

## Van Gogh and the Reality of Painting.

*It is the curse and the blessing of Kunstwissenschaft that its objects necessarily lay claim to an understanding that is not exclusively historical. . . . This demand is, as I said, both a curse and a blessing. A blessing, because it keeps Kunstwissenschaft in constant tension, ceaselessly provoking methodological reflection, and, above all, continually reminding us that a work of art is a work of art and not just any historical object. A curse, because it must introduce into scholarship an uncertainty and a rift that are difficult to bear, and because the effort to uncover general precepts has often led to results that are either irreconcilable with scientific method or seem to violate the uniqueness of the individual work of art.*

Erwin Panofsky, "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens" (1920)

Although forty-four years have passed since its first publication, *Art After Philosophy* remains one of the most important essays to comprehend art history and its more recent developments; it is true that for many reasons this essay simplifies and reduces art to forms of pure conceptualism, making a clean sweep of any other perspective of significance in relation to image; nevertheless, for many aspects, it remains an essential essay for anyone who would like to go into the complex sphere of contemporary art. In this essay, Kosuth states in the most determined and authoritative way, that after Duchamp, art became just a way to question art itself as a status of being art; in this perspective, he gets close to restrict logics of truth in such a way that art itself becomes something equivalent to logic and mathematics. To support his theory, Kosuth plays on that necessary *a priori* of seeing and judging things, and replaces this *aprioristic* concept about the possibility that one thing might be or not be art with a new principle of legitimation based on tautology and restrict circle of reasoning; by doing so, he comes to a paradoxical rejection of aesthetics, and even if this rejection is comprehensible in terms of constant degeneration of aesthetics in taste and fashion, it becomes an obvious error when this rejection involves other spheres of creation, which belong to human beings since before the invention of art history.

The evident limit of Kosuth's theory does not reside within his logical argumentations and how he develops them achieving a growing consensus by contemporary readers, but it resides within his idea of supporting his own system of beliefs and thoughts on the base of another system whose dynamics of knowledge and understanding are maintained by the necessary existence of the system itself. We might just shift Kosuth's beliefs on art to another perspective of significance, from the widespread and dominant dialectics between art and knowledge to that formed by image and religion, to become aware and acknowledge that such a theory would be an absolute non-sense, or at least incomprehensible within another context. Principal and fundamental elements of Kosuth's theory result from a substantial inversion of knowledge, that begins to be produced no more according to the image and its implications of mutually equivalent and reciprocal signs and their combinatory possibility of producing meanings and knowledge, but according to forms of rational analogies and image's codification that lead to the creation of a history of things.

This history, which gradually became more and more significant, absorbed the figurative language of things themselves, and produced a distinction that seems by now irreparable between image and language. This distinction became more and more evident within the system that supports art history and contemporary art, until we might easily recognise a society formed entirely by *users of language*, that do not recognize any form of knowledge except within language itself.

\*

Vincent Willem van Gogh (30 March 1853 – 29 July 1890) was a Dutch Post-Impressionist painter whose work, notable for its rough beauty, emotional honesty and bold colour, had a far-reaching influence on 20th-century art.<sup>1</sup>

This is how Wikipedia presents and introduces in the most concise way the character of van Gogh. In few sentences we have dissected and recomposed the image and the life of this artist; few sentences have already given us a general comprehension of his work: van Gogh is Dutch, is a Post-Impressionist painter, and his work has influenced 20th-century art. In the case our reader had a rudimental knowledge of art history, the conceptual frame to judge van Gogh's painting would be pleasantly concluded; because in the final analysis, what matters in the common aesthetic experience, is this judgment, the ability of creating a conceptual frame that allows spectators to exert on the object the aesthetic categories they have previously learned.

It would be now appropriate for our research to go back to Kosuth and his essay, and go over the passage in which the artist quotes van Gogh and its pictorial work to reinforce his curt and concise refusal of aesthetics. In this case the term aesthetics shouldn't be considered in its eighteen-century acceptance of science of beauty, but according to his Greek etymology of *αἴσθησις*, that means "sensation", and of *αἰσθάνομαι*, that means "to perceive by means of senses". Consequently although Kosuth rejects aesthetics, he does not necessarily reject only the taste for beauty or ugliness but also what is communicated and experience through senses. This leads Kosuth to state that:

actual works of art are little more than historical curiosities. As far as art is concerned van Gogh's paintings aren't worth any more than his palette is. They are both collector's item.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the pictorial object becomes completely deprived by any aesthetic value and its function as object aimed to sensory experience. This comparison between van Gogh's paintings and its palette removes any seducing quality from pictorial objects and consequently from image: what matters is the idea that resides behind created objects; the only thing that matters is how van Gogh has conceived the artwork according to innovative end original modalities. From this point of view, the image itself results detached from the artistic object, which does not seem to be able to contain those rational and ideal concepts within its visible form, which according to Kosuth, are the most important elements for the understanding of the true value of art. Thereby if art constitutes itself as continuous research of its own nature, van Gogh's painting might be replaced not only by its palette but also by the way the artist contributed with his work to a new conception of art, and in other words by the concept of Post-Impressionism and the way this new concept innovates the

---

1 Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent\\_van\\_Gogh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_van_Gogh)

2 Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, Studio International, 1969, 6

previous Impressionism. Thus an extraordinary painting like van Gogh *Sunflowers* finds its entire value and meaning once it is framed within the concept of post-impressionism compared with previous Impressionism; at this point we might go even further and to say that a van Gogh's painting is a formal or physical expression of what might be expressed in words. If we go back again over Wikipedia, it would be easy to associate *Sunflowers* painting to the definition of Post-Impressionism so that everything would be clearly defined in our mind:

Post-Impressionists extended Impressionism while rejecting its limitations: they continued using vivid colours, thick application of paint, distinctive brush strokes, and real life subject matter, but they were more inclined to emphasize geometric forms, to distort form for expressive effect, and to use unnatural or arbitrary colour”<sup>3</sup>.

Paradoxically this is what occurred: the image such as constitutive and fundamental element of art has been replaced with another element, the word, which belongs to a different modality of communication, and thus to a different kind of language. The immediate and general consequence of this process has been a complete transformation of the art value itself as well as its terms of legitimation, in fact aesthetic discussion is no longer deduced by the artwork itself but on the contrary it is the aesthetic discussion that makes the artistic object possible in the first place. This process of transformation might be enlarged to involve all structures and superstructures that maintain and perpetuate this new logic of values, leading us to the paradoxical statement that artworks exist only because art institutions exist, legislating on art and its value.

At this point we might pose a simple question: today, without those art's institutions that support art's production and its legitimation, art might exist for its own intrinsic value?

\*

Van Gogh's life and work has been widely fictionalized and carefully ordered within one of the many drawers of art history; today he became the symbol of a certain logic of art museums and spaces for cultural recreation and vacation, that have gradually granted a false knowledge and understanding of art accessible to everybody, in which language becomes the place of coincidence of every truth, where we see what we read and know.

In the past I was quite fortunate to have the opportunity to see some of the most famous van Gogh's paintings. The most surprising thing (and this is the reason why I am probably writing this brief text) has been the difference I perceived while looking at the original paintings and their photographic reproduction. Before van Gogh paintings I have acknowledged a remarkable gap between the art work and its reproduction: in comparison with its photographic reproduction, the artwork says something emotionally, visually and linguistically different from what in the picture becomes flat and pale. Though the representation remains the same, the image expresses by the artwork and its reproduction are energetically different.

During these years, many times I wondered why I did not experience the same feeling standing before and admiring other works of art (I have to admit that sometimes I experienced the opposite feeling, preferring the

---

3 Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-Impressionism>

photographic reproduction rather than the original artworks), that I had previously admired in their photographic reproductions. Today I have drawn the conclusion that the photographic quality of the reproduction itself, thus the quality of colours, size of the print and other elements, do not subsist as possible explanation for this peculiar experience.

In case it would be necessary to reveal in advance the thesis I am supposed to prove, I would say that the problem in such a matter, does not lie within the photographic reproduction of the painting but in the coincidence between the pictorial object (the painting constituted by colour and canvas) and the image van Gogh expressed in it. In fact, van Gogh's work results from an extraordinary and peculiar necessity to make coincide the two polarities which constitute image, or in other words to reduce the distance between our eye and our hand; van Gogh was able to create a pictorial representation that does not translate its form into the illusion of the scene represented. From time to time, the entire van Gogh's research is aimed to reject any form of illusionism on the canvas (this would explain, for example, his love for Japanese painting), leading to an extraordinary coincidence between what we see and what we touch, between the image and the object. In his painting van Gogh does not *represent* reality but he *creates* reality: it seems like the artist's work and research has been moved by an interior necessity to make coincide his gaze with the reality observed, in order to obtain a mode of painting capable of expressing the opposite and constitutive extremities of image, which are expression of a totality incapable of differentiating image from the original reality. In this sense, according to Van Gogh's pictorial work, image exists as reality as well as reality exists as image. The most surprising thing of this attempt is the fact that van Gogh will never abandon representation: the world is image and everything which has been created articulates itself within image, and the coincidence between image and reality will never be translated into an excessive power of the object (in this sense, I am referring to the historical replacement of image with reality, when Avant-garde artists like Cubists started to employ *found-objects* within the pictorial space, or like later Dadaists made coincide the image with the real object itself). Removing and weakening one polarity of tension of the image itself, results in a predictable condition of an excessive power of reality in relation to the necessary detachment of the contemplative gaze.

Van Gogh has been probably the last artist which realized this subtle antagonism of the opposites and that solved such opposition without rejecting this distinctive condition of conflict between the polarity of the *eye* and that of the *hand*.

Without excluding representation, van Gogh expresses the totality of image as an absolute coincidence between *the image of the world* and *the life in the world*, the reality observed and the reality he experienced and lived in, acting and moving around spaces and objects he was fond of, within a dynamic of appropriation of the real world by means of image. In this way van Gogh never left representation of reality, and while extremely fascinated by everyday life, he painted everything that could be considered as close to him: his shoes, his room, his books, his friends, his son, his nature, himself. These were the things and places the artist saw but also the things and places the artist touched, acted upon, lived in. To understand the veracity of my thesis, we might think of van Gogh's horror toward any art perspective that could separate him from this absolute truth of image. We might think of the way van Gogh unfavourably reacted to the symbolism promoted by his friends Gauguin and Bernard, whose work van Gogh strenuously defended and admired.

Any divergence from what van Gogh considered as a true art (namely the coincidence between image and reality), was taken as an unforgivable mistake. This is the most obvious and predictable opinion of an artist who decided to follow art as it was his innate religious vocation.

Gauguin's symbolism as well as that of Bernard, represents the way to shift the coincidence between image and reality to the polarity of image. In this sense reality of things fades into the reality of images, and consequently reality becomes a *vision*, representation of an excessive power of image. This was something that van Gogh could not accept. In many letters to his brother Theo, this coincidence between image and reality is reiterated by van Gogh's absolute rejection of any kind of symbolism that leads image from concrete reality to *vision*. In fact, Van Gogh's final aim was to make coincide an angel with a farmer, his own life of painter with that of a monk or a priest; within image, what is high and elevated in nature must coincide with what is modest and vulgar, what is sacred with what is profane, and the last ones will be first, and the light of colours will take what lies down in the shadow to the light of sun and stars.

Van Gogh has never been an Expressionist, he never had a rational and aesthetic conscience of colours to be an Expressionist. Van Gogh's idea and use of colours were very similar to that of a mystic, unconsciously he came to employ colours to express this absolute coincidence between image and reality, which was his only possible belief: what he sees it is also what he touches and lives in. Van Gogh does not need to put the finger on the physical wounded body of Jesus, like Saint Thomas the Apostle did, because he already believes in the concreteness and truth of image. He cannot be considered as the forefather of any kind of rationalism that led colours to sensorial emptiness and that sacrificed image for the restrict logics of reason. It is an evident mistake to consider van Gogh as a Post-Impressionist; he was the last artist to be religious in his art as well as in his own life. Like a medieval monk, he was almost incapable of an aesthetic pleasure that was not a reflection of the beauty of the entire creation; it seems that an aesthetic taste never came out from his spirit of nineteenth-century man, and he never admired anything more than the real world around him, evident reflection of God and his beauty.

In van Gogh we do not perceive the peculiar detachment from things that became a typical attitude of contemporary aesthetic judgment; in van Gogh the spirit and character of *the man of taste* does not exist; in the end, Impressionists are also felt like extraneous and far from his research, since this group of artists does not do anything more than representing reality with intense and vivid colours; they *depict* and *represent* reality, but they do not *create real images*.

In van Gogh this condition of image changes, and the painting does not represent nature any longer, but it becomes nature: van Gogh understands the yellow colour by observing the cornfields burned by the hot sun of the south of France; he comprehends the blue colour from the morning sky free of clouds, and the variations of dark blue from the night lighted by moon and stars; he observes red and brown colours from the bitterness of ground in which peasants work with religious fervour while waiting for the ascension to a better world; and the green colour from the springtime that cyclically nature repeats every year; white is the colour of clouds and dark is that exact degree of dark that we meet here and there between yellow cornfields and the blue sky: dark is the colour of ravens.

In van Gogh there is no kind of divine symbolism that screens reality; reality is the image and it is within

colours that the miracle of this coincidence happens. He wrote to the brother Theo:

I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to confer by the actual radiance and vibration of our colourings.<sup>4</sup>

Van Gogh perceives his life of painter to coincide with that of a monk, and the reality he expresses in his painting becomes that of a world seen and lived thanks to God's grace; his painting is not the specific attempt of a man of reason capable of expressing his ideas and thought by means of painting's colours, but it is the strong spiritual strength of a Christian who wants to express his own beliefs, gathering into the light of colours, the totality of the world seen and lived in the image. To confirm this thesis, it would be enough to examine his life, constantly marked by a spiritual research that leads him to love art as the greatest weight and salvation of himself, as a profound faith to believe in; a faith that gives him comfort with the promise of a future happiness and salvation, which nevertheless exhausts the body and the mind because of the continuous sacrifices required by it.

Van Gogh cannot conceive art in aesthetic terms, the entire art history has been reviewed by the artist according to a deep and profound religious and ethical sentiment: *The Imitation of Christ* (he possessed Dutch, Flemish, and French editions), and the *Bible*, which he read and translated in many languages, are fundamental texts for van Gogh's art.

Also some of his claims about the relationship between art and life, or the significance of art in reference to the world, might help us to understand which was the spiritual aim of this artist. His art consists of a message of revelation of reality which articulates itself within the coincidence between image and reality. Probably van Gogh is the last exponent of a former conception of art entirely conceived within those values of image that reject the narrow paths of logic and art history; probably he is the last eminent artist belonging to that ancient tradition of image established around the mystery of Christ's incarnation, by which reality itself expresses the divine because God showed and revealed himself in it becoming man.

He writes to the brother Theo:

I feel myself attracted by religion and I desire to console the humble. I believe my occupation of painter and artist is beautiful, but my father's profession is more sacred.<sup>5</sup>

This spirituality that we might define as a Christian one and that is an essential component for the artist's sensitivity, constitutes the base for this love and confidence in image, that have to be acknowledged in its deep meaning of real life and reality.

This relationship between real world and image is so intense and deep-rooted that constantly emerges in most of the letters written by the artist to the brother Theo. A very interesting example of it might be a letter written to Theo in Arles and dated October 16<sup>th</sup> 1888, in which the artist describes his own room:

My eyes are still tired, but anyway I had a new idea in mind, and here's the croquis of it. No. 30 canvas once again. This time it's simply my bedroom, but the colour has to do the job here, and through its being simplified by giving a grander style to things, to be suggestive here *of rest* or *of sleep* in general. In short, looking at the painting should *rest* the mind,

---

4 Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters*, Arles, 3 September, 1888, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let673/letter.html>

5 Vincent Van Gogh, *Lettere a Theo*, Guanda, Milano, 2004, 32

or rather, the imagination.  
The walls are of a pale violet. The floor — is of red tiles.  
The bedstead and the chairs are fresh butter yellow.  
The sheet and the pillows very bright lemon green.  
The bedspread scarlet red.  
The window green.  
The dressing table orange, the basin blue.  
The doors lilac.  
And that's all — nothing in this bedroom, with its shutters closed.  
The solidity of the furniture should also now express unshakeable repose.  
Portraits on the wall, and a mirror and a hand-towel and some clothes.  
The frame — as there's no white in the painting — will be white. <sup>6</sup>

Van Gogh made three versions of this same subject; what is very interesting in this text is how the language manifests the direct link between world and image, the things loved, used, experienced and the colour. Everything becomes immediately colour because “the colour has to do the job”.

The concrete experience of things coincides with the colour of image within a close relationship and continuity. When van Gogh describes his paintings, he often re-uses the same method: before he describes his intimate emotional relationship with the place, things or people he knows, and later he begins to go into a detailed description where a direct link between the thing and the colour becomes quite evident.

Things and colours substantiate themselves reciprocally, there is a continuous exchange and a variable relationship of significances that we perceive in van Gogh letters. From Arles on Monday 9<sup>th</sup> April 1888 he writes to the brother Theo:

I've got a new orchard that's as good as the pink peach trees — some very pale pink apricot trees. At present I'm working on some yellow-white plum trees with thousands of black branches.<sup>7</sup>

I suppose this is one of the most appropriate examples of how van Gogh's language gives us evidence of how every concrete and touchable thing finds its own immediate and appropriate manifestation into the reality of image and colour.

\*

It is not by chance that Heidegger decides to take van Gogh painting as a starting point for his investigation on the origin and essence of the work of art. In his attempt of examining the original significance and value of the artwork, Heidegger comes to emphasize what I believe to be an essential characteristic of the artwork, namely its condition of *being image* in reference to reality and human beings' life. Heidegger's enquiry ends up establishing an original link among reality and artistic image, revealing an active and living practicality of image itself that finds its most appropriate expression in van Gogh's painting.

---

6 Van Gogh, *The Letters*, Arles, 16 October, 1888, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let705/letter.html>

7 Ibid., Arles, 9 April, 1888, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let594/letter.html>

In this sense, the debate about van Gogh's shoes and to whom they belonged (according to Heidegger they belonged to a countrywoman, while Schapiro argued that this pair of shoes belonged to the artist himself), becomes a matter of very little importance. What really matters is how Heidegger has been capable of emphasizing the way in which a work of art is always a constant unity of image and reality. Work of art has to be considered as an *Ursprung* (origin), in which the reality became image without the image having lost its own consistence and nature of being reality and image at once.

I believe this is the difference between real artworks and their photographic reproduction, in fact, while photography, as reproduction of reality, maintains its consistence of image, it loses relentlessly its concreteness of real thing (as far as it concerns the problem of photography, I am intentionally making no reference at all to the concept of *aura*, Benjamin's *hic et nunc*, because this concept even if particularly insightful in relation to the understanding of image in reference to the observer -the concept of *aura*, the *hic et nunc*, are terms that might exist and refer only for an ideal spectator- do not examine the essence of image in itself, such as real, living and autonomous being).

In this sense I consider particularly enlightening the entire work of Gino De Dominicis; by means of ironic and paradoxical artistic strategies, he always aimed to humanize his own work. An artist ahead of its time, Gino De Dominicis forbade any kind of photographic reproduction of his work, and gave to his own artworks decisional capacity. In this way artworks themselves could autonomously decide to take part or not to exhibitions. This peculiar behaviour can be explained only taking into account De Dominicis' final aim to situate the art work outside aesthetics and taste as well as the spectator's judgment, and consequently beyond history and art history.