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WHERE ARE THE SHOES? KATHERINE CHANDLER

Jacques Derrida begins the essay "Martin Heidegger and the Shoes of Van Gogh" with a series of questions. One of the polyphonic voices asks, "What of shoes? What, shoes? Whose are the shoes? What are they made of? And even, who are they?"¹ Layered between these voices, I propose another use of Derrida's theories to link geography and art. To the voices in his essay, another series of questions is posed. Where are the shoes? Where are the still lifes with shoes located? Which territories claim the shoes? This interrogation reverberates with Derrida's concerns in *The Truth in Painting*; in this collection of essays, he challenges the limits that demarcate artworks, suggesting that it is the *paregon*, a play between features internal and external to the piece, which gives rise to a work of art. In the aforementioned discussion of Heidegger and Van Gogh, Derrida links the philosopher's position to Van Gogh's paintings of shoes, challenging the delineation between artist, artwork, and viewer. To explore the above questions of location, I propose a similar play of features, focusing on the geographies implied by each of the positions.

This examination suggests that artworks, such as Van Gogh's still lifes of shoes, occupy various locations and considers what it would mean for Van Gogh's works to be positioned between them. To some, such a move may seem counter-intuitive. Why can't Van Gogh's artworks simply be located? The still lifes with shoes, produced by Van Gogh between 1886 and 1888, were painted in France. Does that make them French? Van Gogh, however, was born in the Netherlands. Would this make the works Dutch? And, if one considers the paintings, they are scattered. Some are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (F 461), others at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam (F 255); one painting, with three pairs, is at the Fogg Art Museum in Harvard University (F 332). What is more, these paintings could be lent to other institutions, making it difficult to determine where they currently are. This raises the question, if the shoes could be anywhere, are they perhaps located nowhere? Is location no longer important for art, replaced, instead, by flickering, atemporal, aspatial images and globalized circulation – hallmarks of postmodernism?

In contrast to such a view, one can also ask whether, in fact, artworks are so easily severed from the social and geographic contexts where they are produced, interpreted, and exhibited. Could a discussion about Van Gogh omit all reference to location? Moreover, it is not just Van Gogh that is implicated by this discussion. Would Heidegger's correspondence, so carefully reviewed by Derrida, make any sense if there were no geographical points where one could place the contested pair of shoes? Just as the question "what are the shoes?" holds various responses, "where are the shoes?" similarly suggests multiple locations. In what follows, I will therefore analyze the still lifes with shoes considering *where* they could be. I will show that the artworks are not displaced; rather, they are located while simultaneously extending beyond their territorial limits. Through this discussion I propose a possible way of connecting artworks to locations without being deterministic in their placement.

How to locate art?

While many investigations in art history are bounded by territorial considerations, the implications of these positions often seem to be overlooked. Many museum collections are unquestioningly organized based upon the principle of location, dividing artifacts according to their geographical point of origin. Even in halls of contemporary art where, some might argue, the artist's birthplace is of little importance, labels usually contain some reference to the artist's nationality. As Alexander notes, "nationalistic assumptions remain deeply embedded in our studies and continue to inform much of even our contemporary art historical discourse."²

Recently, however, some art historians have begun to explore this question, again, pointing to the complex relation between art and location. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann in *Toward a Geography of Art* thoroughly reviews previous approaches to the topic. His account, which is compiled primarily from German sources, also offers an explanation as to why many art historians of the post-Second World War era are hesitant to directly discuss the link between art and geography. Kaufmann shows that in the 1920s and 1930s many of the investigations that explored this relation were tainted by the politics of the period. He states: "Although clearly not all German theorists of national identity were by any means racist or Nazis, some art historians who expressed themselves during the 1930s on questions of nationality of art and also explicitly on its geog-

raphy definitely fell into this ideology."³ I would agree with Kaufmann, however, when he states that "... the fact that older approaches have often led (and may continue to lead) to results that are at best problematic does not mean that art geographical questions are not worthy of scholarly consideration."⁴

By ignoring the question of location, art historians may further reinforce stereotypical conceptions of race and nationality; potentially, there is much to be gained if these dilemmas are explored more directly. This possibility is best evidenced in Kaufmann's discussion of the cultural historian Aby Warburg. "... [Warburg] discusses how he himself, and cultural historians in general, should not be shy to cross boundaries but should refuse to be intimidated by border guards who stand at the frontiers of disciplines"⁵ The border guards that Warburg refers to can be seen not only at the metaphorical limits of disciplines but also, quite literally, as the border police that demarcate one territory from another. Instead of being beholden to these boundaries, investigations of art can explore how works both pertain to and extend beyond these limits.

Homi Bhabha's book *The Location of Culture* explores the question of location from a post-colonial perspective. Bhabha explains how cultural differences seem to be diminished by presenting them as part of a seamless fabric of time and space. Part of his theoretical proposal is to critically maintain difference, insisting upon the value of considering culture within distinct spatial-temporal contexts that are neither consistent nor stable. Examining the project of modernity, he notes

[Modernity] ensures that what seems the "same" within cultures is negotiated in the time-lag of the "sign" which constitutes the intersubjective, social realm. Because that lag is indeed the very structure of difference and splitting ... then each repetition of the sign in modernity is different, specific to its historical and cultural conditions of enunciation.⁶

For Bhabha, culture must be considered locally, immersed in the specific qualities of time and space that continuously circumscribe it. While Bhabha writes primarily about post-colonial cultures, his criticism holds for Western cultures as well. Cultural critics run the risk of subsuming all contemporary products under the same headings, ignoring how sameness and difference are continuously played out in varied contexts.

Location as *parergon*

Bhabha's discussion of how sameness and difference are enacted in locations brings me to Derrida's proposals in *The Truth in Painting*. Central to Derrida's thinking is the use of *différance*. Derrida rejects the idea that a word or a sign's meaning is grounded in direct experience. Rather, he says, words and signs are only intelligible in relation to each other; accordingly, the possibility of meaning exists only in the space, or absence, between signs. In terms of art, this theory is most clearly developed in his discussion of the *parergon*. He defines the term as " ... neither inside nor outside ... it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate, and it gives rise to the work."⁷ The *parergon* may be linked to framing, although it is not the frame one typically places around a work of art. Instead, it is undefined space that acts as part of the work and as part of the wall. According to Derrida, meaning is produced through the resulting play of interiority and exteriority. Thus, what one typically understands as exterior, i.e., criticism, theory, historical context, etc., becomes internal to the works of art and part of one's perceptual experience.

Derrida never applied the *parergon* specifically to concerns of geography and art. Yet, questions of location certainly influence the production of meanings; the frame that delineates a work of art in space also connects it to places, bearing on what is thought to be internal to the art. Thus, to the above list of internal-exteriorities, I add geography. The correspondences that are typically assumed to exist between an artwork and a location are thus challenged. Conceived by way of *parergon*, both representations of places internal to the piece of art or contexts external to the artwork are simultaneously brought to the foreground. This model challenges the separateness of what is inside and outside the frame. Locations themselves become implicated in artworks, interior to the pieces connected to them, while artworks extend beyond their boundaries.

For the book *The States of "Theory,"* Derrida notes the double meaning of state, showing its use "... both in the sense of the political institution ... and in the sense of state as report, assessment, account = statement."⁸ Later in the essay, he observes that theory, in the singular, seeks to form a kind of state, a total account or statement of all the others. He cautions against this totalizing effect, holding that theory actually acts as a jetty and, as such, generates movement rather than producing a singular, impermeable boundary. Indirectly, he

suggests this same formulation may be applicable to political states, emphasizing the link between his discussion and the seismic activity in the state of California, where he initially presented the paper. In highlighting the seismic quality of the locale, Derrida suggests that even territorial boundaries may not be as totalizing as expected. Instead, they are in continual drift, slowly moving and, even, occasionally, transformed by earthquakes.

Borrowed from this essay is Derrida's problematized conception of a state. In referring to questions of geography and art, it is impossible for a territory to claim totalizing control of the artwork. The characterizations of any location drift, and this movement pertains not only to geographical features and limits, but also to the connected boundaries of politics and culture. While it seems possible to posit certain, stable patterns of movement in relation to specific locations and works of art, these limits can always be exposed to unexpected seismic influences, which may radically transform them. Additionally, because the status of locations is never stable, their connections to works of art are also in flux.

Boundary changes of all types impact how artworks are seen. Works of visual art take up space; as such, artworks double locations. That is, works of visual art remark upon a location or, even, various locations, through their presentation. Locations can vary enormously, be they abstract zones beyond figuration or opaque, nondescript rooms; a table, covered with delicate lace; or representations of landscapes, landmarks, and dreamlike scenes. However, in presenting a scene of any kind, works of art extend beyond their frame. While it might seem that this doubling could produce a direct correspondence between a work of art and a location, this unequal duplication instead points to the impossibility of essential, determined territorial limits.

By showing that a singular location is somewhere between one and two, a territorial state is destabilized. This leads to the transfigurative potential of an artwork, shown through the *parergon's* possible attachment to multiple territories. At the same time, because the *parergon* is always spatial, it never completely dislocates the piece from various settings. Artworks are always being linked to locations, whose boundaries they both transform and reify. Thus, it is not only drifting "states" that impact and give rise to works of art; it is also artworks, through spatial duplication, which act to reformulate geographies. I will now turn to Van Gogh's still lifes with shoes and the geo-

graphical states they imply as an example of how this theoretical frame can be applied.

Where are the shoes?

At first glance, any one of the various still lifes with shoes painted by Van Gogh seems to be a poor choice to examine the relation between location and art. Heidegger points to this difficulty, stating

From Van Gogh's painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand. There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong – only an undefined space. There are not even clods of soil from the field or the field-path sticking to them, which would at least hint at their use. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet –⁹

It is this reference that Meyer Schapiro refers to in his critique of Heidegger. He is of another opinion, however, writing that the shoes can be clearly located, "They are most likely pictures of the artist's own shoes, not the shoes of a peasant. They might be shoes he had worn in Holland, but the pictures were painted during Van Gogh's stay in Paris in 1886-87..."¹⁰ Reformulated, it seems as though Heidegger and Schapiro's debate questions the location of the shoes. Both authors posit (im)possible relations between the shoes, locations, and owners, offering readings based upon internal and external features of the work. Searching for correspondence to either the inside or outside, both Schapiro and Heidegger fail, to some extent. Considering location, instead, as a *parergon*, both inside and outside, Van Gogh's still life with shoes moves between locations, not the least of which are Holland and Paris.

Following Heidegger, one can move from the cavity of the shoes to the interiority of the works. In the paragraph that follows the quote above, he observes the "dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes." Although he initially uses this gap to connect the shoes to the "toilsome tread of the worker," the dark opening in the shoes can be more simply seen as an absence. As Derrida suggests, it is too much of an assumption to link the shoes to a specific walker. Yet, Heidegger correctly highlights the relation between the shoes' dark openings and movement. As he concludes, "In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be."¹¹ The location of the shoes is a

Vincent Van Gogh
Shoes, 1886
Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)
[F 255]



place of movement, shuttling between the interpreter, the artist, and the work of art.

Despite Heidegger's careful observation of the opening in the shoes, he does not explore how the shoes are also situated. Look at how in the Van Gogh Museum's *Shoes* (fig. 1) and the *Three Pairs of Shoes* in the Fogg Art Museum (F 332), the use of shadow dissolves the separation between the shoes and the ground. In Baltimore's *A Pair of Boots* (fig. 2) and the picture in the Metropolitan Museum (F 461), the brushwork accentuates the connection between the shoes and their placement. In these paintings, the shoes are meshed with the ground of the artwork. While the dark gap inside the shoes points to an absence, the shoes themselves show a connection to place. Now, this relation is not, as Schapiro would have it, an authoritative placement, which corresponds to the artist's location. Rather, the shoes themselves simply point to the impossibility of being completely displaced. At the same time, this is not, as Heidegger might have it, a movement between absences; instead, the shoes move between locations. Meshed to their context in the painting, the shoes, and even the mobility of the shoes, maintain connections. The works of art show how shoes of any kind are placed according to relation. Although no definitive assessment of the location of the shoes can be offered, they are framed in relation to places, incorporating not only their setting into the painting but also, through the shoes' cavity, references to locations outside of the work. Locations are thus related through the artwork, emphasizing how its placement is established through connections between internal and external elements.

Derrida may refer to this dimension when he writes, "... something takes place when shoes are abandoned ...";¹² the emphasis, which is his own, points to how location is performed by the still life paintings. The literal action of "taking place" might be linked to the movement of walking, precisely the kind of "taking place" that would be done in shoes. Van Gogh's trajectory as an artist took him from the Netherlands to France. The paintings themselves have been transferred throughout the world. Heidegger saw Van Gogh's work in Amsterdam, when he visited in 1935; now more than a million tourists see the painting at the Van Gogh Museum annually. In this way, Van Gogh's paintings of shoes are meeting points and, also, places of dispersion. What the viewer sees in the painting is never a singular location; instead, it is the various states that have traveled through the painting and their never stable relations.

Vincent Van Gogh

A Pair of Boots, 1887

Baltimore, The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland (BMA 1950.302) [F 333]



Conclusion

The grounded shoes thus extend beyond their frame, connecting the work of art to where it is viewed. The relation between the sole and the ground reproduces how artworks are experienced, in places. This ground in the artwork doubles the contextual ground just outside the frame, accentuating how it is located, for the moment, corresponding to a territory. This may be further emphasized by references to place, like the label indicating Van Gogh's Dutch nationality, just outside the frame. This movement seems to fix the artwork in place. At the same time, the absence or gap, invitingly just inside the darkened opening of the shoes, breaks with this grounding, suggesting the possibility of movement outside these particular, territorial limits, referring to other limits, other locations, other artworks, other shoes. It points to the *parergon*, where the work of art arises, challenging the limits of interiors and territories by both reproducing and breaking their limits.

The position of Van Gogh's shoes has little to do with one, actual location. Instead, the works are relational, moving between the grounds where they are viewed, represented spaces, and other contexts they may be associated with. In many ways, the discussion between Schapiro and Heidegger thus becomes moot, the answer affirming the perspectives of both. Yet, each is also incorrect to the extent that an exact correspondence between the painting and a specific location is insisted upon, be it France or an undefined territory. In each case, either what is perceived as exterior or what is perceived as interior is given precedence. The artworks' doubling of shoes is never equivalent, however. Instead, the paintings of shoes de-stabilize both what is inside and what is outside by moving between locations. In this transformation, Van Gogh's still lifes of shoes raise questions about their possible placement, while never severing links to places.

The movement between locations implied by the responses to the question "where are the shoes?" in Van Gogh's paintings proposes a range of directions to further examine the intersection of art, geography and political territories. Situating the paintings in various places referenced by the artworks, the artist and his interpreters suggests it is misguided to insist upon a direct correspondence between art and territory, just as it is problematic to conceive of the artworks as completely absent from places. Instead, artworks can be productively examined through their movement between locations, paying attention to how

art enacts places. It is the artwork's "remark" upon places that both links it to territories defined politically and geographically, while also suggesting its capacity to redefine and challenge the totality of both.

land door Van Gogh en zijn tijdgenoten 1870–1890, Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh) 1980. This exhibition never had an English-language catalogue and was overshadowed by the subsequent series of high-profile blockbuster exhibitions of Van Gogh during the 1980s and the centenary exhibitions of 1990.

14 Fred Leeman and John Sillevius, *De Haagse School en de jonge Van Gogh*, Zwolle 2005.

15 A recent exhibition in Munich and Rotterdam examined precisely this issue in relation to the Hague School painters themselves; see Jenny Reynaerts and Mattie Boom, *Der Weite Blick: Landschaften der Haager Schule aus dem Rijksmuseum*, Ostfildern 2008.

16 Griselda Pollock, "The Hague School at the Royal Academy," *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 125, no. 963 (1983): pp. 375-9. See also Hans Kraan, "The Vogue for Holland" in De Leeuw et al., *The Hague School*, pp. 115-124.

17 J.G. van Gelder, *The Genesis of the Potato Eaters*, London 1947; Albert Boime, "A Source for Van Gogh's Potato Eaters," *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, vol. 67, no. 6 (1966): pp. 249-253; and, more recently, Louis van Tilborgh et al., *The Potato Eaters by Vincent van Gogh*, Zwolle 1993.

18 G.-Albert Aurier, "Les Isolés," *Mercure de France*, no. 1 (January 1890): pp. 24-29.

19 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London 1975.

20 Letter to Theo van Gogh: "And I don't repent it, and now, far from the country again, I often feel homesick for the country of paintings." For a detailed structuralist analysis of the tropes and metaphors as well as the ideological and psychological structure of this important letter, see my doctoral thesis *Van Gogh and Dutch Art* (University of London 1980), and my forthcoming book *Reading Van Gogh: Modernism, Place and Memory*.

21 This is a slightly different but nonetheless indebted argument from T.J. Clark's famous reading of Manet and modernism, in which he argues that modernism after Manet risked insignificance rather than discovering the means to signify the specificity of social and psychic experience created by new urban-industrial capitalist forms of social relations. See T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, London and New York 1986.

22 Roger Fry, *Transformations*, New York 1956, pp. 235-236.

23 Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern. An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art*, New York 1973, pp. 132-133.

24 The full analysis of this cultural politics of reception forms the opening chapter of my forthcoming book *Reading Van Gogh: Modernism, Place and Memory*.

WHERE ARE THE SHOES?

1 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago 1987, p. 257.

2 Quoted in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art*, Chicago and London 2004, p. 101.

3 DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art*, p. 80.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

6 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p. 247.

7 Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 251.

8 Jacques Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neo-Logisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms," in David Carroll (ed.), *The States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, Stanford 1990, p. 69.

9 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *idem, Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York 1971, p. 33.

10 Meyer Schapiro, "The Still Life as a Personal Object. A Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh (1968)," in *idem, Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, New York 1994, p. 136.

11 Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," p. 35.

12 Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p. 265.

VAN GOGH AS AN EXPORT PRODUCT OF THE STEDELIJK MUSEUM 1945–1973

1 For the collaboration between Sandberg and the engineer Van Gogh, see the present author's previously published study *Expressie en ordening. Het verzamelbeleid van Willem Sandberg voor het Stedelijk Museum, 1945–1963*, Rotterdam 2004, and *idem, "Omwillen van Van Gogh. Sandberg als promotor van een Kunsthistorisch Studiecentrum,"* in Saskia de Bodt, Jenny Reynaerts, and Jan de Vries (eds.), *Studiecollectie. Interpretaties van kunst uit de negentiende en twintigste eeuw*, Amsterdam 2001, pp. 101-114.

2 H.L.C. Jaffé, "Ter inleiding," exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam (Stedelijk Museum) 1945, p. vi.

3 *Ibid.*, p. xii.

4 *Ibid.*, p. xi.

5 See Andreas Blühm, "Displaying Van Gogh, 1886–1999," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1999): pp. 62-83.

6 V.W. van Gogh, "Woord vooraf," exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh*, Liège (Paleis voor Schone Kunsten), Brussels (Paleis voor Schone Kunsten), and Bergen (Museum voor Schone Kunsten) 1946-47, p. 5.

7 He agreed to loan work to Germany again only in 1951 and 1956, although Jaffé communicated to Hildebrandt Gurlitt in a letter, dated February 10, 1956, that the engineer still felt "ziemlich feindlich" regarding a Van Gogh exhibition in Germany. A work was loaned for the first time again to Italy in 1952, while Japan had to wait until 1968. Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Archives. (With thanks to Monique Hageman, Van Gogh Museum.)

8 Quote from V.W. van Gogh's notes for his first lecture in Stockholm, 1946; see also, for