

Reassessing Heidegger on Van Gogh: Artistic Experience as Contextual Displacement

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Abstract

This article offers a novel account of Heidegger's long-debated discussion of a painting of shoes by Van Gogh in 'The Origin of the Work of Art'. I argue that the Van Gogh episode is best understood as a carefully staged textual enactment of Heidegger's conception of artistic experience, properly construed. On my reconstruction, such experience involves a transformative reconfiguration of the experiencer's context of disclosure – a dynamic I refer to as 'contextual displacement'. After laying out this conception, along with two further background assumptions that inform my approach (concerning the reliability of equipment and its 'fading away'), I present a fine-grained reconstruction of the Van Gogh episode, foregrounding its performative dimensions and complex internal structure. I then show how the contextually displacing character of artistic experience accounts for these features, making sense of why Heidegger constructs the episode as he does. I conclude by contrasting my approach with that of Stephen Mulhall, who highlights similar aspects of the episode but arrives at strikingly different conclusions.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Heidegger's brief but enigmatic discussion of a painting of shoes by Van Gogh in his 1936 essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (OWA) has long been a focal point of controversy in the scholarly literature on his philosophy of art.

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Spanning scarcely six pages in the German edition (GA5: 18–24/OBT: 13–16), the episode has elicited responses ranging across the full spectrum of interpretive space.¹ At one end, Julian Young dismisses Heidegger's 'reverie on Van Gogh's painting of shoes' as 'almost completely irrelevant to, indeed [...] inconsistent with, the real thrust of the essay' (2001: 5). At the other, Iain Thomson considers 'Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh's painting [...] actually the most important part of his essay' (2011: 71), modelling the proper way to engage not only with artworks, but with entities in general. Such examples could easily be multiplied.²

The scale of this disagreement is no accident. Heidegger's reasons for introducing the episode, and the precise nature of what it is meant to accomplish, are, on close inspection, far from transparent.³ A provocative recent intervention by Stephen Mulhall (2019) proposes that the key lies in the peculiarities of the episode's textual and rhetorical staging – particularly what he identifies as its performative and dramatic dimensions. On this basis, Mulhall offers a surprising reinterpretation: rather than exemplifying a successful engagement with art, as is commonly assumed, the episode would stage a failure of such engagement. On his reading, Heidegger subtly dramatises how artworks may fail to work when approached inappropriately.

In this article, I offer a novel account of what takes place in the episode. Like Mulhall, I take seriously the rhetorical strategy at play – both as a hermeneutic key and as an *explanandum* in its own right. However, I argue that the very features Mulhall highlights support, rather than undermine, the idea that the episode instantiates a *bona fide* artistic encounter – provided we adequately construe Heidegger's conception of artistic experience. On the view I develop, the Van Gogh episode is best understood as a carefully staged enactment of the very phenomenon that conception seeks to grasp. At its core, I propose, Heideggerian artistic experience involves a transformative reconfiguration of the experiencer's context of disclosure – a dynamic I refer to as *contextual displacement*. The episode, I claim, enacts precisely this transformation. Recognising this enables us to see its structural and rhetorical peculiarities as philosophically coherent and purposeful.

My discussion proceeds in four stages. In §2, I introduce and motivate three background assumptions that structure my approach, including the key features of the conception of artistic experience I ascribe to Heidegger, and which, I will argue, the Van Gogh episode instantiates. In §§3–4, I offer a fine-grained reconstruction of the episode, foregrounding its performative character and tracing its complex internal dynamics. In §5, I bring the assumptions from §2 to bear on this reconstruction, showing how the episode functions as a textual enactment of Heidegger's account of how artworks 'work'. Finally, in a concluding coda (§6), I contrast my interpretation with Mulhall's, in order to bring out the specificity and broader implications of the view advanced here.

2 | THE BACKGROUND

As anticipated, my reading of the Van Gogh episode proceeds from three background assumptions. In this section, I lay out and motivate these assumptions. A full defence of each would require a dedicated treatment. However, I take myself to be entitled to treat them as starting points on the grounds that there is sufficient textual evidence for them to be reasonably ascribed to Heidegger. My reading of the Van Gogh episode may then be regarded as conditional upon their soundness. But conversely, their joint capacity to ground a compelling construal of the episode – a paradigmatically difficult test case for any exegesis of Heidegger's philosophy of art – may in turn be regarded as further evidence in favour of their interpretive correctness.

The three assumptions are as follows:

1. for Heidegger, the encounter with Van Gogh's painting affords an experience of the being of equipment, i.e. of equipment's 'reliability' (*Verlässlichkeit*);
2. for Heidegger, the reliability of equipment has 'faded away' (*hingeschwunden*), i.e. it is concealed in our ontological epoch, such that, at present, we do not and cannot encounter equipment as reliable;

3. for Heidegger, artistic experience is (potentially) (a) contextually displacing and (b) ontologically manifesting – in senses to be specified.

Let us take each of them in turn.

2.1 | Equipment's Reliability

According to assumption (1), Heidegger takes Van Gogh's painting to afford an experience of the being of equipment – a mode of being he names *reliability*. The idea behind this claim is as follows. The painting depicts a pair of shoes. Like Heidegger's more canonical example from *Being and Time* (BT) – the hammer – shoes belong to a determinate ontological class, or, as I will prefer to say, they are an instance of a determinate *kind* of entity. This kind Heidegger names *equipment* (*Zeug*). On Heidegger's pluralist ontology, different kinds of entities *are* in fundamentally different ways – that is, they exhibit distinctive *modes of being*.⁴ In BT, Heidegger had offered an extended analysis of the mode of being that makes equipment the kind of entity it is, which he labelled *readiness-to-hand* (*Zuhandenheit*). What marks out ready-to-hand entities is their inherent capacity to 'afford the doing of particular actions in particular contexts' (Wrathall 2025b: §2.1.1). In OWA, however, Heidegger expands this account. He now claims that the readiness-to-hand of equipment is itself grounded in a more fundamental ontological trait – what he characterises as 'the fullness of an essential being of equipment' (GA5: 19/OBT: 14). This trait he names reliability. Reliability is thus introduced as part of a deepened account of equipment's ontology – one that supplements the analysis of BT, now regarded as incomplete.

Thesis (1) is the least controversial of my three background assumptions. Or at least, it should be. That it might be taken not to be is a curious feature of the scholarly reception of OWA. Several commentators on the Van Gogh episode fail to register Heidegger's explicit claims about reliability.⁵ In doing so, however, they overlook a central element of Heidegger's own framing of the episode. As he writes:

The equipment-being of equipment, [i.e.] reliability, [...] was found. But how? [...] [O]nly by bringing ourselves in front of Van Gogh's painting. [...] The artwork let us know what the footgear is in truth.
(GA5: 20–21/OBT: 15)

This passage, it seems to me, straightforwardly commits Heidegger to thesis (1) – the claim that he takes Van Gogh's painting to afford an experience of equipment's being *qua* reliability. The substantive questions the thesis raises are not whether Heidegger is committed to it – he clearly is – but rather exactly *what* reliability is, and *how* it is manifested in an encounter with the painting. I return to the latter question later in the article. As for the former question, a few remarks are in order here.

Reliability, as I read it, names the specific way in which equipmental entities such as shoes contribute to the establishment of a particular ontological configuration. For Heidegger, an ontological configuration is a determinate way according to which everything that *is*. Such configurations are historically inflected. Intuitively, for instance, the technological configuration Heidegger sees as prevailing today differs profoundly from the *ens creatum* configuration that, on his account, was in place in the Western Middle Ages. Today, entities are encountered, ultimately, as resources; in the Western Middle Ages, they were encountered, ultimately, as divine creations in accordance with divine ideas. For post-BT, mid-1930s Heidegger, what makes an entity the kind of entity it is – what makes, for instance, a piece of equipment equipmental rather than, say, thingly – can be understood in terms of its distinctive way of contributing to the effective historical establishment of such ontological configurations. In the language more common in contemporary Heidegger scholarship, we might say: by how it helps to disclose and sustain a historically specific understanding of being.

Importantly, for Heidegger in this period, ontological configurations exhibit a twofold structure: they are, in his terms, worldly-earthly.⁶ That is to say – to a first approximation – they function by virtue of a comprehensive network of meaningful references (a world) being embedded within an underlying dimension (the earth) that simultaneously sustains, constrains, and resists being fully subsumed by the world. This distinctive mutual relationship between world and earth, through which a given ontological configuration is historically established and maintained operative, Heidegger calls a strife (*Streit*).

In OWA, Heidegger famously characterises artworks as entities that ‘set up a world’ and ‘set forth the earth’ (see GA5: 27ff./OBT: 20ff.), allowing their strife to unfold in terms set by the work itself. In the scholarly reception of Heidegger’s middle-period thought, strongly shaped by OWA, the world-earth strife has accordingly tended to be treated as standing in a privileged relation to the being and working of artworks. OWA itself certainly presents the world-earth strife primarily, and most extensively, in connection with artworks (see GA5: 27ff./OBT: 20ff.). This emphasis, however, obscures the fact that Heidegger in this period assigns the notion a broader scope. Already in OWA itself – indeed, in the course of the Van Gogh episode – he explicitly, if only cursorily, construes reliability (i.e. the being of equipment) in world-earth terms: ‘This piece of equipment [i.e. the shoes depicted in Van Gogh’s painting] belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the peasant woman’s *world*’ (see GA5: 19/OBT: 14, original emphases). This brief, easily overlooked indication is now significantly expanded in a recently published set of notes from the OWA period, in which Heidegger develops his world-earth-based account of reliability in a way that both aligns with and clarifies what appears only in compressed form in OWA – a development recently discussed by Wrathall (2025a).⁷

The broader scope of Heidegger’s conception of the world-earth relationship, extending beyond artworks themselves to equipment (and possibly beyond),⁸ has traditionally gone largely unnoticed in the scholarship – a neglect bound up with the more general neglect of his account of reliability noted above. Yet this broader scope is exegetically significant. It allows for a more adequate appreciation both of Heidegger’s revised account of the being of equipment and of its relationship with the being of artworks, in a way that – as I will argue – proves crucial for understanding the specific dynamics of the Van Gogh episode.

In this renewed framework, what makes entities like shoes *equipmental* is not only, and not primarily, as per BT, their readiness-to-hand. Rather, it is the fact that equipment (a) ‘veils’ (*verhüllt*) and ‘shelters’ (*birgt*) the world that its user inhabits through it, while simultaneously (b) allowing the earth to be discovered as something ‘contributive’ (*beiträglich*) to worldly practices (GA82: 64). These interrelated functions define how equipment modulates the strife between world and earth. It enables us to navigate our worldly contexts while, as Wrathall puts it, ‘harness[ing] the forces of the earth in such a way as to minimise the resistance and maximise the sustaining force that the earth gives to the world’ (2025a: 14). It is in this way that equipment contributes to the establishment of a given ontological configuration.

This contribution is realised through the enabling and facilitation of concrete practices whereby the configuration is concretely articulated and rendered inhabitable. Proper hiking shoes, for instance, allow one to ascend a steep hill with relative ease; formal shoes, by contrast, would impede the task. Hiking shoes ground the practice of hiking by seamlessly integrating us into the worldly nexus of references whereby hiking is the practice it is. In so doing, the world is ‘veiled’, i.e. made to withdraw in favour of the task at hand. But it is also thereby ‘sheltered’, insofar as the world functions as – indeed, it *is* – a world precisely by virtue of receding from salience, allowing us to be immediately immersed in the relevant worldly activity. At the same time, hiking shoes make it so that the earth ‘contributes’ to the practice of hiking: they render the uneven hilly terrain traversable by both tempering its resistance and converting it into dependable support.

Crucially, we thereby encounter no manifest tension between the worldly practice and its earthly basis: the two are harmoniously conciliated by the shoes’ doing – a doing by virtue of which they count as reliable in Heidegger’s technical sense. Accordingly, the effect of equipment’s modulation of the world-earth strife is that the strife itself is ‘veiled’ (GA82: 65, emphasis omitted), i.e. withdrawn from salience within the domain of what may be encountered.⁹ World and earth *remain* at strife, but through reliable equipment, we are able to inhabit our worldly-earthly

configurations as though this were not so – that is, to navigate them as something familiar to us. In this sense, as Heidegger writes, through reliable equipment, ‘the familiar [is] first grounded as such’ (GA82: 64).¹⁰

2.2 | Reliability's Fading

With this in place, I now turn to assumption (2). According to it, Heidegger regards equipment's reliability as having ‘faded away’. As he writes in the relevant passage, our usage of equipment tends to ‘grind[] itself down and become [] ordinary’ (GA5: 20/OBT: 15). This, in turn, affects the very being of equipment, which itself ‘falls into desolation’ (*ibid.*):

Such desolation of equipment-being is the fading away [*Hinschwinden*] of reliability. [...] The worn-out ordinariness of equipment then imposes itself as the only way of being that is – seemingly – exclusively its own. Only sheer usefulness is now visible.

(ibid.)

Roughly, then, we are presented with a dynamic whereby our relationship to equipment (our usage of it) degrades, so that equipment can now only be grasped as useful (rather than reliable).¹¹ As this passage attests, that Heidegger in some sense takes reliability to have faded away, as per assumption (2), is uncontroversial. The question, of course, is just what this fading amounts to.

For present purposes, I will understand the issue as follows. For reliability to have faded away is for it to have come to be concealed over the course of the history of being, such that in our current ontological epoch, we do not, and indeed cannot, encounter equipment as reliable. To encounter it as reliable would be to relate to it as something that grounds and actively shapes our inhabiting – something that precedes and makes possible our very existence in a familiar world, through the modality of world-earth strife modulation described above. It would mean encountering equipment as something on which we depend, and which, conversely, enjoys a degree of independence from us.¹² But such a mode of encounter, on Heidegger's view, is unavailable to us at present. Equipment is for us something we make so that our technological purchase on things be enhanced – hence something that depends on us (as its makers), rather than something on which we ourselves depend (for our inhabiting). It is an ‘inherently meaningless resource[]’ in a broader network of such resources, each ‘standing by to be optimised and ordered efficiently’, on Thomson's (2011: 178) apt gloss on how entities show up within technology.

On this reading of reliability's fading, then, it is not that equipment *itself* ceases to be reliable. The point is that, given the ontological configuration underlying our epoch, it can no longer be encountered as such by us. Equipment itself *remains* reliable; and indeed, it remains so, precisely insofar as it contributes to establishing the very technological configuration according to which equipment is *not* encounterable as reliable. Today, that is, reliable equipment functions to secure an understanding of being which, as it were, fails to reciprocate, by not giving equipment its ontological due.

2.3 | Artistic Experience

We now come to the last of my assumptions. Assumption (3) concerns the nature of Heideggerian artistic experience, which it characterises in terms of two features: such experience is (potentially) (a) contextually displacing and (b) ontologically manifesting.

Before turning to these features, however, a terminological clarification is in order.¹³ A central commitment of Heidegger's account of art is that our encounter with artworks cannot be reduced to psychological goings-on unfolding within a self-contained subjective sphere. Indeed, Heidegger takes precisely such a reduction to be definitive of the account of artistic encounters advanced by traditional aesthetic theory – a principal target of his critique. Within that tradition, the paradigmatic notion for the kind of occurrence involved in encounters with art is *Erlebnis*,

most straightforwardly translated into English as ‘experience’. Accordingly, my talk of a *Heideggerian* artistic *experience* may initially appear to be a contradiction in terms, collapsing Heidegger’s position into the very framework he seeks to reject.

This appearance is dispelled, however, once a key distinction is drawn. German has two main terms for what English names ‘experience’: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. In ordinary usage, their difference can be roughly captured as follows. *Erlebnis* denotes the kind of experience one undergoes in a particular, discrete instance, often marked by heightened intensity (‘The performance was an overwhelming experience’). *Erfahrung*, by contrast, denotes the kind of experience accrued through a temporally extended process, typically culminating in expertise (‘She has years of experience in printmaking’). *Erlebnis*, derived from *leben* (‘to live’), connotes an intensely felt – ‘lived’ – undergoing. *Erfahrung*, derived from *fahren* (‘to travel’), suggests a process of acquisition – a ‘journey’ through which one comes to ‘learn’ or ‘find out’ (both available renderings of *erfahren*) something that could not otherwise have been attained.

In philosophical context, this distinction is often rendered by translating *Erlebnis* as ‘lived experience’, thereby foregrounding its etymological root, while reserving ‘experience’ *simpliciter* for *Erfahrung*. Within the history of modern aesthetics, it is accordingly *lived* experience, construed in subjectivist terms, that comes to be regarded as the appropriate notion for capturing what takes place in encounters with art. Aesthetic experience, traditionally understood, is thus a species of the genus *Erlebnis*. It is precisely this conception that Heidegger rejects, culminating in the well-known pronouncement at the close of OWA:

Aesthetics considers the artwork as [...] the object of *aisthesis*, of sensory apprehension in the broad sense. Today, this apprehension is called lived experience [*Erlebnis*]. [...] Lived experience is the authoritative source not only for the enjoyment of art, but also for its creation. [...] Yet perhaps lived experience is the element in which art dies.

(GA5: 67/OBT: 50)

This rejection of aesthetic (lived) experience, however, does not entail a wholesale abandonment of experiential vocabulary. On the contrary, *Erfahrung* and its cognates occupy a central place in Heidegger’s lexicon, designating a non-subjective mode of experiential relationship to something that is thereby disclosed and apprehended in a distinctive manner.¹⁴ In this article, I draw on Heidegger’s broader usage of *Erfahrung* in order to preserve a meaningful notion of artistic experience without thereby being committed to the reductive conception of *lived* experience that he explicitly repudiates. My talk of artistic experience throughout should therefore be understood as designating the encounter-side of encounters with art, and as implicitly contrasted with, and irreducible to, talk of aesthetic lived experience. Although OWA does not explicitly employ the phrase ‘artistic experience’, it nonetheless, I submit, licenses such usage indirectly. Heidegger can, for instance, write that ‘it is through the work that we first experience [*erfahren*] the equipmentality of equipment’ (GA5: 57/OBT: 43). The notion of experience operative here is not that of *Erlebnis*, and yet it is taken as constitutive of the distinctive kind of encounter that the artwork (here, Van Gogh’s painting) affords. What is at issue, then, is not whether artworks can be experienced, but how such experience is to be understood.

Having distinguished the relevant sense of experience from the one Heidegger is at pains to overcome, the task is thus to characterise just what experiential encounters with artworks, properly understood, involve. Assumption (3), to which this section is devoted, offers such a characterisation by identifying two defining features: artistic experience is, as noted, (potentially) (a) contextually displacing and (b) ontologically manifesting. We can now turn to these features in turn, beginning with feature (b).

2.3.1 | Ontological Manifestation

By ontological manifestation, I mean here, minimally, that access to being may be phenomenologically afforded – that is, that being may show itself – by virtue of engagement with an artwork. Heidegger’s commitment

to feature (b) is directly implied by assumption (1) above. Assumption (1) states that Heidegger takes Van Gogh's painting to afford an experience of equipment's being. This implies that artistic experience in general is *potentially* ontologically manifesting – since the Van Gogh encounter involves an instance of it *actually* being so.

This seemingly straightforward point, of course, raises a number of further questions: what does it mean for being to be manifested artistically? Why, how, and when can such manifestation occur? And how does it relate to cases in which no such manifestation seems to take place? A full treatment of these issues lies beyond the scope of the present article, which is primarily concerned with the other feature of artistic experience identified in assumption (3), insofar as it is – as will become clear below – the primary driver of the Van Gogh episode. Some preliminary clarifications concerning the manifestation at issue are nevertheless required.

On Heidegger's view, the artistic manifestation of being is *sui generis* in character. As is well known, one of OWA's central claims is that artworks are sites of a distinctive modality of the happening of truth – one among a plurality of such modalities, each irreducible to the others (see GA5: 49/OBT: 37). This implies that the kind of ontological manifestation afforded by artworks is itself *sui generis*: 'The work of art opens up the being of entities *in its own way* [auf seine Weise]' (GA5: 25/OBT: 19, emphasis added). A defining feature of this mode of manifestation is that it involves a direct experiential apprehension of the relevant ontological *relatum*. As thus given, being is said by Heidegger to 'appear' or 'shine' (*scheinen*). As he writes, in reference to the Van Gogh episode:

In the work of art, the truth of entities has set itself into work. 'Setting' here means: bringing to a stand. In the work, an entity – a pair of peasant shoes – comes to stand in the light of its being. The being of the entity comes into the constancy of its shining [*in das Ständige seines Scheinens*].

(GA5: 21/OBT: 16)

Just what this 'shining' of being amounts to is not something I can hope to settle here. Three clarifications, however, are in order.¹⁵

First, to encounter being as artistically manifested – in the Van Gogh case, to encounter equipment's reliability as manifested through the painting – is not to be understood in cognitive terms. In particular, it is neither to grasp a proposition about the being of equipment, nor to grasp the 'being' of equipment as though it were a determinate propositional content. This has its counterpart, and its ground, in the fact that, *qua* mode of being, reliability is not itself an entity. The claim that the reliability of equipment manifests itself in the encounter with the painting is to be understood as pointing to a thick phenomenological finding, ultimately available only via a concrete experiential undergoing – and, at the same time, as an invitation to attend to the painting in the way thereby indicated.¹⁶

Secondly, it is essential to distinguish the *experiential access* to being as manifested through the artwork – here, reliability's 'shining' in an encounter with Van Gogh's painting – from its *philosophical articulation*. The account of reliability offered in §2.1 above, as a distinctive modulation of the world-earth strife, belongs to the latter. Such articulation, as Heidegger provides it in OWA, is *grounded* in the experiential manifestation afforded by Van Gogh's painting, but it is not in any sense equivalent to it. The painting affords a *sui generis* access to reliability; on the basis of this access, a philosophical account of reliability is then developed that seeks to make explicit what has been experientially disclosed. This account, in turn, forms part of a broader philosophical framework that explains, among other things, just why the painting is needed for us to encounter the depicted shoes *as* reliable in the first place (more on this in §4.2 below).

The Van Gogh episode thus comprises *both* an experiential access to (a mode of) being (reliability's own 'shining') *and* a philosophical interpretation of (that mode of) being as accessed through that experience (reliability construed as a modulation of the world-earth strife). This distinction is crucial for singling out the specific contribution of the artistic encounter within the overall picture. What art affords – and what other modes of truth-happening cannot – is a direct (and, in particular, non-cognitive) apprehension of being's 'shining'. The experience of the being of equipment that Heidegger takes to occur in the encounter with the painting is, in the first instance, of this kind. Philosophical elaboration is grounded in this experience and further buttresses it by inscribing it within a broader

theoretical framework. To conflate the two would be to collapse distinct modalities of ontological insight which, though capable – as in this case – of functioning synergistically, are fundamentally different in kind. Accordingly, the manifestation of reliability through the painting is not the deliverance of an ontological thesis about equipment, but rather a distinctively artistic mode of ontological access, from which reflective articulation – and, in particular, the formulation of ontological theses (e.g. that the being of equipment is reliability; that reliability is a modulation of the world-earth strife, etc.) – may subsequently be drawn.

Thirdly, artistic ontological manifestation should be understood as a complex phenomenon, in which the manifestation is inseparable from the opening up of the domain within which it can take place. Artworks are thus not to be understood as solely making being ‘shine’, but as simultaneously and necessarily enabling access to the very context that makes such ‘shining’ possible (on the connection between the two in the Van Gogh case, see §5 below). This brings us directly to the second feature of artistic experience identified in assumption (3), to which I now turn.

2.3.2 | Contextual Displacement

Having established that Heidegger is indeed committed to the ontologically manifesting character of artistic experience, as claimed by feature (b) of assumption (3), and having offered some preliminary indications of what such manifestation does and does not involve, we can now address feature (a). According to feature (a), artistic experience is contextually displacing. What, then, is the context from which artistic experience is said to displace? And what does such displacement amount to?

Very broadly, the context at issue here is what we might refer to as a *context of disclosure*. A context of disclosure is a frame of reference within which entities are encountered as entities in a certain specific way. Each such context, for Heidegger, defines a whole, internally integrated and coherent, more or less local domain of intelligibility, within which things make sense according to a unified governing pattern. On Heidegger's account, to the extent that we exist, we are always already operating within the scope of one context of disclosure or other.

Importantly, we operate, proximally and for the most part, within *ordinary* contexts of disclosure. Therein we deal with entities against the background of deep familiarity whose structures Heidegger had analysed, in BT's Division I, in terms of being-in-the-world. We are immediately immersed in the worlds of our everyday concern, and highly conversant with the referential networks that define its web of significance. Yet while pervasive, this mode of existence is, for Heidegger, both derivative and ultimately unstable. As he writes in OWA, although ‘[w]e believe to be at home [*heimisch*] in the closest neighbourhood of entities’, so that ‘entities are familiar, reliable, ordinary [*geheuer*]’, ‘the ordinary [*das Geheure*] is at bottom not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary [*un-geheuer*]’ (GA5: 41/OBT: 31).¹⁷

The point here is that the familiarity with entities we enjoy within our ordinary contexts of disclosure rests on the prior consolidation and entrenchment of these very contexts.¹⁸ But these contexts, in turn, are not given once and for all. Rather, for Heidegger, they are ultimately the result of an original creative projection (*Entwurfung*), whereby their distinctive configuration is first articulated.¹⁹ The very familiarity of everydayness partly depends on a concealment of such underlying projective origins. The converse of this is that any attempt to bring to light what our ordinary contexts may be concealing will have in some way to undo their hold – it will have to estrange us from our taken-for-granted modalities of disclosure.

Now, this is a function Heidegger sees artistic encounters as distinctively suited to perform. Above, I discussed how reliable equipment functions by *veiling* the strife between world and earth, thereby grounding our familiarity with things. This is precisely the opposite of what artworks do. Artworks work by *unveiling* strife as strife. Part of what this means is that they have the capacity to bring out the latent contentiousness that underlies our familiar, seemingly uncontentious contexts of disclosure. They do so by making the world salient, disengaging us from our unthinking immersion in it, casting it in uncanny light; and by simultaneously making salient its embedment in an earth that essentially resists reduction to worldly terms. But this means that the artwork works constitutively *against*

ordinariness. For ordinariness depends on the concealment of the very strife that the artwork, by its essence, works to unconceal. Conversely, ‘through the work, everything ordinary [...] becomes a non-entity [*Unseienden*]’ (GA5: 60/OBT: 45). In being disrupted, the ordinary is simultaneously revealed as what it is and had been all along – namely, a way of making sense of things that purchases a pervasive familiarity at the cost of concealing both its underlying grounds and its levelling function: ‘It comes to light, i.e. into the open, that hitherto there prevailed occlusion and dissimulation and distortion of entities’ (GA80.2: 581, emphasis omitted). It is here that Heidegger theoretically anchors the de-familiarising, elusively revealing import that we are sometimes inclined to attribute to our most meaningful encounters with artworks.

Thus, while both equipment and artworks function by modulating the world-earth strife, they do so in mirroring ways, with correspondingly opposed effects, as Heidegger himself makes explicit: ‘Here [i.e. in the case of reliable equipment] [it is] precisely the reverse as in the case of the artwork’ (GA82: 64, emphasis omitted). Artworks unveil what equipment veils: they bring to light the strife underlying the everydayness that equipment sustains.

In its proper form, then, artistic experience necessarily disrupts the normative texture of everyday dealings. But this means that adequately to encounter an artwork involves an undermining of the very ordinary context of disclosure from within which the artwork itself is initially approached. Ordinariness thereby gives way to an experience of strife, in the specific terms that the artwork at issue configures it. This involves a transposition into a different, *non-ordinary* context of disclosure, wherein such strife is allowed to come into view. For Heidegger, genuine artistic encounters are essentially marked by this double movement, whereby the work ‘transports us into [*rückt ein*] [its] openness and thus at the same time away [*(rückt) aus*] from the ordinary’ (GA5: 54/OBT: 40). This transportation ‘away’ and ‘into’ is what Heidegger calls a *displacement* (*Verrückung*) (see *ibid.*).²⁰ Such movement, of course, is *sui generis* in kind:

[W]hat is strange is that the work does in no way act upon [*einwirkt*] the entities hitherto [in being] through causal connections. The work’s impact [*Wirkung*] does not consist in an efficaciousness [*Wirken*]. It rests in a transformation, happening from out of the work, of the unconcealment of entities, and that means: of being.

(GA5: 60/OBT: 45)

This non-causal transformation takes place by way of a transposition of the experiencer into a differently structured context of disclosure, opened up by the artwork itself:

[Art] breaks open an open place [*offene Stelle*] in the midst of entities, in whose openness everything is different than usual.

(GA5: 59/OBT: 44)

On the basis of this transposition, the possibility arises for the experiencer to explicitly take up what is brought into view. Heidegger’s term for an experiencer who resolves to do so is *preserver* (*Bewahrende*). Without a preserver, the opening into which the artwork displaces us is liable to close again – the extra-ordinary to be reabsorbed by the ordinary. Preservers counter this tendency by allowing their ways of making sense to be reconfigured in accordance with the work, and by sustaining the context into which it transposes them. They thereby, Heidegger writes, ‘follow’ (*folgen*) the displacement:

To follow this displacement means: to transform one’s ordinary references to world and earth, and henceforth to withdraw from all prevalent doing and appraising, knowing and looking, in order to linger in the truth that happens in the work.

(GA5: 54/OBT: 40)

The artwork's contextually displacing effect I focus on here may thus be understood as the condition of possibility of preservation: it is by being transported away from the ordinary and into the work's non-ordinary context of disclosure that the experiencer first becomes able to inhabit it, i.e. to preserve the work – something the experiencer may yet fail, or refuse, to do.

Importantly, the disruptive character of artistic experience can take different forms, with differing ontological import, depending on the artwork at issue and the historically specific context within which it operates.²¹ The disanchoring from prevailing ordinariness may, for example, bring to light what such ordinariness conceals, reconfigure the terms of its underlying configuration, or project an alternative configuration altogether.²² A systematic mapping of these functions would require a full account of Heidegger's being-historical conception of art, and thus lies beyond the scope of the present article. What matters here is one such function – namely, the retrieval of what has been concealed through historical forgetting – which, as I will argue, is at play in the Van Gogh episode (see §5). This retrieval function, however, should not be understood as standing in tension with other functions Heidegger assigns to artworks, in particular their historically grounding role, most prominently exemplified by the Greek temple discussed later in OWA, which has been especially influential in OWA's scholarly reception.²³ Rather, I suggest, these are best understood as distinct modalities of a single, more fundamental capacity – namely, the artwork's distinctive capacity to open up a non-ordinary context of disclosure in which being can manifest itself. The possibility of the function at play in the Van Gogh episode thus rests on the same basic capacity that underlies the artwork's other possible functions.²⁴

Of course, recognising that Heidegger ascribes to artworks a capacity for contextual displacement and ontological manifestation raises the further question of what it is about artworks that endows them with such a capacity. My own view, in a nutshell, is that this capacity is grounded in the artwork's power to articulate meaning in an inherently affectively textured manner, and thereby (when suitably encountered) to reconfigure the affective basis of our exposure to the intelligible. This points, however, to a further strand of Heidegger's theory of art, one that cannot be developed here. The aim of the present section is more limited: to present my assumption (3) – that Heidegger construes artistic experience as (potentially) (a) contextually displacing and (b) ontologically manifesting – and to show *that* he is committed to it – which, as the passages cited attest, he indeed is. The question of just what, for Heidegger, grounds these features of artistic experience – and thus *why* he is committed to them – can here be bracketed as a distinct, interpretively open issue requiring separate treatment. The argument that follows will therefore be consistent with any exegetical account of Heidegger's conception of the mechanics of artistic experience that vindicates the contextually displacing and ontologically manifesting features he attributes to it.

Having now established the three key elements of my background picture – reliability, its fading, and the ontologically manifesting, contextually displacing character of artistic experience – I return to the Van Gogh episode to show how they converge in it. To anticipate: I take the episode to be a staging, on Heidegger's part, of the experience of undergoing the kind of contextual displacement that artistic experience essentially involves (as per assumption (3)). The ontological manifestation thereby enabled is that of equipment's reliability (as per assumption (1)) – a manifestation that would have been unavailable without the encounter with the painting. This is because reliability has faded away from our own epochally situated context of disclosure (as per assumption (2)), such that a displacement from that context is needed for reliability to be encountered.

3 | HEIDEGGER'S RUSE: FROM ONTIC REPRESENTATION TO ONTOLOGICAL MANIFESTATION

Let us begin by briefly rehearsing the Van Gogh episode in its textual context. The episode occurs relatively early in OWA, in the first of the three lectures that make up the bulk of the essay, titled 'Thing and Work'. However, the route by which Heidegger eventually arrives at the introduction of Van Gogh's painting is notably convoluted – a

‘digressive, meandering, essentially errant’ path, as Mulhall (2019: 203) aptly puts it. In broad outline, the key steps are as follows:

- i. Heidegger resolves to approach the question of the origin of the artwork through a preliminary inquiry into its ostensible ‘thingly’ character (see GA5: 5–7/OBT: 4–5), i.e. the fact that artworks, at least *prima facie*, appear uncontroversially to be *things* – to which some special (perhaps aesthetic) property then presumably attaches, endowing them with their artistic status.
- ii. This leads Heidegger back to the preliminary question: what is a thing? He addresses it by reviewing what he identifies as the three main ways of conceptualising the thing’s essence, or thinghood (*das Dinghafte*), that have emerged over the history of Western thought: the thing as bearer of properties, as unity of a sensuous manifold, and as a hylomorphic whole (i.e. a composite of matter and form). Each of these is found wanting (see GA5: 7–14/OBT: 5–10).
- iii. Heidegger then singles out the third model – the hylomorphic conception – as having historically predominated not only in our conceptualisation of things, but of entities more generally. He traces the origin of the matter-form schema back to the domain of equipment, arguing that it is equipmental entities that this conceptual model is properly applied to. However, over the course of the metaphysical tradition, this schema has come to exceed its proper domain, spilling over beyond equipment into other ontological regions – including that of things (see GA5: 14–17/OBT: 10–13).
- iv. The fact that things have come to be understood through an equipmental conceptual schema then leads Heidegger further back to the new question: what, then, is equipment? This raises the challenge of accessing the essence of equipment, or equipmentality (*das Zeughafte*), in a way not already informed by inherited conceptual frameworks. To do so, Heidegger proposes a return to basics, in classic phenomenological style: beginning with a direct, pre-theoretical description of a paradigmatic, uncontroversial instance of an equipmental entity. He suggests taking a pair of shoes as such an instance (see GA5: 17–18/OBT: 13).

It is at this juncture that the Van Gogh painting is finally introduced. As Heidegger writes:

[S]ince it is a matter of immediate description, it may be good to facilitate [the shoes’] visualisation. A pictorial representation [*Darstellung*] is sufficient for such aid. We choose a well-known painting by Van Gogh, who painted such footwear several times.

(GA5: 18/OBT: 13)

From this point onwards, it is worth taking a closer look at what exactly is going on.

To grasp what the Van Gogh episode is all about, it is crucial to appreciate an easy-to-overlook (and little-noticed)²⁵ peculiarity of its presentation – namely, that there is a discontinuity between the way Heidegger introduces the painting, as just rehearsed, and what actually unfolds after its introduction.

The discontinuity at issue can be glimpsed through a telling, if subtle, textual clue. In the passage quoted, Heidegger invokes the painting ‘to facilitate [the shoes’] *visualisation* [*Veranschaulichung*]’ (*ibid.*, my emphasis). The idea is that such a visual aid would make it more convenient to describe them than if one were, say, relying on a mental image alone. The painting is thus introduced as (a) a purely representational device, and (b) something whose utility is both merely instrumental and ultimately dispensable: it serves to assist a task that could, in principle, be discharged without it.

Yet in the aftermath of the encounter with the painting, reflecting on what has taken place, Heidegger now remarks:

Above all, however, the work did *not*, as it might at first have seemed, merely serve to better *visualise* [*zur besser Veranschaulichung*] what a piece of equipment is.

(GA5: 21/OBT: 18, my emphasis)

Here, the reoccurrence (unfortunately partly lost in the standard English translations)²⁶ of the same term – *Veranschaulichung* – that Heidegger had used in introducing the painting is, I suggest, no coincidence. The repetition signals, I take it, Heidegger's intention to mark the move he has made. Whatever else the painting may have done, it did not primarily serve the function for which it was purportedly invoked.²⁷

The question, of course, is: what, then, did happen? As readers of OWA will recall, having introduced the painting, Heidegger seems abruptly to become absorbed in its contents, in a way that goes beyond any mere description. The resulting passage is well-known (and arguably more infamous than famous)²⁸:

From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field [...].

(GA5: 19/OBT: 14, Young and Haynes' translation)

The familiarity of the passage obviates the need to cite it in full. What matters for our purposes is already evident from this brief excerpt: the passage in no way offers a theoretically neutral description of shoes, with the painting serving merely as a visual aid. Rather, what we are presented with is an unanticipated articulation – highly interpretive and couched in rich, literary language – of how the shoes are depicted in the painting and what such depiction seems to reveal about them. The passage gives voice, first and foremost, to an engagement, not with a depicted *piece of equipment*, but with the *artwork* that depicts it.²⁹ And what takes place through such engagement with the painting *qua* painting, Heidegger claims, is an ontological manifestation – namely, of the being of equipment. As he writes:

[T]he work did not [...] merely serve to better visualise what a piece of equipment is. Rather, the equipment-being of equipment explicitly comes to its light first through the work and only in the work.

(GA5: 21/OBT: 16)

The painting is introduced as offering a mere representation of an entity. However, what the painting actually, and surprisingly, turns out to offer is not primarily a *representation* of the entity, but a *manifestation* of the *being* of such entity, i.e. the shoes' reliability.³⁰

With this in place, we can begin to discern the anticipated performative element at play in the Van Gogh episode. The episode is designed to set up a kind of theatrical disruption in the progression of the essay. The artwork, introduced almost accidentally while looking for the being of equipment, unexpectedly turns out to be precisely what allows such being to be found. Heidegger's way of introducing it effectively amounts to a deliberately deceptive ruse.

4 | THE ARTWORK AS TURNING POINT

4.1 | From Equipmentality to Workliness

Moreover, the episode's performative element is immediately compounded. In his reflections in the aftermath of the encounter with the painting, Heidegger introduces a further idea: that the painting afforded an experience not only of the being of equipment, but also of the being of *the artwork* itself. (His terms of art for the artwork's distinctive mode of being – used interchangeably throughout OWA – are 'workliness' (*das Werkhafte*) and 'work-being' (*das Werksein*.) Consider the following passage:

It is in it [i.e. reliability] that we first learn what equipment is in truth. But we still [...] know nothing at all of what we are properly and solely looking for: the workliness of the work in the sense of artwork. / Or have we now not inadvertently [*unversehens*], in passing [*beihet*] as it were, already experienced something of the work-being of the work?

(GA5: 20/OBT: 15)

This is another easily overlooked but key step in the Van Gogh episode's peculiar unfolding. Heidegger's discussion is carefully orchestrated so that an insight into the artwork's workliness is reached retrospectively – as though in an afterthought, following an initial failure to notice it. The point is reiterated later in the section, where Heidegger remarks:

We let a work tell us what equipment is. Thereby there came into the light of day, underhand as it were [*gleichsam unter der Hand*], what is at work in the work[.]

(GA5: 23–24/OBT: 18)

The choice of expression in this passage is telling. In the Van Gogh encounter, in experiencing equipmentality, we have *also* experienced workliness. The latter experience, however, took place 'on the quiet' – without our realising it at first.³¹ Thus, not only have we, in engaging the painting, unexpectedly experienced equipmentality. As it turns out, and just as unexpectedly, we have thereby experienced workliness as well – that is, the very thing we had been looking for *before* we even set out to inquire about equipment, and indeed what had led us to inquire about equipment in the first place. The painting is so introduced that the discovery of equipmentality, and consequently of workliness, should occur independently of, and indeed in spite of, our initial expectations.

The logic of the transition from equipmentality to workliness is made more explicit by Heidegger in the following passage:

The equipment-being of equipment was found. But how? [...] [O]nly by placing ourselves in front of Van Gogh's painting. It [i.e. the painting] spoke. [...] What is happening here? [...] Van Gogh's painting is the opening up of that which the piece of equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth.

(GA5: 20–21/OBT: 16, emphasis omitted)

These sentences mark the point at which Heidegger moves from the claim that the Van Gogh painting afforded a grasp of equipment-being, to the claim that *the very circumstance of such affording* in turn affords a grasp of work-being. This move takes the form of a retrospective reflection by Heidegger on just what it is that took place in the encounter with the painting he had just narrated. The two steps may be captured as follows:

- i. The encounter is interpreted as involving an experience of the shoes' *equipment-being*.
- ii. The experience of the shoes' equipment-being is *itself* interpreted as an experience of the painting's own *work-being*.

The singular structure of this two-step movement, and the rationale behind it, will occupy us in §5 below. For now, it is important to note that this move is how Heidegger first gets hold, in OWA, of the sought preliminary determination of work-being (as 'setting-itself-into-work of the truth of entities' (GA5: 21/OBT: 16)). With this in place, he can then move on, in OWA's second and third lectures, to inquire into the relationships between work and truth, and between truth and art, respectively. The Van Gogh episode is thus the turning point that takes Heidegger off the meandering path the essay had followed until then. In it, Heidegger dramatises the way in which it is the artwork itself that first affords what until then had been sought to no avail: an insight into the being of equipment, and indeed, precisely thereby, an insight into the artwork's own being.

4.2 | The Need for the Artwork

There is more, however. Not only has engagement with an artwork provided the necessary turning point in the essay. The very fact that such engagement should offer this turning point is itself no accident. Indeed, the outcome of the Van Gogh episode is claimed by Heidegger to show that the artwork was in fact somehow *needed* for us to determine equipment-being – and thus (given the two-step movement outlined above) to determine the artwork's own work-being. As he writes, in a passage already quoted:

[T]he equipment-being of equipment explicitly comes to its light first [erst] through the work and only [nur] in the work.

(GA5: 21/OBT: 16)

The precise scope and import of this first-and-only claim are difficult to pin down. On my reading, they are best understood in the light of the gloss I offered in §2.2 on Heidegger's claim that reliability has faded away. I interpreted this fading as the unavailability of reliability within our epochally determined context of disclosure. This suggests a view whereby our inability to directly access equipment in its proper ontological light makes it so that we need a *mediated* form of access – one that the artwork is uniquely positioned to provide. Seen in this way, Van Gogh's painting affords us an experience of reliability that, given our historical situatedness, would not have been available without it. The point is echoed at a later stage in OWA, where Heidegger writes:

What applies to equipment, [i.e.] that it is first [erst] through the work that we expressly experience equipment's equipment-being, also applies to the thing's thinghood.

(GA5: 57/OBT: 43)

And why is this so? Because, Heidegger continues, of thing-being 'we never know anything directly and, if we do, then only indeterminately'; and 'thus [we] *require* [bedürfen] the work' in order to experience it (*ibid.*, my emphasis). We owe this epistemic barrier to 'those ways of thinking which have been common since time immemorial' and which 'assail the thing's thinghood' through 'the interpretation of entities as a whole' that they 'bring to dominance' (*ibid.*).³² But such interpretation is one that is also 'incapable of essentially grasping equipment' in its equipment-being (*ibid.*). The artwork's mediating role is thus necessitated by our being-historical situation, insofar as our epochally determined modes of access to entities preclude, in principle, any direct encounter with things and equipment in their respective being.³³ In other words, in the specific case of equipment-being: in our ontological epoch, reliability has faded away; Van Gogh's painting allows it temporarily to resurface (more on how in §5 below).³⁴

Accordingly, the situation we now face is the following: in order to experience equipment-being, Heidegger claims, we *need* the work. But on the other hand, it is through a manifestation of equipment-being that OWA first arrives at a determination of work-being. Taken together, these yield a striking circularity: Heidegger introduces the painting – by way of a deceptive ruse – so that we may undergo an experience of equipment's being, on the basis of which we may then grasp the work's own being – and from *this*, we can then further realise that the painting (*qua* work) was in fact *required* to access equipment-being in the first place – and thereby, as a consequence, to arrive at work-being itself.

If this is right, we are left with an obvious question: why would Heidegger choose to stage this experience in such an oblique, circuitous, and theatrical way? My contention, as previously indicated, is that the account of artistic experience encapsulated in my assumption (3) above provides the key to this puzzle. How so?

5 | THE VAN GOGH ENCOUNTER AS A STAGING OF DISPLACEMENT

We are now in a position to reach the core claim of this article: namely, that the Van Gogh episode stages the very kind of contextual displacement that Heidegger identifies as a defining mark of artistic experience.

Consider the following remark Heidegger makes in the wake of the encounter with the painting (continuing a passage already quoted):

The equipment-being of equipment was found. But how? [...] [O]nly by placing ourselves in front of Van Gogh's painting. [...] *In the vicinity of the work, we were suddenly somewhere other than we are ordinarily accustomed to being.*

(GA5: 20–21/OBT: 15, my emphasis)

The italicised sentence provides the decisive clue. Heidegger speaks of our having found ourselves, in front of the painting, 'elsewhere' than ordinary. At the early point in OWA at which this line occurs, its import is bound to strike the reader as cryptic. Its meaning becomes clearer, however, when we recall the discussion in §2.3.2 of how artistic experience relates to ordinariness. In that light, the encounter with Van Gogh's painting emerges as an uprooting from the ordinary context of disclosure within which we initially approach it. According to assumption (2), that context is such that reliability has faded from it. The encounter with the painting thus effects a temporary reconfiguration of our contextual situatedness, such that reliability may be retrieved from its historically induced concealment.

Against this background, the last-quoted passage can be readily cashed out in terms of Heidegger's conception of artistic experience as essentially displacing. The Van Gogh encounter, I suggest, amounts to a performative rendering of an experiential undergoing of such displacement. The 'suddenness' of our finding ourselves 'somewhere other' than ordinary reflects the underlying non-causal contextual shift whereby, as Heidegger puts it, 'everything ordinary and hitherto [in being] becomes a non-entity' (GA5: 60/OBT: 45).

Once the Van Gogh episode is seen in this light, I submit, many of its otherwise puzzling features cease to be so. One such feature is the abrupt shift in tone and style that marks the paragraph in which the encounter itself is related, setting it apart from both the preceding and the subsequent text. On an uncharitable reading, this may be (and has been) dismissed as an arbitrary self-indulgence on Heidegger's part.³⁵ The perspective I am proposing, by contrast, allows us more charitably to see it as motivated by the very phenomenon Heidegger is trying to articulate. The tonal and stylistic shift may be seen as tracking the underlying experience of abrupt de-normalisation and reconfiguration that the encounter effects.

The episode's convoluted internal structure also comes into clearer view. As we have seen, Heidegger arrives at the determination of work-being (or workliness) via (reflecting on our having undergone an experience of) equipment-being (or equipmentality). We are now in a position to see that this detour is not circuitous by accident or whim, but for reasons integral to the logic of Heidegger's account.

On my reading, the encounter with Van Gogh's painting works by repositioning Heidegger (and, fictively, 'us') within a new context of disclosure – one in which the reliability of the depicted shoes has room to manifest itself. The contextually displacing ontological manifestation of reliability *just is* the painting's working *as* a work. This is a layered phenomenon. One way to formally capture its structure is through conceptual tools Heidegger introduces in BT, where he distinguishes between appearing (*Erscheinen*) (in a technical sense), self-showing (*Sichzeigen*), and self-announcing (*Sichmelden*) (see SZ: 29ff.). Something X appears (in the technical sense) if and only if X does *not* show itself *and* X announces itself through something else Y which does show itself. Thus, for instance, an illness 'appears' in this sense in that the illness does not show itself, strictly, but it announces itself through its symptoms, which – and insofar as they – do show themselves. The symptoms, by showing themselves, indicate the underlying illness, which is thereby announced.

In this terminology, we can reinterpret the relationship between equipment-being and work-being in the Van Gogh episode as follows: in the encounter with the painting, equipment-being *shows itself*, whereas work-being *appears*, i.e. it does *not* show itself, but *announces* itself through the self-showing of equipment-being. Thus, Heidegger's retrospective working his way back from equipment-being to work-being could be understood as a move from what showed itself in the encounter (i.e. equipmentality) to what thereby announced itself

(i.e. workliness). Our experience of the self-showing of reliability is, at the same time and precisely thereby, also an experience of the self-announcing of the being of the artwork.

This helps make sense of why, in the episode, ‘what is at work in the work’ comes ‘into the light of day’ inconspicuously at first – ‘underhand, as it were’ (GA5: 23–24/OBT: 18), as Heidegger puts it. Initially, we are caught up in the (unexpected) self-showing of equipmentality. It is only afterwards, upon reflecting on just what it means that equipmentality should have shown itself through an encounter with a painting, that we come to realise that *that* was also the self-announcing of workliness. For again, on Heidegger’s view, the ‘working’ of work-being, at its core, *just* is the happening of the displacement whereby the being of entities (here, of equipment) may show itself (as per assumption (3)). As he writes, explicitly linking the point back to the Van Gogh episode:

[A] work’s work-being essences [west] and essences only in such an opening up [i.e. of the domain to which it belongs]. We said that the happening of truth is at work in the work. The reference to Van Gogh’s painting attempted to name this happening.

(GA5: 27/OBT: 20)

In Heidegger’s retrospective analysis of the encounter, then, the experience we undergo in encountering the painting is first to be understood as one of reliability’s manifesting itself – i.e. as an ontological manifestation. But this very manifestation, properly understood, occurs by way of our transposition from the ordinary into an extra-ordinary context of disclosure – i.e. through a contextual displacement. And work-being can now be determined precisely as *that* mode of being whereby such an ontologically manifesting displacement, which the Van Gogh encounter has first phenomenologically attested, takes place. Hence Heidegger is able to derive his determination of work-being as the setting-itself-into-work of the truth of entities.

We thus arrive at a coherent account, grounded in the matter itself – i.e. the nature of works – of why Heidegger would construct the Van Gogh episode as he does. In order to reach a determination of work-being as ontologically manifesting displacement, the artwork is presented *in* its work-being by *embodying* in the text the very experience of undergoing such a displacement. But displacement amounts to a transposition from our ordinary context of disclosure into an extra-ordinary one. Hence, crucially, the need for Heidegger to introduce the painting, at the outset, under a pretext. By doing so, he sets the stage for dramatising the experience of displacement from the standpoint of a beholder who initially approaches the artwork in an ordinary way.

The need for such dramatisation, in turn, is rooted in the nature of ordinariness itself. Ordinariness is such as to inherently escape notice. That is, it functions precisely by *not* being grasped *as* ordinariness. So long as it prevails, it simply *is* the background against which things make sense – and remains so until something comes along to disrupt it. The ordinary can only come to be grasped *as* ordinary on the basis of an acquaintance with the non-ordinary, with which it may be contrasted. This structure is familiar from daily life: the habitual character of our everydayness often becomes visible only in contrast with an unexpected event that interrupts its course. When the disruption passes, we are thrown back into the habitual, which thereby ceases once again to be explicitly apprehended *as* habitual. In this sense, ordinariness and non-ordinariness are determinations that, as Heidegger writes elsewhere, inherently ‘need each other’ (GA45: 164).

Accordingly, if Heidegger’s aim in OWA is to arrive at a preliminary determination of work-being as the truth of entities setting itself to work, while beginning from a conceptual framework that (like our inherited one) is incapable of grasping this (i.e. the position he adopts at the outset of OWA), then he would need to appeal to an experience of truth setting itself to work, as a phenomenological attestation on which to anchor his ontological determination. Yet, as per my assumption (3), such an experience necessarily involves a displacement from an ordinary context of disclosure. Hence Heidegger’s seemingly theatrical introduction of Van Gogh’s painting under a deceptive pretext. This framing invites us to approach the painting in an ordinary fashion – as a mere representation of an entity (a pair of shoes) – only for us to find ourselves suddenly displaced by it, removed from the very context of ordinary disclosure in which we began. The functioning of work-being is thereby *enacted* within the structure of the text itself, in the

way it undoes the ordinary by opening up a non-ordinary context of disclosure, striking us with the thrust of its displacing power.

6 | CODA: STEPHEN MULHALL ON THE VAN GOGH EPISODE

The reading I have developed in this article construes the Van Gogh episode as a deliberate staging of contextual displacement: a textual enactment of the way Heidegger understands the artwork to work. On this view, the episode's distinctive, and peculiar, features – the detour that precedes it, the stylistic shift in its narration, and its striking internal structural convolution – may be profitably seen as integral to Heidegger's philosophical aims. Much of the confusion surrounding the Van Gogh episode could perhaps have been avoided had more attention been paid to the specificities of its presentation – a task which the literature has, to a surprising degree, neglected. As noted in §1, one notable exception is Mulhall (2019), whose interpretive approach acknowledges many of the same features I have sought to explain, but arrives at strikingly different conclusions. Briefly revisiting his account here, in the light of – and in contrast with – the present interpretation will help to bring out more sharply the specificity, philosophical stakes, and broader implications of the view I have advanced.

Mulhall perceptively notes and gives pride of place to the 'dramatis[ing]' and 'enact[ive]' elements at play in the Van Gogh episode (2019: 206). He emphasises the 'highly non-linear' (*ibid.*: 203) character of OWA's first lecture up to the episode itself, underscoring the need to read it as an essential context for appreciating Heidegger's approach (see *ibid.*: 204). He also draws attention to what he aptly calls the 'patent' 'duplicity' (*ibid.*: 206) at work in Heidegger's introduction of the painting, and highlights the remark – central to my own reading – about our finding ourselves, in the encounter with it, somewhere other than ordinary (see *ibid.*: 206–7). As noted in §1, however, what Mulhall takes these features to imply is that the Van Gogh episode in fact amounts to a *failed* attempt at encountering an artwork. He thus offers what we may call a 'revisionist' reading of the episode. For Mulhall, what Heidegger stages is actually a *refusal* on the work's part to be approached in an inadequate manner. The episode would thus illustrate 'not how [Heidegger] really thinks the truthful work of an artwork is meant to happen, but rather what happens when a certain violence is done to it' (*ibid.*: 207). The violence at issue would be precisely the attempt by Heidegger to *use* the painting as a mere means to an end (i.e. as an aid to visualising the shoes – which we saw is what Heidegger initially invokes the painting for), and moreover to do so by treating it as a mere representational device (see *ibid.*: 206). The strangeness (and what many see as the poor quality) of Heidegger's prose in the passage articulating the Van Gogh encounter would be, on Mulhall's reading, a way for Heidegger to subtly enact the inadequacy of his own attempt at engaging the painting (*ibid.*: 207–8).

The radicality of this ingenious reading, whereby the Van Gogh encounter would be the staging of a failure, is motivated by a much-needed attempt to take seriously the inner dynamics of the encounter. However, its revisionism is, in my view, misaligned with the specific thrust of Heidegger's own radicality. Mulhall, I submit, correctly identifies the distinctive features that, I have argued, are due to the encounter's being staged as the unexpected undergoing of a displacement. However, Mulhall's interpretation, operating without an account of artistic experience as displacement, takes this displacement to be a false start – a refusal on the artwork's part to be mistreated – rather than, as I propose, *the very way* in which artworks work.

Therefore, I agree with Mulhall that Heidegger's initial approach to the painting, treated as a mere representational means to an end, is an inadequate mode of engagement. And I agree with his insight that such approach is, in a sense, 'rejected' by the painting. But the rejection at issue does not take the form of a *malfunction* on the painting's part, as per Mulhall. Rather, and this is crucial – the painting refuses the inadequate approach precisely by *truly* functioning as a painting. The ingenuity of Heidegger in the episode, I suggest, lies precisely in the fact that what he stages is *not* a failure as a result of an inadequate engagement, but rather a success *in spite of* that inadequacy. The point for Heidegger is not that a misguided approach on our part will lead to a corresponding distortion on the work's part (which, in other instances, may indeed occur). Rather, it is that the work has the capacity to work on us in ways

over which we have no control. It is precisely in this way that Heidegger is able to construe artistic experience as a site of potential subversion of prevailing ordinariness, thereby breaking the vicious circle within which our epochally determined ontological understanding initially confines us. Crucial to this is that the artwork be able to work its displacement on us even against our intentions and expectations, whether explicit or implicit.

On my view, then, Mulhall is right that Heidegger approaches the painting as a mere representational device. But the relevant contrast is not between a sought representation and the work's failure to represent. Rather, as I noted, it is that between the *representation of an entity* – a pair of shoes – that Heidegger purports to seek from the painting, and the *manifestation of the shoes' being* that the painting actually effects.³⁶ What Mulhall diagnoses as a rejection on the painting's part, which motivates his own rejection of the Van Gogh encounter as a *bona fide* artistic experience, is thus, I have argued, the very way in which artistic experience takes place on Heidegger's account.³⁷

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ All citations from Heidegger will refer to the relevant volume and page number of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe* (abbreviated as 'GA'). Following standard scholarly convention, citations from *Being and Time* will instead refer to the pagination of the 7th German edition of *Sein und Zeit* (abbreviated as 'SZ'; see the Bibliography). Where the English editions do not include the corresponding GA pagination in the margins, reference to the relevant English passage will also be provided. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the German are my own. For reasons of legibility, line breaks in the original will not be preserved in the quoted passages; a '/' will indicate the original line break.
- ² Contributions to the English-language literature on the Van Gogh episode include: Schapiro (1968, 1994), Kockelmans (1985), Derrida (1987), Sassen (2001), Young (2001), Sinclair (2006), Dreyfus (2005), Harries (2009), Pippin (2014), Thomson (2011, 2024), Torsen (2018), Mulhall (2019), Wrathall (2025a).
- ³ Indeed, we do not even know with certainty which of Van Gogh's still lifes of shoes Heidegger had in mind. The painting has traditionally been identified as the 1886 *Shoes* held at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, an attribution that stems from Schapiro's (1968) influential critical article on OWA. However, Wrathall (2025a) presents a well-documented case that the more likely candidate is the 1888 version currently housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Be that as it may, the identification is ultimately irrelevant for present purposes – and arguably for Heidegger's own, for which, as Wrathall compellingly argues, 'any of Van Gogh's shoe paintings serve nearly equally well' (2025a: 18).
- ⁴ For more on which, in the context of BT, see McDaniel (2015).
- ⁵ Wrathall (2025a) discusses the issue in detail. My account of reliability below, though different from his in some important respects, is indebted to his treatment.
- ⁶ In fact, they have a fourfold structure – the strife between world and earth intersecting with a 'countering' (*Entgegnung*) between human beings and the gods. For present purposes, however, this complication may be set aside. For an account of the fourfold dimensionality of Heidegger's mid-1930s picture of fundamentality, see Backman (2015).
- ⁷ See the 'Notes to "The Origin of the Work of Art"' in GA82, recently translated into English (see Heidegger 2025).
- ⁸ In a theoretical programme Heidegger appears to have entertained during the OWA period, though without fully developing it, one might discern an attempt to distinguish modes of being precisely in terms of the differential ways in which different kinds of entities modulate the world-earth strife. For a formulation of the programme, see e.g. GA65: 389–90.
- ⁹ There is a further layer of complication here that lies beyond the scope of the present essay but bears brief mention. One might read the veiling of strife that equipment enables as itself a further mode of unconcealing strife – namely, a negative one, occurring precisely *through* its veiling. To encounter equipment as reliable would then involve – alongside the other aspects discussed in §2.2 below – experiencing it as a site of strife-veiling, hence experiencing (and thereby unconcealing) strife *as* veiled by it. A fuller treatment of this dynamic, and of its relation to the fading of reliability discussed in §2.2, would require more sustained analysis. For our purposes, what matters is that equipment does veil strife,

thereby helping to establish a regime of ordinariness, whereas the artwork, as discussed in §2.3, works in the opposite direction. I am grateful to Jonathan Krude for an insightful conversation and for pressing me on this point.

- ¹⁰ More on this in §2.3 below.
- ¹¹ ‘Usefulness’ (*Dienlichkeit*) is a determination of equipment-being that Heidegger had introduced in BT as constitutive of equipment’s readiness-to-hand. See SZ: 78.
- ¹² In reliability, Heidegger also writes, there lies ‘[t]he repose of equipment resting in itself’ (GA5: 20/OBT: 15).
- ¹³ I thank an anonymous referee for prompting this clarification.
- ¹⁴ In OWA, see e.g.: ‘*Technē*, as knowledge experienced [*erfahrenes*] in a Greek manner [...]’ (GA5: 47/OBT: 35). As a rule, when Heidegger speaks of experience in non-disparaging terms, he is employing the term *Erfahrung*.
- ¹⁵ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.
- ¹⁶ This is why Heidegger can distinguish the manifestation of *being* at play in artistic experience from the rendering by the artwork of an entity’s *general essence*, traditionally construed (see GA5: 22–23/OBT: 16–17). A general essence, understood as the set of properties that a given type of entity must possess to be the type it is, is the sort of content that can be propositionally articulated (e.g. in a definition) and cognitively grasped. Modes of being and general essences of entities are, on Heidegger’s account, fundamentally different. I thank an anonymous referee for prompting this clarification.
- ¹⁷ Here I use ‘ordinary’ to render *geheuer*, in line with standard English translations of the term in OWA (see e.g. OBT: 31 and Heidegger 1971: 52–53). Elsewhere in this article, ‘ordinary’ translates the German *gewöhnlich*. While the two German terms carry different connotations – *gewöhnlich* suggesting habit or custom, *geheuer* suggesting safety or comfort (though in modern usage the term occurs exclusively in the negated form *nicht (ganz) geheuer*, meaning ‘eerie’, ‘fishy’) – this distinction does not, as far as I can see, carry philosophical significance for present purposes. I am grateful to Jonathan Krude for drawing my attention to this issue.
- ¹⁸ ‘Presumably, what seems natural to us is only the ordinary [*Gewöhnliche*] of a long-standing habit [*Gewohnheit*] which has forgotten the non-ordinary [*Ungewohnte*] from which it sprang. However, that non-ordinary once struck human beings as bewildering and brought their thinking to wonder’ (GA5: 9/OBT: 7).
- ¹⁹ ‘The question remains as to why, and in which sense, entities are “in being” [*seiend*] for us. Beforehand [there] is always a project [*Immer zuvor ist ein Entwurf*]’ (GA65: 231) – a project thanks to and in terms of which whatever can count as an entity for us does so count.
- ²⁰ By rendering *Verrückung* as ‘displacement’, I follow both Young and Haynes (see OBT: 40) and Hofstadter (see Heidegger 1971: 64).
- ²¹ I thank an anonymous referee for prompting clarification of this point.
- ²² Cf. Dreyfus’s (2005) influential alternative mapping of artworks’ ontological function in terms of manifestation, articulation, and reconfiguration of a cultural style.
- ²³ See Young (2001) for a case that the Greek temple constitutes OWA’s paradigmatic example.
- ²⁴ And therein, I suggest, lies the key to addressing the longstanding scholarly perplexity concerning the unity of the artworks discussed in OWA – an issue I intend to pursue in further work. For an overview of the problem and the main scholarly responses, which tend to privilege one of the artworks over the others, see Haug (2020).
- ²⁵ Notable exceptions include Sassen (2001), Harries (2009), Mulhall (2019), and Wrathall (2025a).
- ²⁶ Both Young and Haynes (OBT: 13) and Hofstadter (Heidegger 1971: 32) render the first occurrence of *Veranschaulichung* as ‘visual realisation’, while rendering the second as ‘visualise’ (16) and ‘visualising’ (35), respectively – thereby obscuring the immediate and explicit connection between the two occurrences.
- ²⁷ Compare also how Heidegger summarises the relevant juncture of OWA in his own notes on the essay: ‘What a piece of equipment is? Footgear [...] ‘Visualising’ – (apparently!) [»*Veranschaulichen*« - (*scheinbar!*)] and describing – with the aid of a painting’ (GA82: 486). The scare quotes around *Veranschaulichen* and the parenthetical *scheinbar!* – to be heard as ‘merely apparently’, ‘only seemingly’ – clearly signal that Heidegger constructs the painting’s introduction in a studiedly deceptive way.
- ²⁸ ‘[O]ne of [Heidegger’s] most notorious passages of prose’, as Mulhall (2019: 207) puts it, also citing the disparaging remarks of Derrida, who finds the passage ‘ridiculous and lamentable’ (1987: 292).
- ²⁹ The point is perceptively noted by Sassen (2001: 162).
- ³⁰ In OWA-adjacent texts, Heidegger captures this distinction through the terminological contrast between *Darstellung* (representation) and *Erstellung* (‘creative establishment’). Most explicitly: ‘Art [is] creative establishment of being [*Erstellung des Seins*] (Not re-presentation of entities [*Nicht Dar-stellung des Seienden*])’ (GA82: 483).

- ³¹ The phrase is noted by Harries (2009: 89), though he does not pursue the issue further. Young and Haynes omit a translation of the phrase (see OBT: 18). Hofstadter renders it as ‘almost clandestinely’ (see Heidegger 1971: 37).
- ³² Heidegger is here referring back to the three basic metaphysical conceptions of thinghood he had surveyed earlier in OWA, which I summarised in §3 above. As noted there, OWA as a whole is structured by a movement that begins, in the first lecture, from the question of the artwork’s thingly character, leading onto the meandering path that culminates in the Van Gogh episode, from which only the artwork is finally brought into focus (for reasons that I address in §5). In the later stages of OWA, Heidegger returns to the issue of thinghood from which he had initially departed (see GA5: 57–59/OBT: 42–43). His claim, in brief, is that while a traditional approach to the artwork treats it as primarily a thing, to which some further property attaches to endow it with artistic status, an adequate account reverses this order. For thinghood itself is to be understood in terms of ‘the belonging of the thing to the earth’ (GA5: 57/OBT: 43); but since the earth reveals itself as such (i.e. in its self-closing character) only through the artwork, adequate access to thinghood must itself be mediated by the artwork. A detailed discussion of this point, however, lies beyond the scope of a reading of the Van Gogh episode (and hence of the present article), whose internal logic encompasses the being of artworks and equipment and their relationship, but not the being of things. Accordingly, while the episode is situated within an argumentative arc that begins with thinghood and ultimately returns to it, its specific role is more local – though nonetheless crucial, as will become clear in §5, in effecting the transition from the essay’s initial detour to its focus on the artwork. I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging this clarification.
- ³³ While OWA’s discussion focuses on work(–being), equipment(–being), and thing(–being), Heidegger understands such unavailability to apply across the board, to entities (in their being) in general. He captures this predicament through his notion – most prominently thematised in *Contributions to Philosophy* – of our epochally facing an ‘abandonment of entities by being’ (*Seinsverlassenheit des Seienden*). Reliability’s fading would thus be an instance of this more general occurrence. While being has ‘abandoned’ all entities, each kind of entity will have undergone such abandonment differently, according to its own mode of being.
- ³⁴ Here, it bears emphasising again what this implies for the scope of the present interpretation. The specific kind of contextual displacement and ontological manifestation effected by Van Gogh’s painting should not be taken as paradigmatic of the import of artworks as such. As noted in §2.3.2, each artwork’s import is distinctive, depending both on the specificity of its artistic make-up and on the historically concrete setting within which it operates. What is at issue here is a particular modality of artistic working, in which the work retrieves a mode of being that has become unavailable within our present ontological configuration. In other cases, the work’s import will take a different form – for instance, in the case of the Greek temple, the establishment of an ontological configuration as such, rather than the retrieval of what has been lost within one.
- ³⁵ A ‘ridiculous and lamentable’ one, on Derrida’s (1987: 292) estimation. See note 28 above.
- ³⁶ In Heidegger’s jargon, it is the contrast between the *Darstellung* of an entity and the *Erstellung* of its being. See note 30 above.
- ³⁷ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2024 European Society for Aesthetics Annual Conference, the 2024 Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy Conference, and the Existential Phenomenology at Oxford Retreat. I am grateful to the participants at those events for their helpful comments and suggestions. I owe particular thanks to Mark Wrathall, who supervised the broader project from which this paper is drawn, provided extensive feedback on earlier drafts, and whose own work on the Van Gogh episode strongly influenced my views. Research for this paper was supported by a doctoral studentship from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through the Open-Oxford-Cambridge DTP, in partnership with University College, Oxford, and by a Jacobsen Postgraduate Bursary from the Royal Institute of Philosophy.

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