

# Wrestling with Nature:

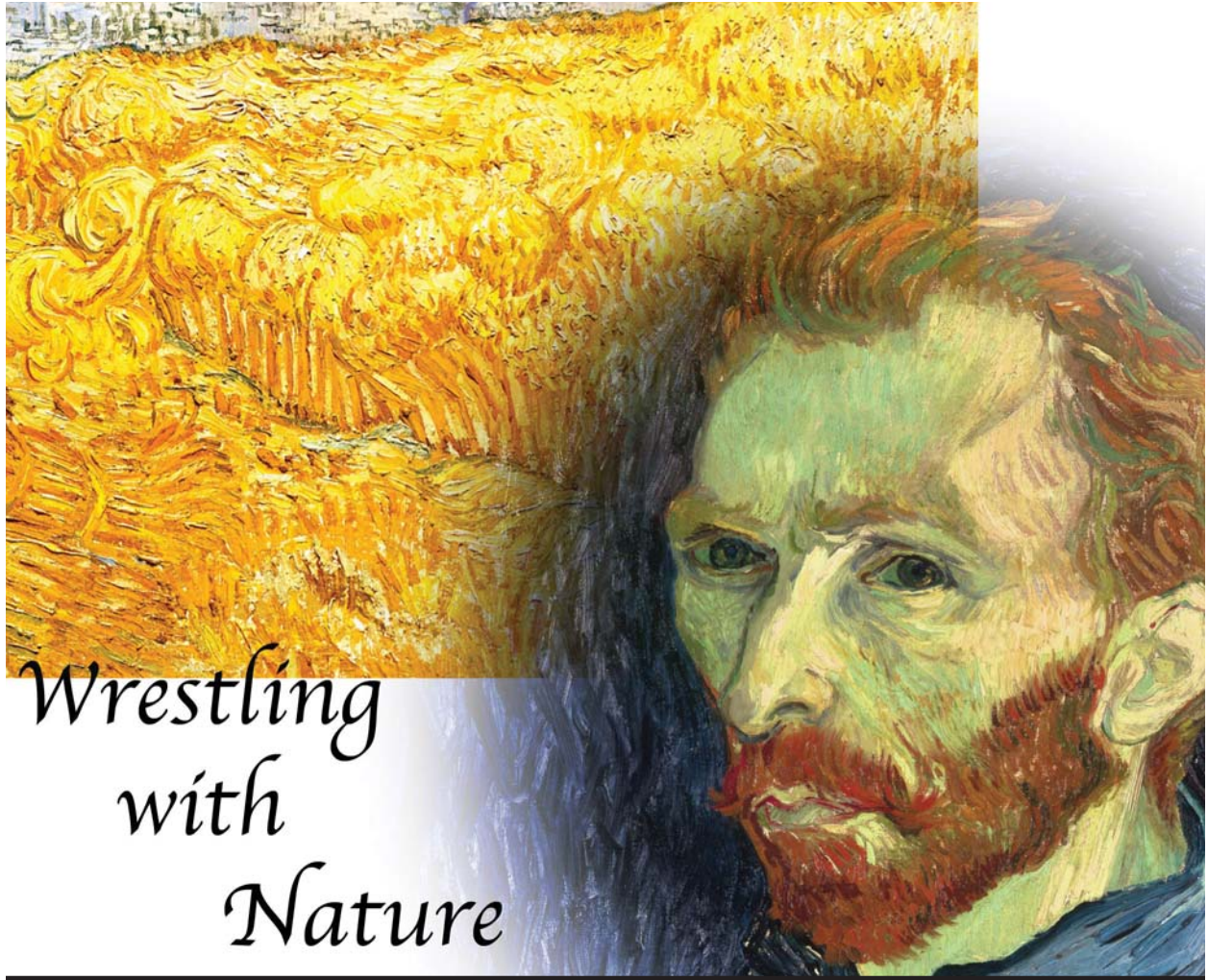
The Obscuring Mirror and the Dream of True Perception

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Van Gogh and Expressionism

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HYPERION:  
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*Wrestling  
with  
Nature*

*The Obscuring Mirror  
& The Dream of True Perception*

**Van Gogh and Expressionism**  
**Neue Galerie, New York**  
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**by Rainer J. Hanshe**

“ Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
My services are bound.  
—Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.2.1-2

“ To be one with all living things, to return,  
by a radiant self-forgetting, to the All of Nature.  
—Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles*

“ I suddenly woke up in the midst of this dream,  
but only to the consciousness that I am dreaming  
and that I *must* go on dreaming lest I perish . . .  
What is “appearance” for me now! Certainly not the  
opposite of some essence . . . Appearance is for me  
that which lives and is effective . . . among all these  
dreamers, I, too, the “knower,” am dancing my dance  
—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

“ When I dream and invent without return, am I not . . . *nature*?  
—Valery

**T**o see or not to see—that is, to lift or not to lift the veil, is not that the question?

“*Phusis kruptesthai philei*,” said Heraclitus, and ever since, his enigmatic statement has been malformed, interpreted and transfigured throughout time. Theologians, philosophers and artists have utilized it to shape our perception of and relationship to nature. In this, are we not shaping our relationship to our selves—and we are a multiplicity of warring, separated selves and not a singularity? For in coming to know nature, however much we are at all capable of knowing that which hides or disappears as it appears, what is it that we are beginning to discern, or *interpret*, but our very own lives? The mirror we are gazing into though is not transparent, but obscured, just as the eye of the camera is not lucid but darkened glass; it is not objective for never is there *only* the eye of the camera—behind that Cyclopean eye there is

always another eye, and that too is a single eye. Distortion abounds; darkness proliferates. Ascend, descend, traverse and pursue, what is there but cave within cave and ground behind ground. Our record of the world, though we think it true or factual, is but a phantasm, flickering images appearing on the screen of life, this dream that is a cinema. There is no true world—what would a ‘true’ world be anyhow?—only perspectives of a world that we will never know. The world just is what it is; it is beyond truth and falsity. “Appearance,” Nietzsche realized, “*is reality*”; it “resists any transformation into an imaginary ‘true world.’” If truth does not exist, art is worth more than truth, for through its generation of appearances, it is more akin to becoming, a reflection of the unfolding film in which we participate, each of us splintered by light, coming to fruition through decay. It is a reflection that does not purport to possess irrefutable clarity; it knows that its vision is full of obscurities. Thus, to love our illusions, knowing all the while that they are illusions and nothing more, is to remain cognizant of our ultimate *anopsia*. But we are deceived both by our illusions—they are seductive and powerful—and by what we think are truths—they are tricky and also seductive—, what we think we discover objectively, for as much as it blesses us, the sun blinds, and as much as they provoke thought, the stars mystify. Our clarity is our encompassing darkness. The veils of Isis conceal but more and more veils—few can plummet into the abyss from the bewildering dizziness of vertigo and laugh. For all your ills, said Rabelais, and consciousness is an ill, I give you *laughter*. . .



Oh, my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter—and now a thirst gnaws at me, a yearning, that will never be stilled.

My yearning for this laughter gnaws at me: oh how can I bear to go on living! And how could I bear to die right now!—

(Nietzsche—*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

In outlining a moral code for psychologists Nietzsche warns against observing merely “*for the sake of observing!* That,” he declares, “produces a false perspective, a squint, something forced and exaggerated.” The ‘psychologist’ who presumes that he sees more clearly because he is not directly involved in what is being experienced, that his perspective is *purser*, which is to say, *disinterested*, is deluded. One is always interested, one is always involved; there is no detached observation as there is no detached creation. The move outside of the world is one that we never can make; thus, any claim to seeing clearly is a delusion—it simply isn’t possible for us to ever know if there is any

clarity to what we perceive. We are always completely absorbed, layer folded within layer folded within layer. The umbilical chord is never cut, but forever transmits the music of the world; it is in orbit that we perpetually remain and the artist as the philosopher must be a psychologist, but one who is *immersed* in things, one who knows that his vision will always be occluded. Enraptured in the fold, the flower exfoliates from our entrails and we are seduced by the beauty of our visions. “To experience from a *desire* to experience—that,” also, Nietzsche pronounces, “will not succeed. One *cannot* observe oneself while in the midst of an experience, or one’s eye will become an ‘evil eye’.”

To imagine that we gain an objective viewpoint of our own experiences while in the midst of them is to delude our selves—that notorious ‘one’ is always a multitude—and to observe our selves while in the midst of our experiences is to disrupt and alter those very experiences. As Pierre Hadot noted, for Goethe, “only nature—that is, mankind’s senses understood as free from all intermediaries—can see nature. Even observation, which disturbs the phenomenon and immobilizes it, prevents us from seeing living reality.” Thus, not only has ‘one’ corrupted one’s experience, a gross self-deception is committed when believing that it is possible to experience *and* observe what is experienced, that it is seen as if transparent, naked, unveiled. The truth one believes one has gained is simply a perspective disguised. There is no tearing of the veil—each veil reveals but another, a blindness we cannot overcome. In the end, one hasn’t experienced anything, but destroyed one’s experience as if with an ‘evil eye.’ What is necessary is surrender, sacrificing one’s selves in trust, knowing that that which was undergone will remain. To remember and *re-create* existence, first we must forget. That is the secret whispered in our ears by Dionysus; that is what seduced Ariadne.

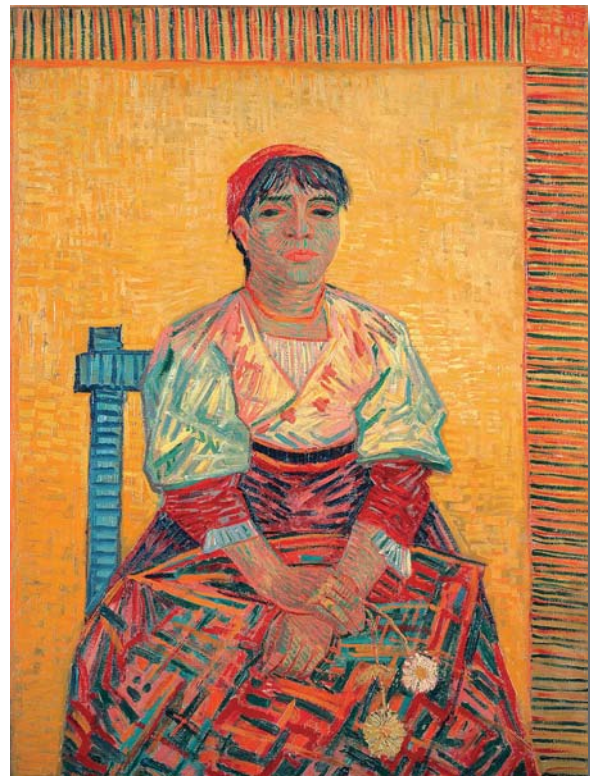
“A born psychologist,” Nietzsche continues, “instinctively guards against seeing for the sake of seeing; the same applies to *the born painter*. He never works ‘from nature’—he leaves it to his instinct, his *camera obscura*, to sift and express the ‘case,’ ‘nature,’ the object of the ‘experience’ . . . He is conscious only of the *general*, the conclusion, the outcome: he knows nothing of the arbitrary abstraction from the individual case.” While one is to obey one’s instincts and to guard against false notions of objectivity, one must also guard against individualized distortions, one must sift what one experiences through one’s *own* obscuring camera, that is, one’s instincts, which must guide one, retaining what is general in order to develop a more overarching perspective, such as a historical or geometric one. The individual has been sacrificed. It is in deference to historical or cultural perspectives that the psychologist must subsume its potential individual abstractions, eschewing personal prejudices or distortions, such as, for instance, the Christian’s perception of nature as ‘evil.’ In his *Religio Medici*, even Sir Thomas Browne noted that “the ordinary effects of nature wrought more admiration in [the heathens] than, in the [the children of Israel], all his miracles. Surely the heathens knew better how to

join and read these mystical letters than we Christians, who cast a more careless eye on these common hieroglyphics, and disdain to suck divinity from the flowers of nature.” Amen. One does not work ‘from nature’ alone, simply recording it like a *camera obscura* as if capturing a truth, but one questions like a scientist what one has experienced since the senses cannot be trusted; one expresses, therefore *interprets* nature for the ‘real’ is not knowable. Geometry may hold the world together, but where do we stand after that? The abyss remains. There is no real and there is no essence, there is only the glittering illusion. In truth, it is not that reality doesn’t exist, but that we can never access it, thus, petty facts yield not objective truths; they are, as Oscar Wilde said in “The Decay of Lying,” not only discreditable, they usurp “the domain of fancy” and vulgarize mankind because of their indifference to the poetic. Facts interest not Nietzsche either, but the poetic cinema of existence, for only that cinema is aware of its darkness. “Nature, artistically considered, is no model. It exaggerates, it distorts, it leaves gaps. Nature is *chance*. To study ‘from nature’ seems to me a bad sign: it betrays submission, weakness, fatalism—this lying in the dust before *petits faits* is unworthy of the *complete* artist. Seeing *what is*—that pertains to a different species of spirit, the *anti-artistic*, the factual one. One has to know *who* one is,” which is to say, one has to be a different genus altogether. One has to be a beast *and* a god, that is, one must be a philosopher, that is, one who gives birth to images out of the spirit of Dionysus.

Genitor of surfaces and images, Wilde too found realism dubious; it was to him a complete failure. The dream of true perception is the dream that Dionysus does not dream. As if embodying Nietzsche, Wilde said: “no great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.” “Truth,” he declared, “is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” and “it is style that makes us believe in a thing, nothing but style.” Nature, as man, and man is nature, is not to be trusted. It not only exaggerates and distorts but it leaves things to chance and the psychologist as the artist cannot leave things to chance—that is anti-artistic. It is to succumb to a presumption, which is not to create but to think that one has *seen*, that a veil has been removed and the cinema overcome. Chance does not reveal some greater truth. One will not seize ‘the real’ or a more supposedly truthful perspective of the world simply through observing chance events. The chance event is but a moment of becoming, not an overarching truth that is indicative of some lasting reality. To leave things to chance is to blindly trust what cannot be trusted, to rely on the transitory as the eternal when there is no eternal; it is to believe that the caterpillar remains a caterpillar, while the one who engages in further observations, the one who does not rely upon what is first sensed, knows that the caterpillar is but an instance of a different, larger, more elusive reality. Nature is as submissive, as weak, as fatalistic as man; ‘petty facts’ do not capture reality and chance Nietzsche infers, at least in this regard, is

a passing actuality one must interrogate. Seeing *what is*, truly seeing is not possible, nor is it desirable; insights are not brought forth simply through the naked observance of nature. The psychologist must be like a deep sea diver who penetrates into the nether regions, across, over, and down, and the unconscious, which is our only perhaps valuable or trustworthy guide, must be the psychologist's Vergil. Or we must dance on the surface of the world as if we were vectors along its circumference, or twirl eternally like dervishes in ceaseless motion, spinning into ever quicker and quicker circles of ecstasy, giving harmony even to conflict.

If art's concern is life, if it is to be as philosophical as philosophy, the artist as the philosopher must know itself as well as it can. In making art then, the artist cannot leave things to chance alone; the arbitrary is not representative of becoming. It yields not some greater limpidity but is still caliginous. What is of paramount importance here is the 'psychologist's' relation to the world, the mode of observation that the 'psychologist' engages in. It reveals whether one is a born painter—or whether one has made oneself into one—or if one has Cyclopean vision. To observe and to know that what one observes is but a perspective and not an ultimate reality is imperative. It is a philosophical necessity, and as a painter who is also a psychologist, van Gogh and the painters commonly referred to as 'Expressionist' were concerned with observing and with experiencing the world and depicting *their* experience of the world as vigorously and as faithfully as possible. The real was not to be captured through mere impressions, that is, *it could not be*; it is not discernible through such means, and their artistic vision as well as their techniques and their method of painting articulate this awareness. Realism and Naturalism were not truths but lies in the mouths of those who could not laugh; obscuring clouds which thought they were reflecting mirrors, and philosophy and science were disrupting the validity of such artistic practices and such modes of perception. In order to get closer and closer to becoming, van Gogh and the 'Expressionists' developed new practices of painting which were, in Nietzsche's sense, psychological. While their modes of observation and expression are related, their nuances reveal how distinct they actually are from one another, if not to a large degree even opposed. What is of concern is their relation to nature and their modes of observation and expression. Are they stripping Isis of her veils, are they adorers of her surfaces, or do they invoke completely different gods?



In the Neue Galerie's exhibition *Van Gogh and Expressionism*, the "tremendous influence which van Gogh exerted upon Austrian and German Expressionist artists" was explored as an exhibition for the first time. It was developed in association with the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, where the show originated and ran from 24 November 2006 – 4 March 2007. When Max Pechstein, one of the Die Brücke artists, declared that van Gogh was father to all the 'Expressionists,' the Dutch painter's fate as one of the progenitors of early twentieth century art was reverently declared. What influence signifies demands interrogation, but that will temporarily be deferred. Aside from such testimony, and the letters, diaries, and journals of the 'Expressionist' artists further substantiate the debt, the paintings themselves provide the most compelling and forceful evidence, attesting that van Gogh's impact on 'Expressionism' is incontrovertible. Sons though—all but one of the painters, Gabriel Münter, in the exhibition were men—are not the mere shadows of their fathers; often, even while influenced by them they are simultaneously at war with them, locked in violent contests in order to free themselves to discover their own paths. It is an agonistic event. At very least, van Gogh was a dynamic catalyst whose life and paintings served as explosive models for an age on the verge of creation and destruction.



My great wish is to learn to *change and remake reality*. I want my paintings to be *inaccurate and anomalous in such a way that they become lies, if you like, but lies that are more truthful than literal truth*.

(Vincent van Gogh)

In January of 1885, several months before painting *The Potato Eaters*, Vincent van Gogh declared in a letter to his brother Theo that "whether people approve or do not approve of what I do and how I do it, I personally know no other way than *to wrestle with nature* long enough for her to *tell me her secret*." When expressing the manner of his method of creating, van Gogh revealed the character of his relationship to nature, embodying a tradition or heritage that erupted with Heraclitus. In referring to his relationship with nature as a 'confrontation that made him feel more himself,' van Gogh defined his bond with nature not as passive, but as active and *agonal*. Nature, though something he was in awe of, was something he wrestled with, something he said he was in "a hand-to-hand struggle with." It was a competition. Out of that struggle, which was marked by an ascetic type of suffering, his vision of art was formulated and refined, though it was always to undergo transformation.

One year after seriously taking up drawing, van Gogh emphasized the value to his brother Theo of devoting one's life "to expressing the poetry hidden"

not only in “the figure of the laborer,” but in plowed fields, in sand, sea, and sky, elaborating an aesthetic practice of *aletheia*. Nature reveals something, speaks to the painter who investigates the world like a psychologist: “something of what wind or breath or figure *has told me is in*” the painting. The earth is van Gogh’s academy; nature is his studio; the sun is his master. He listens to them as they speak.



Greetings, Great Star! What would your happiness be, were it not for those whom you illumine?  
(Nietzsche—*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

What he creates is not born of a “studied manner or a system” but is “rather *from nature itself*.” But this is not naturalism or realism at work; van Gogh is not merely holding up a mirror to nature—that is a practice he disdained, something he criticized with derision as “still connected with romanticism.” He painted what struck him, not simply photographic resemblances of what he saw. What guided him was “passionate expression,” which was “a means of expressing and intensifying” things. What was crucial for him was painting the poetry concealed within nature. How he discovered what he referred to as the ‘secrets of nature’ must be taken into consideration.

In *The Veils of Isis*, an elucidation of man’s relation to nature and the changing conception of Heraclitus’ statement on nature, often translated as ‘nature loves to hide,’ Pierre Hadot distinguishes two methods of unveiling ‘the secrets of nature’ and they include the Promethean and the Orphic: “Whereas the Promethean attitude is inspired by audacity, boundless curiosity, the will to power, and the search for utility, the Orphic attitude, by contrast, is inspired by respect in the face of mystery and disinterestedness.” Further, the Orphic method is one that “seeks to discover the secrets of nature while confining itself to perception, without the help of instruments, and using the resources of philosophy and poetic discourse or those of the pictorial arts.” “Orpheus,” Hadot elaborates, “thus penetrates the secrets of nature not through violence but through melody, rhythm, and harmony.” In van Gogh’s immediate observation of and confrontation with nature, as well as in his immersion in literature, both of which he related directly to life and to his work as a painter, sensory perception guided his discoveries. Thus, his mode of ‘unveiling nature’s secrets’ was Orphic, which further letters as well as his practice as an artist confirm.

Yielding to the secrets of nature, the Orphic painter’s art is like that of the lyric poet who, while rooting creativity in the self, does not root it in an empirical form of the self. Rather, it is rooted in the primal Dionysian self, which is



Vincent van Gogh, *Field with Flowers near Arles, 1888*  
 Oil on canvas  
 Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, (Vincent Van Gogh Foundation)  
 Courtesy Neue Galerie New York

the obliterated self transfigured in the body of the deity. In the world of appearance as Nietzsche defines it, the logic of identity is shattered, each mask revealing but a proliferation of further masks. Yet, while nature is van Gogh's goddess, his relation to her, or *it*, is complex and nuanced. He is no simple naturalist, more the epopt of a pagan cult. Though he continuously reiterated that one must work directly from nature, he didn't merely reproduce exactly

what he saw or brought forth; instead, he used color "arbitrarily in order to express [himself] forcibly." At first, from his statements, it almost seems as if he was interested in the most extreme mimetic depiction of nature. Again and again, without reservation, he decries studio painting and with unrestrained fervor insists that painters must go outside, paint outdoors, paint under the sun, paint *in the midst of* nature, expressing in this fidelity one more binding than any other in his life. It is reality that is of paramount import to van Gogh for, according to him, one's imagination "always falls short of [nature]." He reiterates this point tirelessly. At times, the results of his immersion in nature are reinforced in the most literal manner: "I had to wipe off at least a hundred or more flies from the four paintings you will receive, not counting the dust and sand, not counting that when one carries them across the heath and through the hedges for several hours, some thorns will scratch them, etc." Material reality blends with his depiction of it as if to make it more real. Studio painters, those who work from memory, and the painters of Arabesque visions are all generally condemned. Young painters who compose from memory disgust him—"the whole thing makes me sick"—and the painters of fantastic scenes are derogatorily referred to as "*imagiers!*" From this it might be possible to conclude that van Gogh is working in the very manner that Nietzsche problematized; yet, there is a keener degree of perspicacity in his method. It is not the dream of true perception.

Instinct is a primary force for van Gogh, who continually sifted things through his *camera obscura*. Facts were anathema to him; they did not reveal truths. "I see a chance of giving a true impression of what I see. Not always literally exact, or rather never exact, for one sees nature through one's own temperament." What he was interested in was *intensification* and he was aware that what he was creating was a vision. He was *changing* and *remaking* reality, or what he could know of reality. And his overarching vision was of painting itself; of the past and *the future of painting*. To Theo, he confessed that he was nothing, that he was not interested in success, and that it was the future of painting that he believed his work would aid. The painter of the future would he said be a 'colorist such as has never yet existed' and it was precisely through his arbitrary use of color that van Gogh forged a new dimension, instigating an even more extreme and arbitrary use of color that painters such as Kandinsky, Heckel, Kirchner and others would employ. "As for me, with my presentiment of a new world, I firmly believe in the possibility of an immense renaissance of art." While his viewpoints would have most likely continued to change over time, van Gogh may have enormously disliked 'symbolist' and 'expressionist' painting. For him, the painter must depict what is *directly experienced* from reality, what is brought forth or revealed through Orphic perception yet, feeling is involved—what one feels is to enter the painting, but not to the degree that what is painted is so distorted that it is unrecognizable. Feeling in and of itself is not to dominate, let alone some psychological experience of reality. "It is the painter's duty," he declared, "to be extremely absorbed by nature and to use all his intelligence to express sentiment in his work *so that it becomes intelligible*." For van Gogh, this is "not painting things as they are, but as they are felt"—it is to make things "truer than the literal truth" and that is not by any means a slavish or mechanical imitation of nature. Nature is to be *poetized*, but always with an eye towards reality. A literary reflection perhaps bears some insight into his vision of art, or his relationship to the 'real' and the extent of how critical he was of excessive psychological interpretations of 'reality.'

While professing that, at times, he admired the work of Hoffman and Poe, he found it more than not "impossible, because the imagination behind it is ponderous and meaningless, and has *no contact with reality*." The excruciatingly sensitive painter who was faithful to the real—or his still basically mimetic image of the world—finally proclaimed that he found their work "very repulsive." It was for him too gross a distortion. There is a tightrope then that as a painter he balances on—while decrying studio painting and any kind of photographic-like mimesis of reality, he wants to remain true to nature, but to imbue it with his thoughts and feelings, and it is this inclusion of man's experience of nature or the mixture of man's experience with nature's 'secret' that defines art for van Gogh. "I can still," he said, "find no better definition of the word art than this: art is man added to nature—nature, reality, truth, but

with a significance, a conception, a character, which the artist brings out in it, and to which he gives expression, “*qu’il degage*,” which he disentangles, sets free and interprets.” Paintings that accomplish this disentanglement and unraveling of nature’s secrets through the Orphic mode “say more” and say what they are saying “more clearly than nature herself.” While the painter’s imagination may fall short of nature, art for van Gogh “sometimes rises above nature.” This occurs when the artist subsumes himself to nature and becomes a “*type* instilled from many *individuals*.” Here the shattering of the logic of identity and the continuous metamorphosis of being becomes even clearer. Van Gogh is all the painters in history. After perishing, he entered the pantheon of individuals out of which new masks would be created, and the ‘Expressionists’ reconfigured those masks, giving birth to new masks, to masks of their own which made manifest their encounter with the world. For van Gogh, nature had no significance or character; it is *the artist* that imbues the ‘goddess’ with significance and character through art. Or, the significance and character of nature cannot be expressed by nature alone, but is augmented by the artist, who gives expression to what nature cannot. The artist liberates significance and character from nature and interprets it through the fullness of expression more than nature ever can. The artist articulates the silent, manifesting images, giving birth to gods. Van Gogh makes of existence a song; the light of the sun flickers through his projector.



What beauteous pictures now  
Rose in harmonious imagery—they rose  
As from some distant region of my soul  
And came along like dreams. . .  
(Wordsworth—*The Prelude*)

It is the song of the self but that is the song of the lyric poet whose self has been obliterated and who when he speaks of the self, is speaking of an altogether different self—it is the self that reflects and expresses nature, both revealing and creating its experience and its vision of the world.

Is this the lifting of a veil, or is it a knowing dance with the veils, van Gogh dreaming the dream of appearance?



The dialogue with nature remains the condition sine qua non for the artist. The artist is a human being; he is himself nature, and a piece of nature within the area of nature . . . a creature on earth and a creature in the universe: a creature on one star among other stars.  
(Klee—*On Modern Art*)

The influence of van Gogh on the painters exhibited in *Van Gogh and Expressionism*, that their work revealed a deliberate interaction or engagement with his, was palpably clear, but how he influenced them, what they made of his work, and what their relation to him is needs to be further elucidated, as well as how their relation to nature differed from his. The primary difficulty of the exhibition, if not the precarious escarpment on which it pivoted resided in the classification of all of the painters aside from van Gogh—Kandinsky, Kokoschka, Heckel, Schiele, Gerstl, Klimt, Jawlensky, Boeckl, Pechstein, Schmidt-Rottluff, Nolde, Macke, Marc, Münter, Klee, Corinth, Meidner, and Dix—as ‘Expressionist.’ To unify these varied individuals under the rubric ‘Expressionist’—which, of course, is an act already committed by art historians—though some of them were in groups together, is to efface their singularities and to blur what is in each distinctive. It is a false construction, invented to give cohesion to a fragmented and disparate history that essentially resists such unity, or, *uniformity*. Even painters within the Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter movements, each of which only existed for several years and neither of which referred to themselves as ‘Expressionist,’ had markedly different styles.

Clearly, such terms are in the chemical sense volatile and it is only through want of some greater strength of perception that they are even sustained. It is out of the blindness of the herd, out of a sheer refusal to perceive as well as an obsession for neat historical categorizations, that, predominantly, they persist. The term itself has shadowy origins, too. As the late Donald E. Gordon, whose *Expressionism: Art and Idea* is one of the seminal studies of the so-called movement, noted, it originated not in Germany as is commonly believed but in France. The term is French and was originally associated with Moreau and after him Matisse. It was not coined in 1911 by Herwarth Walden as Stolwijk claims after the curator Jill Lloyd in his essay in the exhibition catalogue, but, as Gordon revealed, was actually invented by Antonin Matejcek in 1910. He employed the term in his essay *XXXI. Vystava: Les Indépendants*, the catalogue introduction to an exhibition of paintings from the Paris Salon des Indépendants held in Prague from February – March of 1910. In Matejcek’s essay, Cezanne was declared the “spiritual father” of the movement with Gauguin and van Gogh listed as its pioneers. Other painters deemed by Matejcek ‘Expressionist’ included the Nabi Bonnard, Fauves such as Marquet, Camoin, Puy and Matisse, and the Symbolists Redon and Girieud. The first exhibition in the world accredited as ‘Expressionist’ occurred in 1911 in Berlin and though it was referred to as French, comprised French, Spanish, and Dutch artists such as Derain, Braque, von Dongen, Vlaminck, and Picasso. When one critic of the time suggested that Pechstein should have been included in the exhibition, the director of the Dresden Städtische Kunstsammlungen, Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, found the suggestion dubious,

stated that the painters in question had no relation to one another and that the phrase 'Expressionist' signified little and was the result merely of an impasse. Only later was 'Expressionist' conceptualized and imposed by critics on German and Viennese paintings and painters, though not without resistance. During its existence, Die Brücke as a movement was never referred to as 'Expressionist,' nor were any of its members singled out as 'Expressionist' painters. And in 1912, Marc and Kandinsky rejected the title not only as an accurate description of their work but of the work of other German movements as well. Instead, if one had to define the movement as having a single style Marc thought the phrase 'Die Wilden,' which is far more fluid, more thoughtful a description of Die Brücke style. Clearly, 'Expressionist' was not a term adopted by the artists themselves, as Breton and other Surrealists adopted the term Surrealist, and it should perhaps be employed with much reservation.

One other claim which must be examined is that of the curator, Jill Lloyd, as well as numerous writers in the catalogue who second her claim, which is that *Van Gogh and Expressionism* reveals "in depth for the first time van Gogh's formative impact on leading German and Austrian 'Expressionists'." In a reply to the author of this essay, Ms. Lloyd clarified that it was the first exhibition "to develop the visual potential of the subject and to pull all the strands together." The claim is still strange and more than difficult to believe if not substantiate while riding on the qualifying "in depth" is rather tenuous. More difficult to countenance is the claim of Renee Price, the Director of the Neue Galerie, who stated that van Gogh's impact "has never been the subject of extended scholarly inquiry." Stefan Koldehoff, who wrote one of the essays in the catalogue, is seemingly at odds with these claims when noting that "the thesis that van Gogh was a role model for the 'Expressionists' is over a century old."

Van Gogh's formative impact on the 'Expressionists' is a veritable commonplace of art history and has been since early in the twentieth century. In 1907, van Gogh was even referred to as 'Germanic' and numerous attempts were made by German critics to appropriate him, as did Georg Fuchs, who compared van Gogh to Hölderlin in his 1907 *Deutsche Form*. There is Matejcek's aforementioned groundbreaking work in 1910, as well as others in the 10's. Later, in the early 20's, Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, who as noted previously questioned the validity of the word 'Expressionist,' stated in his *Die Kunst der Gegenwart* that van Gogh was "the greatest pioneer of Nordic-Germanic Expressionism." There is even a dissertation, written in the 50's by Wolfgang Eckhardt, *Van Gogh und Deutschland, ein Beitrag zum Thema: Künstler und Publikum*, which explores the very subject in question. In a review in 1954 of Werner Weisbach's *Vincent Van Gogh: Kunst und Schicksal, Vol. 2, Künstlerischer Aufstieg und Ende*, K. F. Ertel observed that one could "speak of a broadly-based and well-explored field within the framework of Van Gogh research and . . . Art Nouveau and early Expressionism," highlighting Fritz Schmalenbach's *The Basis of Early Expressionism*. And

in a review to two exhibitions (Fauves and German Expressionism) in 1966 in Paris, Aaron Sheon remarked that “Schmidt-Rottluff’s thickly painted *Self-Portrait* and Kirchner’s *Tête d’Enfant*, both from 1906, illustrate how Van Gogh’s and Matisse’s art had been diffused throughout Europe.” There is also Patrick Bridgewater’s (another essayist of the catalogue) *The Expressionist Generation and van Gogh*, which was published in 1987 (this is mentioned in the catalogue), and Donald E. Gordon’s *Expressionism: Art and Idea*, which omission of mention is especially peculiar considering it is one of the most widely available and important texts on the subject. In Germany and the Netherlands, there must be texts too which have examined this relation. More recently, and more damning, in 1991, the Folkwang Museum staged an extensive exhibition titled *Van Gogh and Modern Art (1890-1914)*, which featured works by van Gogh exhibited during the period in conjunction with over one hundred works by French and German artists who van Gogh influenced. The exhibition featured many of the same artists as the Neue Galerie exhibition, including Kirchner, Kandinsky, and Schiele, as well as many of the artists originally referred to as ‘Expressionist,’ such as Von Dongen, Derain, and Matisse. Of all the evidence, this shatters their claim more than any other. Why then make such claims? Regardless of whether this is or is not the first exploration of van Gogh’s influence and impact is inconsequential; the exhibition remains an important investigation and examination and it does I concur contain many discoveries.

To see, to perceive, to experience is wrought with difficulty and such terms as ‘Expressionist’ essentially only obfuscate, they do not clarify; employing them to articulate what one has seen is like wearing glasses when one’s sight is perfect. In the end, such terms do not illuminate but impede one’s vision and the articulation and communication of what one has seen. When the degree to which we can see is already limited, such obfuscations further diminish abilities that we cannot permit to ebb. If we are to encounter things directly, if we are to see and experience them so that our encounter with things is manifold and original, it is vital to trust our responses and to move beyond our reliance on concepts and move into the dark of not knowing, into the possibility of inexpressivity, into silence. In that is our originality and in that is our passageway to sight. Originality as Emerson said is “being, being



Ludwig Meidner, *I and the City*, 1913  
Oil on canvas  
Private Collection, Courtesy Neue Galerie New York

one's self, and reporting accurately what we see and are. Genius is the first instance, sensibility, the capacity of receiving just impressions from the external world, and the power of co-ordinating these after the laws of thought. It implies Will, or original force, for their right distribution and expression." The status of seeing aside, accuracy aside, in being completely himself, van Gogh organized, that is, shaped into a style, and presented *his* vision of the world, making his originality evident in a forceful and dramatic manner. When encountering his paintings for the first time, the painters here being examined were confronted with a mask more powerful than any mask they had ever seen. It was not the mask of one who was a dwarf of himself, it was not the mask of a god in ruins, but it was one who insisted on the absolute validity of his selves and let them flourish incandescently. It was van Gogh with the mask of the future.

In that radiant mask the future of painting truly did reside, at least one of its futures, and to each painter now considered 'Expressionist' different pathways were visible, pathways which encouraged them to manifest their originality and shape masks of their own. While initially some of them may have imitated van Gogh, ultimately, they incorporated and transformed him, finding in him a base metal out of which to forge new materials. For Kandinsky, aside from his vibrant combinations of color, van Gogh's paintings contained the seeds of abstraction, germs which he would extend to extremes far from the orbit of van Gogh's earth. Instigated by such force, Kandinsky would be able to affirm in 1911 in the Blaue Reiter manifesto that "the signs of the new inner renaissance," the very renaissance which van Gogh thought possible and effectively proclaimed, were evident. At one point van Gogh even experimented with abstractions but said in the end that though it was "enchanted ground," with it, "one soon finds oneself up against a stone wall. I won't," he continued explaining to his brother Theo, say "that one might not venture on it after a virile lifetime of research, of a hand-to-hand struggle with nature, but I personally don't want to bother my head with such things." He veered toward the abyss, but retreated from it, probably as we can infer because of his ultimate fidelity to nature, to his inability or refusal to consider more unsettling perspectives. Later, the 'Abstract Expressionists' would shatter form in an even more pronounced if not violent manner and extend painting into domains van Gogh foresaw but did not venture into and probably would have detested more than Francis Bacon. To Kokoschka, it was van Gogh's link with the figurative tradition and his fervent humanism which aided later artists in avoiding what he saw as the 'dangers' of abstract art. For Heckel, the dramatic intensity of van Gogh's visuality was completely unique, encouraging the artist's own vivid and striking depictions of reality. Schiele's inclusion in the exhibition is perhaps more intriguing than that of any other painter—perhaps even more than Klimt's—for, at least visually, in terms of the application of paint, van Gogh's influence on the Austrian painter is not as discernible. There

may actually not be one, but without the excoriating clarity of the wandering Dutchman's self-portraits, the impetus for Schiele's extreme, hyper-conscious and histrionic self-portraits may not have come so freely. It was the energy, the galvanic force, and van Gogh's self-reflexivity, his knowledge that what he was creating was a vision as well as his life which affected a diverse array of painters, each with distinct and powerful visions of their own, attesting to the richness of van Gogh's work and what it was, and *still is* capable of provoking.

In general, most of these artists directed their attention not toward nature but toward their own inner worlds, making van Gogh's extensive influence ridden with tension. However, while they did pivot away from nature, in another sense, it remained their sole concern. True, the natural world that van Gogh immersed himself in was not of abiding interest to most of the painters here, yet they focused on 'nature' just as intensely; that is, not on the natural world but on *themselves* as representatives of nature. As noted by Klee in the epigraph to this section, the artist is "himself nature, and a piece of nature within the area of nature." "It is not form," he said, "but a kind of inner truthfulness that determines whether or not a painting will have achieved something of significance." Franz Marc declared that the painter "has only to listen to [his] own conscience—he who honestly asks will be told when the feelings that he expressed in his paintings were genuine and when he contented himself, frivolously, with empty formalistic shapes." What marks the highest if not sole level of achievement here is not adherence to natural form or one's ability to adequately or strikingly depict such forms. The painter is now free from all the previous constraints or demands of painting but given, and all gifts are comprised of dangers as the German sense of the word connotes, perhaps the most strenuous constraint or demand of all—that of striving for *inner truthfulness, of listening*, and listening is a difficult art, *to the music of one's own inner depths*. In this is a decisive shift. Van Gogh focused on the natural world and attempted to discover its secrets, though cognizant that what he saw was affected by his temperament. It was not some truth, but a perspective of the world. However, while he did lead the way out of the rigid 'optical' naturalism and 'scientific' coloring of the 'Impressionists,' his paintings remain almost logical in comparison to those of the 'Expressionists.' In his work there is a structure and order that overrides any distortion. In van Gogh's paintings, a tree is always a tree. A table is a table. A field is a field. The colors of such things may lack verity, but the forms remain realistic whereas the 'Expressionists' shatter natural structure almost altogether. In fact, one of the stated goals of the Blaue Reiter manifesto was the very "displacement of the center of gravity in art, literature, music." If the center of gravity is displaced, then perspective is displaced and the whole world becomes a topsy-turvy abyss. Where perspective in van Gogh is disrupted or flattened out, in most 'Expressionist' work it is completely obliterated. In many 'Expressionist' paintings, it often isn't clear what one is seeing and in

Alexej von Jawlensky, *Self-Portrait in Top Hat*, 1904  
Oil on canvas  
Private Collection, Courtesy Neue Galerie New York



that is a deliberate practice. A tree may be an amorphous blur; a table a block of color; a field of grass a sea of fire or a tumultuous ocean. There is no ground; there is no above or below; there is no sustaining law but only the eternal flux, the chaos that is chance, the dance of fire flickering like frames of a Stan Brakhage film. The focus is entirely on the self, which is examined as nature, and an expression of that self's experience of the world. It is not a truth claim wherein some transparency has been achieved. It is an intensification and complete internalization of a focus that was formerly directed, at least predominantly, outward. The nether regions the 'Expressionists' explored as psychologists were the nether regions of their psyches. The poetry they painted was not that which was concealed within the natural world, but what they brought forth from within themselves. It is not that van Gogh was the apotheosis of the subject-self, for while imbuing all of his work with

what he felt, in the end he always deferred to nature, but that all of the painters considered 'Expressionist' apotheosized the self as hitherto it never had been in the history of painting. In an epoch when the status of the subject could not have been more tenuous, as if it might slip away forever like an eel gliding through our hands, it became a major point of orientation. That fragile stability of the self remained; it is apparent in even the most aggrandized self-portraits, revealing that the very selves that created them could dissipate and vanish, if they ever existed at all.

In Alexej von Jawlensky's eerie *Self-Portrait in Top Hat*, 1904, the distinction between the natural world and the painter is nearly erased. In fact, it doesn't exist. He is blended into nature, or nature is fused into him as he is fused into it, a swirl of forces ready to consume one another. His left eye is visible, but is on the verge of vanishing as is his body, which is being consumed by the greenery about him. His top hat is the sole vestige of civilization—his clothes are already in the midst of transmogrification—and the firmest object in the painting; otherwise, the painter could be a flower within the larger field of nature, or something that nature will eventually consume entirely. And the top hat is beginning to dissipate, its edges dissolving in the storm of green about him. The instability of materiality is hauntingly palpable.

Herbert Boeckl's *Portrait of Kurt Plahna*, 1917, is similar in its near obliteration of the subject, whose intensity remains but which is also blended into its

surroundings, a whorl of violent, contrasting colors reflecting an emotional intensity and inner turmoil in which van Gogh's influence is obvious. Conversely, the macabre darkness of the painting, its real ferocity if not terror, is lost in the exhibition catalogue and looks like a wholly other, much lighter, less apocalyptic work—Plahna died at sixteen in the defense of Carinthia weeks after the portrait was made. The reproduction of the painting is not even remotely accurate. This is a serious flaw with all of the reproductions, which distort the colors of the paintings and make them bright when they aren't, while many lack the luminosity they have in life, such as van Gogh's *Self-Portrait*, 1889, which is as radiant as few paintings in the world. Its glow is mesmerizing, like the light of the moon piercing an emerald in the blackest night.

Schmidt-Rottluff's *Self-Portrait*, 1906, is another instance of an ironic emblazoning but near erasure of the subject, which is threatened by and fractions from amalgamation by its surroundings. The defining features of the painter's visage are clear enough—Schmidt-Rottluff accentuates himself through an intensification of color and thick, short dabs of paint—but he is amorphous, more a fiery mixture of shape-shifting colors that merge into the background of the painting than in any of van Gogh's self-portraits.

In Emil Nolde's *Portrait of Schmidt-Rottluff*, 1906, the distinction between the subject and the background is in part nebulous, too. His gaze, which is directed towards the left field of the painting as if something is approaching to obliterate him, is full of apprehension. Many of his features are clearly defined—he is as much a part of the background of the painting as it is of him. Where the self, or selves inhere and the natural world ends or begins is strictly *not* clear.

This aspect of the above paintings could be seen as a figuration of the self as nature, of a depiction of the tenuous membrane separating man from the world which, in van Gogh, is always on the verge of exploding. In his reality, the world is aflame, like glass in a crucible, the whorl and torrent of becoming pushed to an extremity but not yet breaking open. In the world of the 'Expressionists,' the glass never makes it to the annealer. It explodes from the thermal stress. It is broken open. Chaos is presented in its unabashed formlessness and the world as appearance flourishes in all of its terror, flickering violently before us, an apocalypse ready to consume not merely



Emil Nolde, *Portrait of Schmidt-Rottluff*, 1906  
Oil on canvas  
Stiftung Seebüll Ada und Emil Nolde  
Courtesy Neue Galerie New York



Ludwig Meidner, *Apocalyptic Landscape*, 1913  
Oil on canvas, 26 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches  
Fishman Family Collection

every individual, but the world itself. Here we are, exploding together, in Meidner's *Apocalyptic Landscape*, 1913.

This is not the dream of true perception, nor the obscuring mirror which does not know that it obscures. This is world as appearance in its fullest, most scintillating sense. This is world as appearance in its horrific truth.

In refusing to try to depict the world in a

realistic manner, which they knew wasn't possible, the 'Expressionist' painters overcame the threat of the *camera obscura*. The world as glittering illusion was given its full glory. They did not see things as they thought they were but created a vision of the world; they interpreted it and pushed what was impulse in van Gogh to its absolute extremity. In their phantasmagoric use of color, the 'Expressionists' became the arbitrary colorists of the future that van Gogh called forth. For him, the painter had to depict what he directly experienced from reality; what the 'Expressionists' depicted was the direct experience of their own inner selves. That was something van Gogh may have found ponderous and meaningless as, clearly, these painters had less contact with 'reality' than did Hoffmann and Poe, but then, perhaps their contact with reality was even sharper, perhaps they approached reality as van Gogh never had, perhaps they moved into the dark abyss of becoming, in which terror often threatens obliteration. "Art," as Oscar Wilde said, "finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror." In knowing that the mirror is but an obscuring device, in knowing that the veils of the saving sorceress could not be removed, the 'Expressionist' painters confronted the tragic reality of the world. As they dreamt, they were inventive without return; in that plenitude, out of such abundance, through such sacrificial expenditure, they were nature in action, giving birth to joy and to terror, knowing full well that their encounter with the world was but one encounter, one film strip flickering through a projector, as reliant upon light as upon darkness, not a

revelation, but yet another appearance flickering forth. The recreation of new values was for them not possible without the simultaneous destruction of the ossified values at rule in their time, not only in painting, but in life itself. In their confrontation with the world as tragic, they refused the myopic lie of Socratic optimism and they refused the belief in a stable and comforting truth, rushing instead like bulls into the terrifying ambiguity of the abyss. It is the world that laughs as we perish; it is the world that dances as we evaporate. It is the world as will to power and nothing besides. . .

**Title page images:**  
**Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield Behind St. Paul's Hospital with a Reaper*, 1889 (detail)**  
**Oil on canvas**  
**Museum Folkwang Essen, Courtesy Neue Galerie New York**  
**and**  
**Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889 (detail)**  
**Oil on canvas**  
**National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney**  
**Courtesy Neue Galerie New York**

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