems displeased with Heidegger's encroachment on art. He reproaches: "Alas for him, the philosopher has indeed deceived himself" (p. 429).

Twenty-six years later in another essay, "Further Notes on Heidegger and van Gogh," Schapiro (1994) explores additional literature to support his first essay. He adds iconographic analyses to his interpretation of van Gogh's painting. The direct evidence is Gauguin's accurate description of how van Gogh used his two violet, enormous worn-out misshapen shoes as a subject to create a still life. Schapiro also believes van Gogh's idea of this painting might derive from Gustave Flaubert, a writer van Gogh admired, and Jean-Francois Millet, a contemporary influential artist. Both of them illustrate the concept of how to employ aging shoes as a personal object to simulate the human condition (p. 144-145). Thus, Schapiro claims: "While attempting to define what 'the equipmental being of equipment is in truth,' Heidegger ignores what those shoes meant to the painter van Gogh himself" (p. 147).

In fact, the reason that Heidegger (2001) mentions van Gogh's painting is to take the shoes as an example of the truth of equipmental being, through which to trace back the main topic of "the thingly character of the thing and the workly character of the work" (p. 188), namely the Being-question. Owens (1989) points out that the governing issue of all Heidegger's philosophy is focused on the question of Being; he claims: "During the 1930s, when "The Origin of Work of Art" was written, Heidegger had his sights set on the truth of Being" (p. 132). This motif is reflected in the beginning of Heidegger's essay: "Origin here means that from and by which something is what it is and as it is. What something is, as it is, we call its essence or nature" (p. 182). In order to explore this essence or nature of the work of art, his demonstration follows the conceptions below: (1) The artist is the origin of the work and the work is the origin of the artist; (2) Art is the origin of both the artist and work; (3) All works have a thingly character; (4) To view the thingly element of the work is a necessary process to clarify what a thing is. Then, Heidegger argues that three conventional definitions of thing (thing as a bearer of traits, thing as the unity of a manifold of sensation, and thing as formed matter) are not only incapable of explaining the question completely, but these definitions also "assault upon the thing" (p. 187). After examining "the course of the history of truth about beings," Heidegger suggests a new mode of thought "by which we think not only about thing, equipment, and work but about beings in general." In order to fulfill this conception, Heidegger selects equipment as the beginning because it has "a peculiar

intermediate position between thing and work” (p. 188). It is based on this idea that Heidegger starts his conversation about van Gogh’s painting.

Now we find the crucial misunderstanding in the beginning of Schapiro’s (1968) first essay. He claims that “Heidegger interprets a painting by van Gogh to illustrate the nature of art as a disclosure of truth” (p. 427). In fact, the main subject that Heidegger (2001) discusses here is the nature of equipment, not art. He wants to use a pair of peasant shoes as an example to reveal the character of equipment. In order to make it easier to understand and avoid “any philosophical theory,” he chooses “a well-known painting by van Gogh” (p. 188). Heidegger uses a long paragraph of lyric description to show how the shoes connect a peasant’s life and the earth; then he concludes that the equipmental quality of the equipment is its usefulness, and this usefulness itself rests in an essence of the equipment. He asserts, “we call it reliability” (p. 189).

I would like to argue that what Heidegger and Schapiro ignore, each in their own way, is the question of equipment and thing. If we review Foucault’s argument in *This Is Not a Pipe*, we may find that what he points out is that people have been falsely positioned within the notion of linking visual representation with reality, is exactly what happened to Heidegger and Schapiro: they both are distracted by a representational image in a painting. Let’s suppose a hypothetical scenario: If Heidegger confesses that he has mistaken the ownership of the shoes, he decides to change the description of the shoes by using Gauguin’s reminiscences, and submits to Schapiro’s (1994) analysis that van Gogh’s idea of the shoes is “a symbol of his life-long practice of walking, and an ideal of life as a pilgrimage, a perpetual change of experience” (p. 147); then, I believe, Heidegger will still come to the same conclusion about his Being-question on the essence of equipment. It is still “reliability.” It might be inappropriate for Heidegger to call them peasant’s shoes, but it won’t hinder him from gaining the same summary. Schapiro might do a good job in demonstrating a conventional art historical methodology, but to label Heidegger as a deceiver seems too severe. They both get lost in the fantasy of the representational space.

In fact, in Schapiro’s (1968) first essay, he also translates Heidegger’s motive by using a partial quotation that “to grasp ‘the equipmental being of equipment’ we must know ‘how shoes actually serve’” (p. 427). This implies two points. First, he is quite aware that Heidegger is discussing the essence of equipment here; second, he knows that Heidegger focuses on “how,” but not “whose,” shoes actually serve. Then, why did Schapiro show such hostility to Heidegger? In “Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing [‘Pointure’],” Derrida criticizes Schapiro and Heidegger. According to Adams (1996), both Schapiro and Heidegger “in Derrida’s view, have fallen into the trap of hubris” (p. 172). But actually, when we read the text carefully, it is not difficult to find that Derrida is more generous to Heidegger.

It is well-known that Schapiro dedicated his article of 1968 to the memory of Kurt Goldstein who introduced to him Heidegger's "The Origin of Work of Art" (Derrida, 1987, p. 256). Goldstein was a German-Jew, Schapiro's personal friend and colleague at Columbia University, who had been taken prisoner by the Nazis (Adams, 1996, p. 174). On the other hand, Heidegger's involvement with Nazism is always a controversial issue. He was an energetic supporter of German National Socialism in the 1930s and never renounced his political views. Collins and Selina(1999) argue that for many people "this is not a purely historical concern. It is bound up with our responses to resurgent nazisms now" (p. 12). However, Derrida has often acknowledged his intellectual debt to Heidegger. He claims that "Heidegger's work is extremely important to me, and it constitutes a novel, irreversible advance"(Collins and Mayblin, 1998, p. 153). Did these complicated, non-academic factors interfere in this argument of the truth of art? In order to reconstitute the truth, can we ignore the entangled relation with which they have involved? When Derrida (1987) asks: "And who is going to believe that this episode is merely a theoretical or philosophical dispute for the interpretation of a work or The Work of art? (p. 272)" I wonder, did he himself get involved?

But temporarily, let's get away from the real world, pass through the frame of the work, and go into the art world again. Derrida (1987), in the head note of his essay, announces that his discussion will be preceded by a polylogue consisting of a group of female voices (p. 256). Their miscellaneous but poignant conversations evoke a series of questions: What of shoes? What, Shoes? Whose are the shoes? What are they made of? Who are they? (p. 257) What makes them so sure that they are a pair of shoes (p. 259)? Through these questions, Derrida leads us to reconsider the essence of art itself: whether art is merely a representation of real things. He claims that "Schapiro is mistaken about the primary function of the pictorial reference . . . For the whole Schapiro's case, on the other hand, calls on real shoes: the picture is supposed to imitate them, represent them, reproduce them" (p. 312). And this is exactly what Heidegger (2001) tries to resist. He asks: "Is it our opinion that the painting draws a likeness from something actual and transposes it into a product of artistic—production?" Answered by himself: "By no means" (p. 190).

Hence, Derrida (1987) extends his argument and points out there are three dogmas in Schapiro's credo. First, painted shoes should belong to a real, identifiable, and nameable subject, namely the signatory of the picture. Second, shoes, painted or real, should belong to undetachable feet. Third, feet, painted or real, should belong to a proper body (pp. 313-314). Here, we can see Derrida applying his linguistic communication theory in art criticism. He has argued that communication is always subject to iterability, citation, and grafting, but these elements always derail communication. He takes signature as an example: "Iterability is the condition of possibility of the signature, but it is also the condition of its impossibility, of the impossibility of its rigorous purity. Its detachability corrupts its identity and its singularity, divides

itself”(Collins & Mayblin, 1998, p. 153). For Derrida, the conventional connection between signatory and painter, shoes and feet, and feet and body all should be detachable.

Though Derrida uses “naïve” to reproach Heidegger for his recklessness in calling the unproved object a pair of peasant shoes, and further, woman shoes, he also disqualifies Schapiro’s argument by quoting Heidegger’s statement that, “For a long time, conformity with being has been considered to be equivalent to the essence of truth.” Derrida (1987) continues: “Now I understand well enough how that hits Schapiro’s preoccupations and disqualifies his assurances”(pp. 316-317). He points out that Schapiro seems to believe in the reproduction of given shoes in a given place, and this is a priori irrelevant. Pointing (pointure) then becomes a metaphor; the prick of their iron point pierces the leather and canvas, through which laces go between the inside and outside of the surface, appear and disappear, and link up the internal and external world. In the external world, a group of people is trapped in the argument about the ownership of this pair of shoes; in the internal world, the questions remain: if what we saw from van Gogh’s painting is not a pair of peasant woman’s shoes, not van Gogh’s shoes, and even not shoes, then we have to consider seriously, “WHAT IS IT?” As an existing being—a canvas, covered with layers of pigments, left a residual image on the surface, supported by a square frame, and hung on the wall of museum—what is the meaning of its existence for the artist, for the viewer, and even for the work itself? In the following paragraph I would like to stress my discussion on the initial issue raised by Heidegger: what is the essence of the work of art?

A Reflection and Exploration of the Essence of the Work of Art

History shows that before Alexander Baumgarten coined the term *aesthetics* in 1750, philosophers discussed only the nature of beauty. Dickie(1997) points out that in the eighteenth century philosophers started to relate the theory of taste, beauty, and sublime to the realm of art, and since then the word beautiful has come to be used as a synonym of “having aesthetic value” (p. 4). For a long time beauty and truth were two different labels which separately belonged to art and science. As Heidegger (2001) states: “the truth of which we have spoken does not coincide with that which is generally recognized under the name and assigned to cognition and science as a quality in order to distinguish from it the *beautiful* and the *good*, which function as names for values of nontheoretical activities” (p. 208). In this duration, the prevailing theory of representation dominated the general belief that the beauty of art derived from the imitation from nature. It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that the representational theory was called into question.

In 1835, Hegel in his *Aesthetics: Lecture on Fine Art* lists three prevalent ideas of the aim of art: the principle of the imitation of nature, the principle of awakening passions, and the principle of didactic purpose (Hegel, 1988). Basically, his ideal of artistic value is grounded in the accomplishment of the dialectic principle—the resolution of the opposition between content and the form. Thus, he not only proclaims that artistic beauty stands higher than natural beauty (p. 2), but also defines beauty as the way in which art expresses truth and brings truth to sensuous appearance and representation. He claims that: “Now we said that beauty is Idea, so beauty and truth are in one way the same...the beautiful is characterized as the pure appearance of the Idea to sense” (p. 111). This means that the unity of content (universal truth, positive) and form (particular appearance, negative) is the highest achievement of art.

Why should we discuss truth of art or in art? When Hegel (1988) defines beauty as the pure appearance of the idea to sense, does he foresee an essence exceeding beauty, which ensures the perpetuation of art? Let’s reconstruct Heidegger’s argument. He defines the nature of art as the setting-into-work of truth and asserts that, “The nature of art would then be this: the truth of beings setting itself to work” (p. 190). But he reminds us not to strap into a general concept of scientific truth; by recollecting the Greek word, he emphasizes that truth should be regarded as the unconcealedness of being. According to Heidegger, truth conceals and preserves itself in earth. Meanwhile, it tends to make itself unconcealed and happening in the world. This conflict creates a rift, then art is shaped into concrete figures and fixed in place. Thus, Heidegger (2001) claims: “Truth is present only as the conflict between lighting and concealing in the opposition of world and earth” (p. 201); and “The strife that is brought into the rift and thus set back into the earth and thus fixed in place figure, shape, Gestalt. Createdness of the work means: truth’s being fixed in place in the figure” (p. 201). Heidegger believes that truth may happen in many ways. He claims that “One of these ways in which truth happens is the work-being of the work” and beauty is also “one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness” (p. 198). Here we can see the hierarchical notion between truth and beauty. For Heidegger, truth is the highest principle of art; beauty is one way to reveal truth via a concrete figure fixed in place and preserved in work. The problem is that when he looked at the painting and asserted that this pair of peasant woman shoes could be taken for example, he could not avoid taking the image of van Gogh’s painting as the representation of the real shoes. Of course, the same problem happened on Schapiro. Then, allow us to query: Did they make any mistake? What is wrong with the visual representation?

In the 1960s, representational theory was overthrown by Clement Greenberg. In his essay on “Modernist Painting”, Greenberg (1961) argues that each art should coincide with all that was unique in the nature of its medium; thus, painting should not serve as the representation of three-dimensional illusion, but turn back to its flat, two-dimensional instinct. He claims: “Realistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art (p. 112)”. Modernists’

anti-representational notions were mainstream during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.

In the face of a series of challenges, representational theory was not exiled from the territory of art. Contemporary art theorists endow it with new interpretation. Julian Bell concludes three types of representation paintings in the mid twentieth century in contrast to prevailing abstract art: (1) Pictorial representation—viewers are expected to recognize the physical objects drawn on the picture, also relates to the term “realism;” (2) Symbolic representation—viewers are expected to think of the meaning through the images on the picture; and (3) Systemic representation—viewers are supposed to catch a broader sense from the systemic structure, within which “all human nature and culture, all experience and meaning, take place” (Bell, 1999). The notion of systemic representation derives from the structuralists. Structuralism emerged after 1950; according to Adams (1996) it was an effort to identify “universal mental structures” which motivate human behavior. In short, “structuralists minimized the role of the individual author in conferring meaning on a text or image” (pp. 133-134).

To review the standpoint of Schapiro’s and Heidegger’s arguments, we may attribute pictorial representation to the former, who tries to relate the image to artists’ real life. And we may apply symbolic representation to the latter, who attempts to jump over artist’s intention to establish the metaphysical interpretation through the image. As to Derrida (1985), his deconstructionism assumes that “the effects or structure of a text are not reducible to its ‘truth,’ to the intended meaning of its presumed author, or even its supposedly unique and identifiable signatory” (p. 163). He maintains that there can be no definitive “author;” instead, the author confers definitive meaning on text. Thus, deconstructionists reject not only the deification of the artist, but also the notion that “great art gives form to an ‘idea’ which was lodged in the mind and soul of the artist” (Adam, 1996, p. 163). Consequently, within this argument, we see the presence of an art historian with his representational ontology, a philosopher with his metaphysical phenomenology, and a deconstructionist with his post-structuralist semiotics. Each of them has set up different values of art in their individual territories. However, we have an absent artist—van Gogh.

In *The Man Without Content*(1994), Giorgio Agamben points out that the split between taste and creation has existed for a long time in Western society where genius always belongs to artists and taste always belongs to spectators. Eventually, taste becomes a pure reversal. Agamben calls this “the very principle of perversion” (p. 24). He further uses French surrealist writer Lautreamont’s sentence, “judgment on poetry are worth more than poetry,” to explain this reverse phenomenon (p. 40). Agamben argues that when artists are exiled from spectators’ absolute taste, whatever criterion the critical judgment employs to evaluate the reality of artwork, “it will only have laid out, in place of a living body, an interminable skeleton

of dead element” (p. 43). Agamben’s idea of the pure reversal is associated with Hegel’s “pure culture.” In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*(1977), Hegel describes that, “When the pure ‘I’ beholds itself outside of itself and split, then everything that has continuity and universality, everything that is called law, good, and right, is at the same time rent asunder and destroyed” (p. 314). Based on the idea of the pure culture, Hegel seems to be pessimistic for the development of art history. In the *Aesthetics: Lecture on Fine Art*, he claims that:

We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit. No matter how excellent we find the statues of the Greek gods, no matter how we see God the Father, Christ, and Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is no help; we bow the knee no longer (Hegel, 1998, p. 103).

The above statement is regarded as his declaration of the death of art. Agamben(1994) believes that when Hegel mentioned that art will transcend itself and cease to develop, he meant to caution that we should not leave art to “loosen itself from itself and move in pure nothingness, suspended in a kind of diaphanous between no-longer-being and not-yet-being” (p. 53). Agamben has a profound interpretation of Hegel’s notion when he observes the contemporary artworld. He claims that the split between content/form, spectator/artist, criticism/creation, and taste/genius keep fermenting and becoming even more serious. He examines the development of nihilism after the late nineteenth century and asserts that, “Art is the eternal self-generation of the will to power. As such, it detaches itself both from the activity of the artist and from the sensibility of the spectator to posit itself as the fundamental trait of universal becoming” (p. 93). He believes that this split between artists and spectators has to account for the development of nihilism in modern art. Agamben argues that “as long as nihilism secretly governs the course of Western history, art will not come out of its interminable twilight” (p. 58). In order to prevent this destiny of “self-annihilating nothing,” he suggests that we should reconstruct our aesthetic judgment and “allow a more original, that is, more initial, way to think of art” (p. 51). Thus, Agamben carefully explores the original concept of human productive activity. He traces back to the Greek notion of poetry that “any cause that brings into existence something that was not there before is ποιησις” (p. 59). In fact, when Heidegger defines art as “letting happen of the truth,” he also brings about an important idea that all art is essentially poetry (p. 204). Agamben further suggests that in order to restore the poetic status of art, we should not let our relationship with the work of art be reduced to mere aesthetic enjoyment achieved through good taste. He claims that:

In the experience of the work of art, man stands in the truth, that is, in the origin that has revealed itself to him in the poetic act...When the work of art is instead offered for aesthetic enjoyment and its formal aspect is appreciated and analyzed, this still remains far from attaining the essential structure of the work...so long as man is prisoner of an aesthetic perspective, the essence of art remains closed to him (p. 102).

From here to review Heidegger's notion that "truth is present only as the conflict between lighting and concealing in the opposition of world and earth," maybe we could get some enlightenment as to why, in the early twentieth century, this philosopher would begin the discussion of the origin of the work of art by placing truth in a position that transcends traditional notions of artistic beauty. Did he sense that after the industrial revolution people were becoming confused about the distinction within the essences of thing, production, and work? Did he foresee the crisis that human poetic activity would fall into a nihilistic split, as Agamben mentions?

Conclusion

In the Epilogue of the essay, Heidegger (2001) writes: "The foregoing reflections are concerned with the riddle of art, the riddle that art itself is. They are far from claiming to solve the riddle. The task is to see the riddle" (p. 207). In this process of seeing the riddle of art within the arguments of Heidegger and Schapiro, to recognize the ownership of a pair of shoes becomes fading out of our focus. All these metaphysical phenomena of aesthetic judgment, as Haver(1999) suggests, are merely "curiously irrelevant residue" of "art's work" (p. 13), which implies the courage not to conceal our inherent desire of pursuing primal pleasure. Haver's notion of art's work is exactly what Agamben(1994) maintains is the "being-at-work" of the work—a dynamic status of ecstasy through the highest engagement—which "allow man to become again the contemporary of the gods and to reattain the primordial dimension of creation, so in the work of art the continuum of linear time is broken, and man recovers, between past and future, his present space" (pp. 101-102). In this ecstasy of engagement, art is emancipated from the conventional criteria of beauty, goodness, and truth.

One might ask then: What does an artist promise in his/her work? "I owe you the truth in painting, and I will tell it to you," quotes Derrida (1987) from Cezanne's letter and puts the sentence in the epigraph of his "Restitution of the Truth in Pointing ['Pointure']" (p. 255). What Cezanne promises, as Derrida indicates, is just a performative utterance—to utter his intention that he wants to redeem a debt of the truth by *saying* it, but not to *paint* the truth in a *painting*(p. 8). Thus, Heidegger could *utter* that he finds the truth of art through a pair of peasant shoes in the painting; Schapiro could *utter* that to utter these two shoes belong to a peasant is out of truth. For Derrida they are uttering their performative utterances "without debt" and "without truth" (p. 9). As Derrida asserts: "Nobody's being accused, or above all condemned, or even suspected. There is painting, writing, restitution, that's all" (p. 371). This is not a pipe; these are not a pair of shoes; this is a painting.

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