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**Novelty and Intersubjective Understanding:  
Vincent van Gogh's Painting on  
Melancholy and Death**

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# **Novelty and Intersubjective Understanding: Vincent van Gogh's Painting on Melancholy and Death**

## **Abstract**

Scholars in diffusion of technology generally explain the adoption of an innovation in terms of psychological, cultural and social factors. This paper goes beyond these factors and explains the failure of accepting a novel idea in terms of intersubjective understanding. In particular, this study uses phenomenological approach to explain why Vincent van Gogh's paintings were rejected by his contemporaries but gained recognition over time.

**Keywords:** Vincent van Gogh, diffusion of innovation, phenomenology, intersubjective understanding; oil painting

## **1. Introduction: The 'Tragic' Life of Vincent Van Gogh**

“he will probably not live to see them come to fruition,  
for by the time people understand what he is saying in his paintings  
it will be too late... but I am sure he will be understood later on.  
It is just hard to say when”.

*Theo van Gogh, “Letter to Jo Bonger”  
9-10 February 1889*

“Now I understand what you tried to say to me”

*“Vincent” (“Starry Starry Night”)  
Don McLean, 1971*

Today, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)<sup>1</sup> is viewed as a great artist and an indisputable genius. Sadly as it be, van Gogh's career life is a tragedy. Though he produced an incredible number of masterpieces that live for the rest of human history, his paintings were sold as scraps at Breda flea market for around five

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, Vincent van Gogh in this essay is referred to as van Gogh.

cents in 1903.<sup>2</sup> During his short but turbulent life, he sold only one painting<sup>3</sup> for 400 francs, just four months before his death (Butterfield 1998). Unlike van Gogh, another celebrated painter, Pablo Picasso's talent was recognised quickly and accepted by the community during his lifetime. Both Picasso and van Gogh are genius in painting. We may ask why there is such a contrast in acceptance. In Yu (2008), I offer an explanation of the acceptance of Picasso's creativity based on phenomenology. Arguably, it is easier to elucidate why Picasso's paintings were accepted by his contemporaries than explaining why van Gogh's paintings were rejected by his community. More ironically, the growth of popularity of van Gogh's paintings over time begs for an explanation. In this second episode, I attempt to offer some insights on rejection and rediscovery of van Gogh's paintings by using the same phenomenological framework developed in Yu (2008). It is argued that van Gogh's cranky behaviour led to himself being unacceptable by his community. No doubt, van Gogh's behaviour and naive interpersonal skills are contributing factors of poor reception of his paintings. This paper goes beyond psychological, cultural and social reasons and argues the failure of accepting van Gogh in his time in terms of intersubjective understanding. In what follows, I shall put forward a theoretical framework which allows us to understand the reception of a painting in the tradition of Max Weber. The framework is then applied to understand why van Gogh's paintings were not accepted by his community and why they have gained popularity over time.

## **2. Novelty and its Acceptance: Intersubjective Understanding**

The prerequisite for accepting an innovation in painting is to understand. If a novel idea is not understood, we cannot expect it to be accepted.<sup>4</sup> When a person sees a painting, he or she will try to make some senses out of its content and style. Making sense of what other people paint means understanding. In the subjectivist

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.forbes.com/lifestyle/2003/11/25/cx\\_1125hot.html](http://www.forbes.com/lifestyle/2003/11/25/cx_1125hot.html), retrieved on 3 August 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Research suggests that van Gogh may sell more than one painting.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, it needs no further remark that full understanding may not necessarily lead to acceptance.

perspective, understanding the external world is to subjectively interpret the incoming events.

How can an understanding in painting be possible in the social world? The answer is that the act of painting is essentially intersubjective, since all human agents find their experiences necessarily associated with other persons. Everyday life builds on the category of the "other" (Weigert 1981:55). Individuals find themselves related to the surrounding world in order to create a meaningful life and share it with others. Painters are taken by the audience to be "other I's" just as painters experience the audience as "another you". In this way, "we" can make sense. Subjective understanding or interpretation, as Weigert (ibid:74) puts it, "is a process of perceiving the other and his or her interaction within symbolic frameworks so that we can make some sense out of what the other is doing .... *If we cannot make any sense out of the other's interaction, it may be that there is no sense in it, or worse, it may be that there is no sense in me*" (italic added).

Interpretation on an artwork by the community is based on the stock of knowledge which is accumulated from everyday life through learning from school, teaching from parents and socialization from mass media or interaction with art dealers (Schutz 1962:7). This knowledge at hand functions as a scheme of reference. The experiences of the external world, such as church, mountain, custom, law and war, are pre-defined and taken for granted. I may never see a church but if I see one, I take it as a church and in particular a church showing all familiar features of a typical church. I may ask what kind of church it is (for example, Christian or Muslim<sup>5</sup>). The question presupposes that a Christian church is different from all other kinds of church which people know.<sup>6</sup> My experience (and knowledge) taken for granted tells me that there is a cross on the roof of a Christian church. These experiences form the base of our expectations. Therefore, we expect a church with a cross on the roof as a Christian church. If an innovative artist deliberately violates our experienced self by drawing a Christian church

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<sup>5</sup> More precisely, a Muslim mosque.

<sup>6</sup> In his classic work, *The Sensory Order*, Hayek (1952/1976) explains the perception process in term of classification problem exercised in human minds. See Yu (2007).

radically different from our experience, then our sense of reality is also violated. This violation threatens the sense of underlying reality which grounds our world taken for granted as the basis for everything else. The uncertain self may seek a possible alternative explanation in order to make sense out of the problematic situation. If none of the solutions works, then the painter will be seen as a threat to the society and his or her painting will be rejected. Some creative painters are even condemned by the public as deviants. We can conclude that if a novel idea is consistent with our experiences, then it will be accepted. Further away from our experiences, the idea will encounter the risk of being denied. Paradoxically, if we are familiar with an innovative idea, this implies that the innovation is trivial and consists of nothing new.<sup>7</sup>

### **3. The Art of Painting before and in Van Gogh's time**

Before van Gogh time, impressionism was already founded by a group of painters including Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Frédéric Bazille, Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, and Armand Guillaumin. Against the Académie des Beaux-Arts which dominated the French art scene in the middle of the 19th century, impressionist painting uses visible brush strokes and open composition<sup>8</sup>. It emphasises on light and ordinary subject matters. It takes movement as a crucial element of human perception and experience. However, from van Gogh's point of view, impressionism had its problem too. Impressionist painters focus on 'eyes' and not the 'thought'. Having said that, van Gogh accepted impressionism in general and went on to explore new aesthetic ideas. Van Gogh and other artists such as Paul Gauguin sought new forms of expression in the pictorial revolution initiated by impressionism. They "moved away from the aesthetic program of impressionism and, in particular, from the impressionists' emphasis on depicting a narrow spectrum of visual reality" (Irwin 2001).

### **4. Novelty in Brush Technique: Pointillist and Colorist**

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<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion on this framework, see Yu (2008).

<sup>8</sup> In painting, 'open composition' gives an impression of not finished, and the picture looks like as if it could be extended out of the edges of a painting.

Artists do not only adapt to the external world, but subjectively and selectively define their future (Jones 1987:24). Van Gogh 'enact' rather than just 'react' to the environment (Jehenson 1973:235; Jones 1987:24). Unlike impressionists, van Gogh used strong colours and rhythmical pattern lines across the surface of a canvas to express intense emotions. He directed his talent toward the flat decorative patterns in Japanese styles and painted in the Pointillist style. In other words, he applied colour in tiny dots and strokes that created an effect of considerable intensity in the viewer's eyes (Glueck 1984).

According to Kimmelman (2005), van Gogh translated "sky, rocks and plains into a swarm of swirls, dots, jabs and scratches. Foaming, cable-knit patterns imply the heaving gusts of wind rustling olive branches and bending gnarled olive trunks; whispery, microscopic speckles, endless numbers of them, mimic the quality of dull light on receding fields as they evaporate into the horizon. You can even sense colour - the dark brown of the earth, the yellow and lilac fields and gray-blue sky - in van Gogh's black and white".

On his unique way of using color, van Gogh himself once claimed: "the painter of the future will be a colorist, such as has never yet existed". While van Gogh subjectively defined the future for himself, the art of painting at the same time has been redefined too.

It must be remarked that simply using the Pointillist style and strong color does not necessarily mean van Gogh will contribute a breakthrough in art history. What is revolutionary in his paintings is that van Gogh painted people in a way that revealed their character or made a comment on society. More importantly, he believed that colors and patterns expressed feelings and moods. Symbols used in paintings conveyed deeper meaning (O'Reilly 2002). Van Gogh searched for the truth of the inner spiritual world. His works pave way to expressionism (Irwin 2001).

As will be argued, expressing one's feeling by brush strokes makes van Gogh's paintings so difficult to be accepted. On this, we can argue that Picasso's works are easier to be comprehended and accepted, though his painting technique is more revolutionary than van Gogh's in the dimensional perspective.

## **5. Rejection of van Gogh's Paintings by his Contemporaries: Failure in Intersubjective Understanding**

In order to understand the failure of accepting van Gogh's paintings in his time, we start with van Gogh's behaviour and interpersonal skills. These factors partially lead to a failure in intersubjective understanding by his contemporaries.

### **5.1 Van Gogh's behaviour and social skills**

Butterfield (1998) once reminds us that "an understanding of the paintings by van Gogh requires insight into his turbulent life". This is certainly true, however, not the vice versa. Knowing his turbulent life does not necessarily mean that people will accept his paintings. On the contrary, given social and moral environment in van Gogh's time, knowing van Gogh's weird behaviour and social life in too much detail without knowing his inner feeling may defer people to appreciate his contribution. Due to his 'cranky' behaviour and incompatible social skills, van Gogh was seen by the community as a deviant. He was rejected by the art community, the church and female companions. As a result, van Gogh retreated from the society (McDonald 2002).

#### *Van Gogh as a Replacement Child: A Born Genius or a Deviant*

Van Gogh was born in Holland in 1853. It was reported that he was born as a replacement to a stillborn child who was also named Vincent exactly a year earlier (<http://www.artopedia.org>; accessed on May 25, 2008). As a kid, van Gogh exhibited cranky behaviour. His sister, Elizabeth van Gogh, described his behaviour as "intensely serious and uncommunicative, and walked around clumsily and in a daze, with his head hung low....Not only were his little sisters and brothers like strangers to him, he was a stranger to himself" (Butterfield 1998). Psychoanalytic studies attribute many of van Gogh's problems as a child and his latter preoccupation with eccentricity and death to the fact that he was a 'replacement child'. Moreover, his parents buried their first born Vincent next to their house. Little van Gogh might have seen a gravestone carved with his own name and birthday ([http://www.artopedia.org/index.php?title=Vincent\\_van\\_](http://www.artopedia.org/index.php?title=Vincent_van_)

Gogh, accessed on May 31, 2008). The gravestone may form a dark and death shadow over van Gogh's child development and later on his paintings.

Unlike families today which would bring the problem child for psychological treatment, van Gogh's deviant behaviour was taken by the family and the community as a disgrace. Van Gogh was a disappointment to his mother, and to his entire family<sup>9</sup> (Butterfield 1998). Van Gogh's eccentricities in his early childhood "created many distressing experiences that directly impacted the development of Expressionism. Painting was no longer the medium used primarily to capture photographic images. It became a crucible that could hold all of the artist's passions, conflicts, and unrealized dreams" (Butterfield 1998). His strange behaviour led van Gogh to a complete failure in social life as he grew up.

#### *Abandoned by the Art Community*

At the age of 16, van Gogh became an apprentice in an art firm, Goupil & Co. in Hague, Belgium, of which his uncle was a partner of the firm. He was later transferred to the galleries in London (1873) and in Paris (1876) respectively. He quickly learned all the painters and their respective styles and what constitutes a valuable piece of artwork. However, his salesmanship was a total disaster. It was reported that when a customer became interested in purchasing a painting, van Gogh would provide a long description on why it was a piece of junk. He was even known to be fond of arguing with many of the art patrons. Finally, van Gogh was dismissed by the art firm (Butterfield 1998).

#### *Abandoned by the Church*

With the help from his relative, van Gogh went to an evangelical school in Brussels and later became a missionary preacher in Borinage, a mining town in Belgium. Van Gogh mixed himself with the miners and their families. He donated his clothing and money to poor families living in shacks of the coalfields. He was even influenced by the miners to take on their lower class belief (Butterfield

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<sup>9</sup> Having said that, van Gogh's brother Theo was extremely sympathetic to Vincent. He financially supported and encouraged Vincent throughout his poor life.

1998)! He was then dismissed by the church which believed that a preacher ought to take on a middle-class bourgeois value (Kakutani 1990). Being unable to find a 'comfort' in his church, van Gogh looked for an alternative faith. In particular, he found spirituality and tranquillity in oriental yin-yang philosophy and Japanese paintings. More importantly, as will be argued below, later in his paintings, van Gogh attempted to show his love of God in an unloved manner. This feature made his paintings unacceptable by the community.

#### *Abandoned by female companions*

Van Gogh lacked social and interpersonal skills to earn him a lover. In 1873, he fell in love for the first time for Eugenia Loyer, a respectable upper class woman. Loyer was irritated by his advances and she harshly rejected him. Later in 1881, he fell in love again. This time was his first cousin Cornelia Adriana Vos-Stricker (known as Kee Vos), a widow who stayed with his brother's home in Etten. However, marriage with one's own cousin was not contemplated by the Dutch community in the 19th century. Furthermore, Vos also denied his affection. It was reported that van Gogh had never recovered from Vos's rejection of his love, and consequently, threw himself into an imbalanced narrow world (McDonald 2002). Rejected twice by female companions, Van Gogh stayed into a relationship with a pregnant prostitute, an affair which dragged him further away from the middle class society. In 1884, while continuing with his work in his parents' home in Nuenen, van Gogh fell into a relationship with a neighbour's daughter, Margot Begemann. However, both families opposed to their marriage plan. In despair, Begemann attempted to commit suicide. Van Gogh was extremely distressed as the relationship ended (Butterfield 1998).

With disastrous relationship with women, it may not be unreasonable to speculate that he may seek comfort in homosexual love. It is quite possible that a homosexual affair was developed between him and Paul Gauguin, a painter who significantly influenced van Gogh's creativity. If this is true, then it makes sense to argue that his break-up with Gauguin was the last straw that killed van Gogh's back. The forbidden affair led van Gogh deeper and deeper into melancholy and

darkness. He increasingly withdrew from the society. He wore ragged, unwashed clothing. He did not respond to acquaintances on the street. He lived in isolation.

Complete failure in social life has one catastrophic effect on understanding van Gogh's paintings. People simply refused to read or understand his paintings no matter what van Gogh painted. To make sense out of a madman's paintings means oneself is mad too. In other words, people did not want to learn van Gogh's innovative art because doing so would bring disgrace to oneself in the society. Without deliberate learning, it is impossible for his paintings to be understood and hence accepted.

## **5.2 Repulsive and dark subject matters in van Gogh's paintings**

A reason that leads to the failure of intersubjective understanding is van Gogh's kind of creative expressions. Unlike Jean Francois Millet's<sup>10</sup> paintings and in particular his famous "Angelus", which shows unconditional devotion and passion towards God, love and humanity, van Gogh's works express his love of God in a dark and negative manner.

Van Gogh knowingly paints "portraits that would appear after a century to the people living then as apparitions." (Letter to Theo, 5 June 1890) According to Ploeg (2008), van Gogh's serial portraits of the church tower in Nuenen reveal "the inherent paradox in the artist's religious belief: that just as he was rejecting the organized Church (the "building"), he was simultaneously yearning for consolation in God". In particular, *Funeral in the Snow near the Old Tower* (1883), he attempted to point out that people

only travel to the religious building (church) because of death. The church tower – or, for van Gogh, the organized Church in general – has lost its drawing power over the people, and the only real purpose for its existence in their lives is the adjoining graveyard. In the barren wasteland of the surrounding world, the organized Church provides only a dying end, not the comfort for which van Gogh so desperately longed (Ploeg 2008).

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<sup>10</sup> Millet was an important source of inspiration for van Gogh, particularly during his early period. Van Gogh mentioned Millet's works many times in his letters to his brother Theo.

In *Reaper* (1889), van Gogh portrayed a farmer attempting to clear the wheat in a golden yellow field. However, the painting portrays more than just a worker (Kimmelman 2001). Rather, van Gogh “see in him the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping...but there’s nothing sad in this death” (Letter 604, van Gogh). For van Gogh, this reaping is not a sad ‘journey’ because there is nothing to fear.

Kimmelman (2001) concludes, van Gogh “invented very different ways to make modern sacred art, a radical ambition to the extent that it contradicted the idea of modernism as secular and formal; he did this not just by casting themselves as martyrs and even as Jesus in their art, but by contriving new forms of religious metaphor”. In sum, in his paintings, van Gogh tried to approach humanity and his God in a most ‘unusual’ way, a way that was not accepted by the community. His paintings were regarded by the community as tarnish to the church and Holland. Though he loved his God, and yet, he was dismissed by the church. The mixture of hatred and love feelings interweaves in his paintings.

### **5.3 Incoherence and inconsistency during the creativity process**

Another important factor that confused van Gogh’s audience is associated with the process of developing a novel idea. The creative process in terms of Alfred Schutz’s phenomenology can be classified into (1) fantasy and imagination, (2) focus of an idea and selective attention, (3) elaboration and (4) implementation (Yu 2003:397-412). At the initial stage of the creative process, innovation is essentially a mental projection, involving some fantasies. Artists enter into utopian social relations with fellow people according to their experiences. They imaginatively run through a series of psychic states in each of which it expands, grows richer and changes. Then they decide a particular future for them to pursue (Schutz and Luckmann 1989:35). During this process, the artist’s world of knowledge is “incoherent and inconsistent, only partially clear and *not free from contradiction*” (Schutz 1970:80-81) (*italic added*). The painter needs to experiment with different techniques and tries multiple paths. In van Gogh’s case, though he knew that he was creating something new, he was not sure what that thing would be. In his own words, “my existence is not without

reason! I know that I could be a quite a different person! How can I be of use, how can I be of service? There is something inside me, but what can it be?”. He tried to search for an echo, an answer to his lonely journey of exploration. In his letter to Theo, 3 September 1882 (Letter 228), he wrote,

After all I find in my work an echo of what struck me. I see that nature has told me something, has spoken to me, and that I have put it down in shorthand. In my shorthand there may be words that cannot be deciphered. *There may be mistakes or gaps*, but there is something in it of what wood or beech or figure has told me, and it is not a tame or conventional language, that proceeds not from nature itself but from a studied manner or a system.

Austrian subjectivism emphasizes on the unknown and indeterminist future due to the creative power of mankind (Yu 2003). Sharing the same meaningful world and reinforcing each other with his few closed friends, van Gogh chartered into a journey of an imagined future. He wrote, “a weaver who has to direct and to interweave a great many little threads has no time to philosophize about it, rather, he is so absorbed in his work that he doesn't think, he acts: and it's nothing he can explain, he just feels how things should go. Even though neither you nor I would arrive at any definite plans, etc., *by talking together perhaps we could mutually strengthen the feeling that something is ripening within us*” (italic added). He expected people would understand his creativity one day through learning. He used Shakespeare as an example, “how beautiful Shakespeare is, who else is as mysterious as he is; his language and method are like a brush trembling with excitement and ecstasy. But one must learn to read, just as one must learn to see and learn to live”.

The unclear concept developed during innovative process creates understanding problems to the community. Some members of the community might attempt to figure out what van Gogh tried to express on canvas. However, van Gogh himself, at the initial stage of creative process, may not be able to tell what he was going to create. Of course, when van Gogh was sure of what he created, he could then be able to convey his vision to the community. As van Gogh interacted with his friends and artists, he was able to make sense of his own

paintings too. Thus, Kimmelman (2005) correctly remarks “as he (van Gogh) kept reinventing drawing, he also found himself”.

#### **5.4 Expression of inner feeling, emotions and spirituality in brush strokes**

It is generally agreed that understanding another person’s feeling is most difficult. It would be more difficult if the feeling is to be understood through painting (or other art such as music), instead of face-to-face interaction. It is this reason I argue that van Gogh’s paintings are more difficult to be understood than Picasso’s though Picasso’s technique (cubism) represents a revolutionary breakthrough in the art history.

The value of van Gogh’s paintings lies not in the paints used in the picture. Instead, it is the expression and feeling inside his paintings that makes his paintings valuable. As van Gogh claimed, “it is not the language of painters but the language of nature which one should listen to, the feeling for the things themselves, for reality, is more important than the feeling for pictures.” Therefore, “I can't change the fact that my paintings don't sell. But the time will come when people will recognize that they are worth more than the value of the paints used in the picture” ([http://www.artquotes.net/masters/vangogh\\_quotes.htm](http://www.artquotes.net/masters/vangogh_quotes.htm)). For van Gogh, colour reflects emotion and passion ([http://www.artchive.com/artchive/V/van\\_gogh/sower\\_text.jpg.html](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/V/van_gogh/sower_text.jpg.html), accessed on May 27, 2008). In particular, van Gogh wanted to paint “men and women with that certain eternal touch - an idea which the sacred halo embodied earlier and which we seek to express today through light and the palpitating movement of our colors...The love between a couple is expressed by the unity of two complementary colors, by their mixture and contrasts, by the secretive vibrations of similar tones; the intelligence of a forehead is portrayed by using a light tone on a dark background; hope by a star and a man's passion by a vibrant sunset” (Letter to Theo, 15 November 1878).

Van Gogh’s paintings exhibit the ambition of putting God and people together. As Kakutani (1990) notes, “the deep spiritual hunger that animated his search for God did not disappear; it was translated into his paintings. The dazzling light that fills his canvases from Arles pulsates with a moral radiance, intimations that some divine pattern might be discerned in the seemingly random designs of

nature. The images of the sower and the reaper that turn up again and again in his work... serve... as symbols of the rhythmic cycles of birth and death”.

A fellow artist once complained about the distortions of his paintings, van Gogh replied, “I should be in despair if my figures were ‘correct’, ...I don't want them to be ‘correct’. Real artists paint things not as they are, in a dry analytical way, but as they feel them. I adore Michelangelo's figures, though the legs are too long and the hips and backsides too large. What I most want to do is to make of these incorrectnesses, deviations, remodelings, or adjustments of reality something that may be ‘untrue’ but is at the same time more true than literal truth.” Kimmelman (2001). Thus, he attempted to seek the truth in the “untruth”. This paradox is the most difficult aspect of art to be comprehended.

### **5.5. Complete frustration**

Given the reasons mentioned above, it is not surprised to realize that his paintings were utterly rejected by his community. Though there is a great fire in van Gogh’s heart, no one ever comes to warm oneself up. The passers-by see only some smoke. In van Gogh’s own words, “One may have a blazing hearth in one's soul and yet no one ever came to sit by it. Passers-by see only a wisp of smoke from the chimney and continue on their way”. Even worse, he is taken by the society as “an old leper, one would like to call from afar”. Come too near or intercourse with a leper will bring sorrow and misfortune. However, van Gogh knew exactly what he did in paintings. He said,

what am I in the eyes of most people — a nonentity, an eccentric, or an unpleasant person — somebody who has no position in society and will never have; in short, the lowest of the low. All right, then — even if that were absolutely true, then I should one day like to show by my work what such an eccentric, such a nobody, has in his heart. That is my ambition, based less on resentment than on love in spite of everything, based more on a feeling of serenity than on passion. Though I am often in the depths of misery, there is still calmness, pure harmony and music inside me”.

### **5.6. Sharing the meaningful world**

Although van Gogh’s paintings were in general rejected by the community of his time, there were at least three persons who understood van Gogh, namely,

Theo van Gogh (his brother), Paul Gauguin (soulmate) and Fredrick van Eeden (psychiatrist).<sup>11</sup>

### *Theo van Gogh*

Theo was van Gogh's brother. They grew up together. Phenomenological sociology argues that a family is the first point of contact for an individual to be socialised (Berger and Berger 1976:56-76). In a family, members are raised with the same culture as their parents and share similar meaning together. Hence, brothers and sisters in a family can easily understand each other well. Theo was a successful art dealer and he knew painting. It can be envisaged that Theo might in large extent understand van Gogh's talent and thinking because he suggested van Gogh to take up painting seriously. He financially supported van Gogh all the way. Theo's full confidence on his brother's talent can be seen in a letter to Jo Bonger on 9-10 February 1889:

That head of his has been occupied with contemporary society's insoluble problems for so long, and he is still battling on with his good-heartedness and boundless energy. His efforts have not been in vain, but he will probably not live to see them come to fruition, for by the time people understand what he is saying in his paintings it will be too late. He is one of the most advanced painters and it is difficult to understand him, even for me who knows him so intimately. His ideas cover so much ground, examining what is humane and how one should look at the world, that one must first free oneself from anything remotely linked to convention to understand what he was trying to say, but I am sure he will be understood later on. It is just hard to say when.

### *Paul Gauguin*

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, our everyday life builds on the category of "other individuals". We relate ourselves to the surrounding world to create a meaningful life and share it with the community. Paul Gauguin can be

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<sup>11</sup> The fourth person who may understand van Gogh is his brother-in-law, Jo Bonger. Bonger was said to be responsible for saving nearly half the paintings we know, perhaps the whole legacy of the today Amsterdam "Vincent van Gogh museum". Six months after Vincent died, his brother Theo died too. Paintings in Theo's custody went to his widow. Despite the friendly advices to get rid of "these crust", Bonger decided to keep them. She succeeded in saving nearly three hundred works, selected by her brother André, who sold the rest for 200 francs (Khalil 2001).

regarded as van Gogh's soulmate. Here, Gauguin took van Gogh as "other I" and van Gogh took Gauguin as "another him". In this way, Gauguin and van Gogh made sense (created) together. They shared the same meaningful world. Gauguin pushed the younger artist to paint from memory rather than sight. Van Gogh remarked that "Gauguin gives me the courage to imagine things, and certainly things from the imagination take on a more mysterious character." (Glueck 1984).

Paul Gauguin and van Gogh influenced each other in creative painting. Kimmelman (2001) rightly comments, "talented men who needed other talented artists against which to establish their own identities, they became themselves because of what they could not avoid about each other." Gauguin and van Gogh understood each other at heart. Expression of feeling on canvas using colour is their shared identity. Together they created what Schutz describes (1970:31, 165) a "communicative common environment".

#### *Fredrick van Eeden: the psychiatrist*

It is ironically that van Gogh's talent was recognised by a psychiatrist shortly after van Gogh's death. In autumn 1890, Dr. Fredrick van Eeden was called upon to consult Theo's mental depression. He then had the chance to confront with van Gogh's paintings for the first time. His remark on the paintings was overwhelming. The paintings appeared to him as "a tremendous expression of the uttermost despair", and its author to be of a sort "which the lower classes call *mad*, but which people of our kind call *holy*" (Khalil 2001; italic added). It is equally interesting to probe into why a psychiatrist is able to understand van Gogh's painting. We may ask if professional knowledge in psychology can help understand a person's creativity. Indeed, as will be mentioned below, increasing popularity in van Gogh's paintings today can be attributable to advances in medical knowledge on mental illness.

#### **5.7. The spirit of Christ: Sacrifice oneself for the faith**

Facing cold and merciless response from the community, van Gogh maintained his faith. He said, "what would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything?" and "now it so happens in the world that opposed to characters of such

persons as he there are characters like mine, for instance. I care as little for the world's opinion as that man cared for what was right. To appear right was enough for him". Furthermore, he firmly believed that his contribution will bring eternal victory. "If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint', then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced". Kakutani (1990) remarks, "If 'genius' is perhaps the wrong word, then 'courage' must replace it".

After exhausting all means to convince the public, van Gogh felt that dying was a way of making the acknowledgment to the public. Like his seeds, the sower had to die away leaving all his canvas for the yellow sun to shine all over his wheatfields (Khalil 2001). Hence, it would not be too exaggerated to claim that van Gogh made a costly sacrifice of himself to make his unknown contributions known to the public by committing suicide. On this, Khalil (2001) illuminates us in the biblical metaphor, "the wounded Vincent is held to have fallen three times on his way home, three times he struggled to his feet again, to fulfill his mission and die at the inn. Three times, in reminiscence of Christ's suffering on his way to his cross". Therefore, rather saying that van Gogh was 'suicided' by the society (Artaud 1947), it is more correct to say that he committed suicide for his belief of what is the truth, in a manner similar to what Jesus did for his Christianity.

## **6. A Long and Winding Road to be Accepted: Typification as a Process of Coordination of Imagination**

We have attempted to explain why van Gogh's paintings were not accepted by his contemporaries. However, van Gogh's fame glows as time goes by. According to Christie Sotheby, hitherto, three of his paintings sold at auction rank the world's top ten most expensive painting list.<sup>12</sup> It remains to explain why his paintings have been increasingly accepted over time. In our framework, understanding is an interpretation problem. In phenomenology, the process of

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<sup>12</sup> They are Portrait of Dr. Gachet (US\$82.5 million, rank 4th); Portrait de l'Artiste sans Barbe (self Portrait without Beard; US\$71.5 million, rank 7th) and Irises (US\$53.9 million, rank 10th); (<http://www.chiff.com/a/painting-top-ten.htm>; accessed on May 29, 2008).

classifying<sup>13</sup> an event into a type is termed typification (Schutz 1962:15-19). It takes time to make sense of, understand and accept a novel idea. Encountering something entirely new, people would cope with their knowledge-deficiency by creating a knowledge surrogate (White 1977:80). This knowledge surrogate can be regarded as a temporary interpretation on the new event, waiting for the community consensus or approval. Thus, an understanding and accepting van Gogh's paintings is a process of collective typification. The length of time in the typification process depends on culture, social attitude and advances in medical and communication technologies.

### **6.1. Advance in medical knowledge**

The mental state of van Gogh is a hot subject for more than 100 years after his death.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned above, one psychiatric doctor was able to make 'correct' interpretation on van Gogh's paintings shortly after van Gogh's death. Of course, it is hard to speculate if professional medical knowledge helps understand van Gogh's paintings. One thing is for sure: understanding van Gogh's mental state will help us make correct interpretation on van Gogh's paintings. In particular, with advance in medical technology, a study of van Gogh's pathography, based on his autobiographical letters and on the diagnoses made by his physicians, argues that van Gogh was suffered from chronic physical and psychopathological illness, resulting from lead poisoning (Luque and González 2004). If this is the case, one can imagine that van Gogh bore a lot of pain from mental instability and sought calmness in his paintings. Judging from this scenario, van Gogh's paintings show tremendous humanity. New medical information on mental disease of van Gogh contributes this new view.

### **6.2 Change in social attitude**

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<sup>13</sup> Hayek (1952) refers interpretation as an act of classification.

<sup>14</sup> Van Gogh might also be addicted to a dangerous narcotic drink which was popular in the late 19th century. Other possible causes of Van Gogh's physical problems include syphilis, tinnitus, lead poisoning, Meniere's syndrome and epilepsy. Van Gogh could also be the victim of 'bad genes'. Van Gogh's brothers died young and his sister spent most of her life in a mental asylum (<http://www.vggallery.com/misc/faq.htm>; accessed on May 8, 2008).

Mental illness was in history considered to be a form of possession by demon and patient should be locked up in an institution. Furthermore, society in Holland in 1890 considered suicide as a crime against society. As a result, van Gogh was buried without reasonable respect or ceremony. However, social attitude has changed. Today, suicide is viewed as the result of an illness treated unsuccessfully (McDonald 2002). People nowadays take a more sympathetic view to mental patients. Making sense out of a mental patient's artworks does not constitute oneself insane. After all, van Gogh's 'abnormal' behavior had not harmed people. At most, he cut off his ear to frighten people. On this, Artaud (1947) notes that: "one can speak of the good mental health of van Gogh who, in his whole adult life, cooked only one of his hands and did nothing else except once to cut off his left ear". This cranky act is minor when compared to campus massacre by many psychos in recent years.

### **6.3. Advance in information technology**

To understand van Gogh's paintings, it requires us to reach his mind. On this, no method is more effective than reading van Gogh's letters and personal documents. In van Gogh's time, these documents were not available to the public. Hence, it was impossible for his contemporaries to understand what was in van Gogh's mind, and eventually he was treated as a madman. Advance in communication technology today allows us to gather all information about van Gogh, including his letters to his brother Theo. Publishing a complete set of van Gogh's letters (total 874 letters) was a major step towards a better understanding of the artist's creative paintings. These documents which can be readily available in internet<sup>15</sup> enable researchers to gain insight into van Gogh's turbulent life as well as his inner feelings, so that his paintings can be better understood.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper seeks to explain the rejection and acceptance of a new idea from phenomenological perspective, with special reference to Vincent van Gogh's

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<sup>15</sup> The complete letters of Vincent van Gogh are presented in Adobe Acrobat format at <http://www.vggallery.com/letters/main.htm>; accessed on June 6, 2008).

paintings. The paper has argued that whether a new idea, such as in oil painting, is accepted or not by the community is a matter of subjective understanding. Based on human agency theories given by Max Weber and Alfred Schutz, this paper has argued that painters, like other human agents, act in the social world. Instead of adapting to a ready-made environment, innovative artists themselves create the environment to which they will adapt. By recreating the artwork in different forms, they add new meanings to the social world. The prerequisite for the community to accept an innovation is to understand it. Members of the community will attempt to make sense out of the creative artwork. If an innovator deliberately violates our experienced self by doing something radically different from the past, our sense of reality will be violated. The uncertain self may seek a possible alternative explanation to make sense out of the problematic situation. Two possible outcomes can be mentioned. After the process of typification, the innovation may be eventually understood and accepted, though it may take a long time. However, it may be the case that the creativity cannot be understood at all. As a result, the innovator is seen as a threat to the society and even condemned as a deviant. The arguments developed in this paper help us understand the dramatic reception of van Gogh's paintings in the world of art over time.

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