

22.05

26

18.10

26

STREET

Van Gogh, Tricksters & Co.

*"It tempts me so much —
not the drink, but rogue painting."*
Vincent van Gogh, letter to his brother,
Arles, 15 August 1888

The exhibition *SUSPECTS — Van Gogh, Tricksters & Co.* is inspired by remarks made by Vincent van Gogh in his letters, where he expressed on several occasions his desire to break with convention. He told his brother, for example, that he wanted to paint like a “ruffian” and wrote to his friend Émile Bernard that he “deeply despised rules and institutions”, and that he was looking for “something other than dogmas”. These statements recall other non-academic artists of the late nineteenth-century who, like Van Gogh, pursued their work on the fringes of society, developing an aesthetic that differed from that of the bourgeoisie. Taking its cue from art critic Albert Aurier, who in 1890 noted the nervous, excessive and sometimes violent aspects of Van Gogh’s work, this exhibition aims to reintroduce the suspect nature of the Dutch painter’s work to our contemporary eye.

The exhibition features a heterogenous group of artists who chose dissidence over conformity, exaggeration over restraint, and freedom over restrictions. Their approach bears witness to a spirit of freedom and insolence that can at times be masked by a bitterness that goes beyond parody and verges on poetry. They thereby fulfil one of art’s main societal functions: to break with convention and challenge accepted truths, adding a touch of sharp or unsettling humour to our search for self-knowledge.

Leigh Bowery — Anna Byskov — Ellen Cantor

Luciano Castellì — Maurizio Cattelan

Nina Childress — Lucien Clergue — Mathis Collins

Clément Courgeon known as Triboulet

Gino De Dominicis — Cerith Wyn Evans

Robert Filliou — Fergus Greer — Cameron Jamie

Mike Kelley — Martin Kippenberger — Nick Knight

Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux — Maria Lassnig — Mire Lee

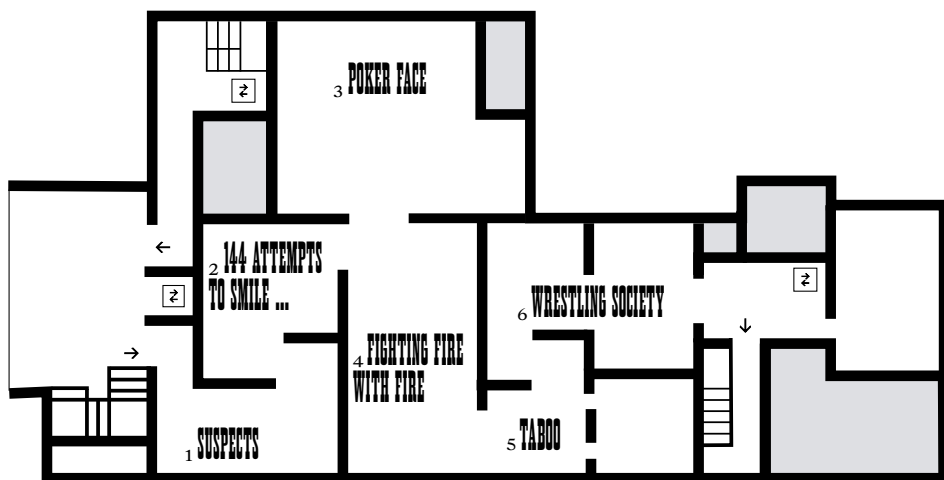
Jacques Lizène — Sarah Lucas — Urs Lüthi

Christopher Makos — Pierre Molinier

Bruce Nauman — Philippe Perrot — Pablo Picasso

Salomé — Cindy Sherman — Walter Swennen

Andy Warhol & Vincent van Gogh



1st floor

SUSPECTS

1

"Without wishing to, I've more or less become some sort of impossible and suspect character in the family, in any event, somebody who isn't trusted, so how, then, could I be useful to anybody in any way?"

Vincent van Gogh, letter to his brother, Cuesmes, between 22 and 24 June 1880

This section of the exhibition addresses the suspicion with which Van Gogh was viewed by his contemporaries during his time in Arles; the petition displayed here is certainly the most famous example of this. At the time, the artist and his work were both misunderstood — they raised a lot of questions and were cause for concern, likely due to the fact that Van Gogh was a foreigner and suffered mental health crises.

This room also includes artists who have remained marginal, operating outside of established systems or upending social and artistic conventions, such as Urs Lüthi who takes on numerous guises, giving free reign to his multiple personalities. Some of these artists go further still, assuming the role of disruptors, or even criminals, in order to claim their freedom and create more radical work. Such is the case with Maurizio Cattelan in his work *Super Us*, which consists of 48 pseudo-portraits that enable him to explore the part of one's identity that cannot be captured.

144 ATTEMPTS TO SMILE ...

"My dear brother, the best thing remains perhaps to joke about our little miseries, and also a little about the great ones of human life."

Vincent van Gogh, letter to his brother, Arles, 19 March 1889

Like Picasso's Harlequin figures, with their seemingly tight-lipped, uneasy pouts, the works presented in the second room are full of laughter, parody, irony and derision. With these strategies, artists are able to reveal how they have tried to overcome difficulties, doubts and setbacks. The works brought together here can be ridiculous, absurd, even repulsive, challenging us and leading us to reconsider what we can expect from an artwork and helping break free from constraints imposed by tradition. This is the case, for example, with the work made from faecal matter by Jacques Lizène, who throughout his career pursued an art that would express the truth about who we are.

The presence of Van Gogh's self-portrait reminds us that this genre was ever-present in his work — it persisted across the different roles and identities he assumed throughout his life.

POKER FACE

"But what can one do, unfortunately it's complicated in several ways, my paintings are worthless, they cost me an extraordinary amount, it's true, perhaps sometimes even in blood and brain."

Vincent van Gogh, letter to his brother, Arles, 17 January 1889

The works here all have the same objective: to call into question and undermine in a more or less brutal way the criteria with which we normally judge the symbolic, historical or technical quality of a work of art. The modest materials used in Robert Filliou's *Œuvre sans valeur* (Work of no value) reflects his aspiration to make a shift, that a creative life and the act of creation itself are the most important things, not an artwork's style or the sophistication of its materials.

When concepts of virtuosity and originality are disrupted, insolent and liberating ideas can emerge. Maurizio Cattelan's emblematic work *Comedian* bears witness to this: it proves his point that the (very high) price of an object is determined not by the object itself but by the attitude of the artist. The *tricksters* gathered in this room all display similar behaviour: they reveal nothing and play fast and loose while keeping a poker face.

FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

"Art is long and life is short, and we must wait patiently while trying to sell our skin dearly."

Vincent van Gogh, letter to Émile Bernard, Arles,
between 27 September and 1 October 1888

Since the seventeenth century, Western art has suppressed our animal nature, rejecting the more provocative and profane expression of flatulent, fornicating bodies that so delighted medieval society, appearing in festivals and popular humour. More than ever, in our modern society the body has instead become the site for power dynamics and violence, personal and collective. This is most brutally the case for the female body, which has been continually subjected to myriad rules and taboos. By unleashing and expressing that which, by convention, is supposed to remain hidden, the artists presented here offer a strong dose of freedom, which is at once off-putting and repulsive, suggestive and vital.

This desire to disrupt orderly propriety can be seen in the work of Sarah Lucas, for example, in her photographs and sculptures from different periods shown here, and in Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #190*, which appears to depict a face trying to extricate itself from an agglomeration of disgusting materials of unknown origin.

TABOO

"Enjoy yourself as much as you can and have as many distractions as you can, and be aware that what people want in art nowadays has to be very lively, with strong colour, very intense." Vincent van Gogh, letter to his sister,

Paris, late October 1887

This section gives puts nightlife and the often transgressive experimentation associated with it in the spotlight. This includes the Berlin and London scenes of the 1970s and 1980s, presided over by Luciano Castelli and Leigh Bowery, respectively. The night is a space-time conducive to the expression of beliefs and aspirations and the transformation of identities, offering a moment in which everything can be upended and subverted, giving rise to a new world order. This can be seen in Cameron Jamie's film *Kranký Klaus*, for example, which captures the rituals performed by mysterious characters on the Saint Nicholas Eve in Austria.

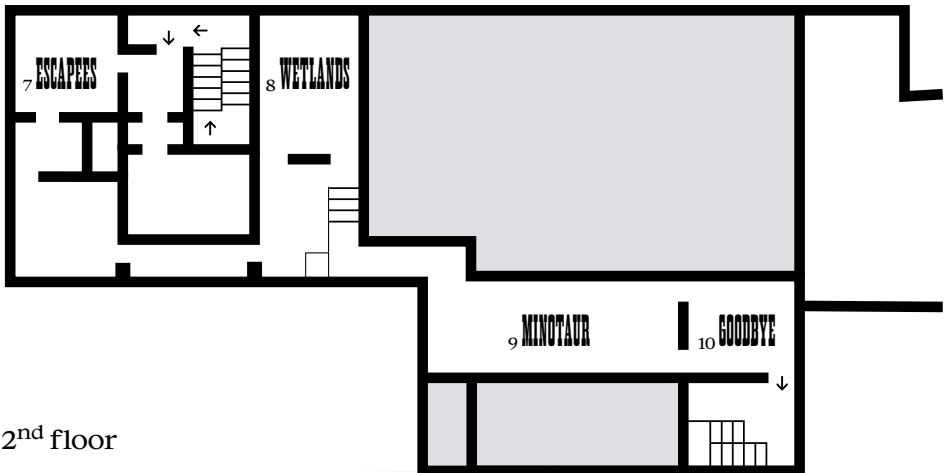
These nocturnal adventures are not without risk: strange metamorphoses occur, giving rise to styles and aesthetics that are wild and free, opening the door to a diverse array of impulses.

WRESTLING SOCIETY

"I deeply despise rules, institutions, &c., in short, I'm looking for something other than dogmas, which, very far from settling things, only cause endless disputes."

Vincent van Gogh, letter to Émile Bernard, Arles, 3 October 1888

The works that unfold across these spaces all evoke accidents or moments of conflict or confrontation — such as the violent, deadly fight between Triboulet, the wrestler alter ego of artist Clément Courgeon, and his work tool, a broom. By seeking out and prolonging moments of tension, these artists create situations that are at once dramatic, absurd and pathetic — to the point that we just want it all to stop, a feeling we get, for example, when confronted with Bruce Nauman's clowns with their expression of restless frustration that hovers between shame and denial.



ESCAPEES

"To succeed you have to have ambition, and ambition seems absurd to me."
 Vincent van Gogh, letter to his brother, Paris, between 23 and 25 July 1887

Like the figure of the prisoner who seems ready to jump out of Walter Swennen's painting *Escape*, the fugitives here are the artists themselves, as they seek to extricate themselves from the constraints of both art and life in general. By enacting a kind of symbolic disappearance, or by opting for the death of their own image — as Maurizio Cattelan does when he represents himself as a hanged man — these artists attempt to evade their own fate. By escaping, concealing themselves or hiding behind a fence, they call into question the constant doubts they must face in the form of societal or political imperatives.

WETLANDS

"Grief mustn't build up in our souls like the water of a swamp."
 Vincent van Gogh, letter to his brother, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence,
 around 20 September 1889

This section deals with domestic space and the space of family life, within which forms of violence can lead to much trauma. This can be Philippe Perrot, for example: all the artist's works attempt to reframe memories and emotions from his own childhood. These early years also feature in the works of Ellen Cantor and Mike Kelley exhibited in this room. All of the works found here play with emotional ambivalence, suggesting ambiguous situations in which human relations alternate between banality and cruelty.

MINOTAUR

"Fundamentally I'm not as violent as that, anyway I feel more myself in calmness."
 Vincent van Gogh, letter to his brother, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence,
 around 19 December 1889

Like a lair or den, this room invites us into a physical, sonic and sensory space in we are destabilised us and made ill at ease. In an atmosphere that is at once commemorative, mechanical, alive and unreal, a work of Martin Kippenberger — recalling violence he was subjected to in the 1970s — is shown in direct relation to a piece created by Mire Lee specifically for this exhibition. The latter evokes both a giant organ and otherworldly technology.

GOODBYE

*"Anyway, it isn't always pleasant, but I try not to forget completely how to jest,
 I try to avoid everything that might relate to heroism and martyrdom,
 in short I try not to take lugubrious things lugubriously."*
 Vincent van Gogh, letter to his sister, Arles, between 28 April and 2 May 1889

The exhibition ends on a derisive note, thanks in part to the work of Robert Filliou titled *La Joconde est dans les escaliers* (The Mona Lisa is on the Stairs) and Walter Swennen's *Bras d'honneur* (The finger). There is a paradox between an inevitable ending in the form of "goodbye" and the desire expressed in this final painting by Martin Kippenberger in the show — to not go home, so as not to be alone perhaps, to not get back to work, and also, perhaps, to not have to leave each other.

FONDATION
 VINCENT
 VAN GOGH
 ARLES