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EDVARD MUNCH
THE MODERN EYE

February 9 – May 13, 2012

TEXT PANELS IN THE EXHIBITION

Edvard Munch. The Modern Eye

Edvard Munch. The Modern Eye offers a new perspective on the Norwegian artist's work through a collection of 140 paintings, photographs, etchings, drawings and sculptures the equal of which has rarely been exhibited in Germany. Munch is generally seen as a 19th century artist whose painting resembles Symbolism or Pre-Expressionism and falls naturally alongside that of Paul Gauguin or Vincent van Gogh. It is true that Munch was born in 1863 and began to paint in the 1880s, but he created three quarters of his works after 1900 and he died in 1944, the same year as Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky. Contrary to most of the retrospectives of his work in recent years, the present exhibition aims to show that Munch was also a 20th century artist. Munch is often perceived as a solitary artist who was concerned solely with the representation of his inner world. In the early decades of the 20th century, however, he travelled widely, went to the cinema, listened to the radio, read the international press and subscribed to several illustrated magazines. The artist also kept up a permanent dialogue with the most contemporary forms of representation like the new theatre, photography and film. He was perfectly aware that these new media offered radically different ways of telling and showing. He also tried out photography and cinema himself. Through his works and experiments, Munch questioned ideas which became central in 20th century art such as reproducibility, autobiography and the importance of the viewer. He truly was modern.

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Repeats

Copies, repeats, variations: Munch continually returned to subjects he had already explored. Six versions of *The Sick Child,* as many *Girls on a Bridge* and a dozen *Vampires:* if we also count the many graphic adaptations, repetition appears as a major constant in Munch's work. Leaving Romantic uniqueness behind, he is doubtless the artist of his generation who most keenly questioned the fundamental issue for 20th century art: the reproducibility of the work of art. The reasons for repetition are numerous. The original canvas was lost or destroyed. A collector commissioned a new version. The artist wished to work on the subject further or include it in a new frieze project. The cathartic value of repetition should not be underestimated either. Through its repetition and, often, reduction to its simplest expression, the subject was freed from its context. It took on a life of its own, as if it were Munch's brand or signature.

Autobiography

Munch, like Bonnard, Vuillard or Mucha was one of a generation of artists to become involved with amateur photography at the turn of the century. The Norwegian painter acquired a small Kodak Bull's Eye camera in Berlin in 1902 and started taking photographs. Apart from a few images representing his paintings or certain places linked to his memories, Munch mainly took self-portraits. In fact, it would be much wiser to compare him to the photographer-writers of the period than to other artists of his generation. In his photographic practice, like in August Strindberg's Pierre Loti's or Emile Zola's, there was the same obsession with self-portraiture and a similar wish to retrace his life in pictures. As Munch remarked in a 1930 interview: "One day, when I am old and have nothing better to do than write my autobiography, then all my self-portraits will be brought back out into the open."

Optical Space

In Munch's painting, the treatment of space is absolutely unique. On many occasions, his compositions were based on one or two diagonal leading lines used to increase the sense of perspective, spatial expansion between close and distant objects, prominent foregrounds often cropped by the frame, or figures moving to the fore of the painting. This way of painting took into account lessons learnt in the 19th century from Impressionism, Japonisme and use of the camera obscura or photography. Yet it also integrated ways of seeing that were characteristic of the 20th century, such as those established by the illustrated press and the cinema with their images of moving crowds and people or horses rushing toward the camera. If Munch often had recourse to this spectacular and dynamic form of composition, it was because he tried to intensify the relation between his painting and the spectator to the full.

On Stage

In the 1890s, Munch lent a certain theatricality to the scenes he depicted through the arrangement of the figures that were often shown facing the spectator in an immobile, hieratic attitude. Influenced by August Strindberg, whom he frequented in Berlin in the 1890s, as well as Max Reinhardt, for whom he drew production sketches and a decorative frieze in 1906 and 1907,

the tendency became stronger. Strindberg and Reinhardt defended the idea of intimate or chamber plays (Kammerspiele) in which the distance between the actor and spectator was reduced to a minimum to enable emotional empathy. In their view, theatrical space had to resemble an isolated room, one wall of which would simply have been removed to open it up to the audience. This is just the device Munch uses in his *Green Room* series which he began in 1907, immediately after his collaboration with Reinhardt, with the aim of encouraging the projection of the viewer into the pictorial space.

Compulsion

In 1907, during the period when he was painting *The Green Room,* Munch was also working on another subject that of a woman in tears standing, naked, next to a bed. Within quite a short time, he painted six versions, made several drawings, a photograph, a lithograph and a sculpture. This form of repetition differs quite markedly from the artist returning to a painting many years later to create a new version. There is a kind of compulsive mania in such repetition across the whole spread of media used by Munch at the time, suggesting his obsession with the subject. Nobody knows exactly what it meant for Munch: a primitive scene, an erotic memory, an archetypal lamentation which he aimed to simplify as much as possible by repeating it, as he had done with *The Scream, Melancholy* and *The Kiss?* Doubtless it meant much more than that, since he planned to use the sculpture of the *Weeping Woman* for his own tombstone.

The Outside World

Posterity has retained an image of Munch as an artist who turned inward: a solitary recluse who was concerned solely with depicting the torments of his angst-ridden soul. In the 20th century, however, his painting was very much in tune with the outside world. He often painted from life and was inspired by things he had seen or news items he had read in the papers. When a fire damaged a neighbouring house, he rushed over to paint it. He bore witness to the execution of communists in Finland and panic scenes in Oslo after the declaration of war. He was interested in the social demands of the working class. He understood very well that illustrated news and the cinema were establishing new ways of telling stories. To recount his disagreement with the painter Ludwig Karsten, he used a sequence of separate scenes and adopted the principle used often in early cinema, for obvious photogenic reasons, of the opposition between a black character and a white character.

The Amateur of Cinema

Several accounts relate that in the early decades of the 20th century, Munch liked to go to the cinema regularly to watch newsreels, American and European feature films, Charlie Chaplin movies, etc. From 1910, his friend Halfdan Nobel Roede opened several cinemas where some of Munch’s works were exhibited. In 1927, during a trip to France, the artist acquired a small Pathé-Baby home movie camera. In the 5 minutes and 27 seconds of film that have been preserved, his fascination with city life is obvious. In Germany and Norway, he filmed the movement of pedestrians or a tram or carriage passing by. He observed a woman waiting on a street corner and

followed her for a while. He asked a friend to walk in front of the camera; furtively shot images of his aunt and sister, then placed the camera to face him, leant toward the lens and examined it carefully, as if he wanted to see what lies beyond the mirror.

Drawing, Taking Photographs

At the end of the 1920s, after a very long break, Munch began taking photographs again. A first series of self-portraits was taken in the studio. Playing with the effects of transparency created by long exposure times, following a principle he had already explored at the start of the century, the painter seemed to want to become one with his painting. Another series of self-portraits was taken in the open air. Using a move which is common today, the artist held his camera at arm's length and turned it to face him, like a mirror. This second series of self-portraits should be compared to a lithography Munch made during the same period, since it was in fact a response to a debate which began in the German periodical Das Kunstblatt on the respective qualities of photography and drawing in their ability to capture degrees of shade and light. At a time when Munch was suffering from serious problems with his sight, we can well imagine the interest he took in evaluating his tools in this way.

Radiation

Munch was one of a generation of artists whose imaginations were profoundly marked by a culture of radiation, from the distant echoes of mesmerism to the belief in the curative properties of the sun, not forgetting the discovery of X-rays, radioactivity or wireless telegraphy waves. The artist himself had an X-ray taken in 1902 and was treated with electric current in 1908–1909. His archives preserve numerous leaflets on treatments using rays or phototherapy. His paintings show traces of his fascination with rays. He creates effects of transparency characteristic of X-rays as if he could now see through opaque matter. He painted back-lit subjects showing the iridescence of the sun or coloured vibrations in shadows. His brush strokes seem to want to adjust to the wavelength of light and start to vibrate, dilute and, at times, even flirt with abstraction.

Troubled Vision

In his self-portraits, Munch turns his gaze back upon itself, like a glove. In 1930, when he was 67 and a haemorrhage in the vitreous humour of the eye affected his sight, he pushed the process of optical introspection even further. For several months, with methodical precision, he attempted to render on paper what he saw through the affected eye. Inside the eye, the flow of blood had coagulated into a shape which was superimposed onto his ordinary vision. In these spots or smudges the artist saw a bird appear, or tree-like shapes or concentric circles. In drawing or painting what he observed through his disabled eye, the artist became an ophthalmologist for a time and represented what he saw, sight itself, or "the inside of sight", to borrow a phrase coined in the same period by Max Ernst. He watched himself looking. In that respect as well, Munch showed his great modernity: he was a modern eye.

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The Inward Gaze

“Each year, since he had resolved to record the effect of passing time, he produced a self-portrait”, writes his collector and friend, Rolf E. Stenersen. In the 20th century, the artist intensified his production of self-portraits. In the 1880s and 1890s, he had only painted five, but after 1900 they add up to more than forty. This total does not include the many self-portrait drawings, engravings and photographs nor the last sequence of the short film shot by Munch himself where he appears approaching the rolling camera and leans toward it, as if he wanted to pass through to the other side of the mirror. Through his repetitive practise of self-portraiture, Munch marks out past time to watch himself age. His self-portraits, which trace a guiding thread through his oeuvre, form a fascinating visual autobiography and answer perfectly to the program of the Norwegian literary Bohemia of the late 19th century whose watchword was: “Write your life!”

Picture Descriptions

Kiss on the Shore by Moonlight

Munch created ten different versions of *The Kiss,* starting with the initial canvas he painted in 1897. Over the years, he tried different composition schemes. The couple is kissing, nude or dressed, next to a window or on a beach, as if the painter is interchanging the scenery around an action, which is repeated over and over, on the same theatrical stage. Munch was adept at auto-citation: the reflection of the moon, in the form of an “i” is a recurring motif in the landscapes he painted in Åsgårdstrand, starting in the 1890’s. *The Kiss* is, moreover, one of the major subjects of the modern project that Munch entitled *The Frieze of Life.* He described it as follows: “The *Frieze* was conceived of as a series, the totality of which constitutes a panoramic view of life. All along it run the undulations of the same shore. The sea stretches out beyond, in perpetual movement. Life, with its full share of joys and suffering, unfolds, in all its plenitude and variety, under the trees.”

Workers in Snow

To celebrate its 1911 centenary, the University of Oslo decided it would endow itself with a new community hall (the Aula), which was to be decorated with mural paintings. After some years of beating about the bush, Munch was chosen for the project and, after several years of work, inaugurated his monumental series in 1916. This canvas was one of the numerous studies produced for *The Sun:* this monumental painting sits imposingly, on the community hall’s main wall. The entire space is pervaded by concentric circles suggestive of a hemispheric surface, as if the sun motif is blended with the organ of sight. For Munch, to examine the activity of the eye was to discover the transformation of luminous rays in nervous energy. Here, light is nothing more than an exteriorized manifestation of the magnetic waves that, for the artist, energize the world.

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The Fight

During the summer of 1905, while they were dining in the small house in Åsgårdstrand, a violent disputebroke out between Munch and the painter, Ludvig Karsten. Munch, who, unlike Karsten, did not volunteer for military duty to defend his country at the time it splits away from Sweden, was criticized for his lack of nationalistic feeling. He took offense. With alcohol fueling them on, the two men came to blows. More than a quarter of a century later, in 1932, the artist would go back over that event by producing several works, which he entitled *The Fight.* While Karsten is dressed in white in the painting, Munch depicts himself in dark clothes, from a perspective that gives the viewer the impression he is taking an instrumental part in the action. To put this memory on stage, Munch creates something like a small film scene, by using a very contemporary principle found in the production of films, from their earliest inception, which consisted, for obvious photogenic reasons, of pitting a man dressed in white against a man dressed in black.

The Sick Child

This canvas is a version Munch produced after one of the major works from his initial years as an artist: *The Sick Child* (1885 – 1886). “With *The Sick Child,* I became engaged along a new path. There was a breaking away in my artwork. The greater part of what I would create later came about because of this canvas.” And, nevertheless, this painting caused a scandal because of its unfinished, slapdash appearance, when, in 1886, it was put on exhibit at the Kristiania [Oslo] Autumn Exhibition. It was a veiled look at the painful memory of his older sister Sophie’s death. It is the young model, Betzy Nielsen, that the painter entrusts with the task of giving physical form to the theme of disease, which was in vogue with Naturalist Norwegian artists at that time. Just like he did with *The Sick Child* motif (he would produce six variations of the same between 1885 and 1927), Munch would work, throughout his life, at making multiple versions of single subjects.

“Zum Süssen Mädel”

This painting was part of a group of about 10 paintings entitled *The Green Room.* Created on the northern coast of Germany, in Warnemünde, during the summer of 1907, this series is inscribed inside of the continuity of the theatrical experience that Munch had participated in, the previous year, as part of Berlin’s new “intimate theater” known as Kammerspiele. Its director, Max Reinhardt, had, in effect, invited Munch to come and create the scenery for Henrik Ibsen’s play, *Ghosts.* Following the example of the scenic arrangements conceived of by Reinhardt, that were meant to lessen the distance between actors and spectators, Munch put his subjects into a kind of box, only open on one side. The walls of this closed-in space, which were similar to theater wings, resulted in a strong perspective effect. The scene seemed to extend beyond the framework, inviting the spectator into the couple’s intimate space. The decor, speckled with green diamonds, heightened, even more, the feeling of a stifling atmosphere that dominated the entire set. The following year, Munch was hospitalized, suffering from depression.

Self-Portrait. Between the Clock and the Bed

This major work, which Munch carried out several studies for, in preparation, makes up a part of the artist's last group of self-portraits. In a self-confrontation, he looks, in an uncompromising manner, at the finite nature of existence. Munch is standing, in a hieratic pose reminiscent of those of certain of his paintings' subjects, between a clock with no hands, a symbol of time that has slipped away forever, and a bed, which is an omen of a close-at-hand death. Behind him, two partially opened doors allow one to see a room bathed in light; the walls, studded with his works, bear witness to the road traveled by the artist during his life. But they blend into the room's decor: they are already a part of the past. There is a canvas that depicts a phantom-like nude, who seems to be floating over the bed. The visual force of Munch's tableaus influenced a great number of 20th century artists, especially Jasper Johns who created, at the beginning of the 1980's, a series of eponymous canvases, based on this work.

Thorvald Løchen

During the initial years of the 20th century, a new form of outside photography, made its way onto the scene. It contrasted with static studio poses. Along the avenues of big cities, or in vacation spots, street photographers took strollers by surprise. More often than not, they have one foot moving forward in the photograph; the images are both graceful and dynamic, and suggestive of movement. Carl Størmer produced these kinds of images in Oslo, right at the end of the 19th century. Magazine publications, which were then developing rapidly, were big consumers of these kinds of dynamic images, most notably, to illustrate their society columns. The testimonies of several people have pointed to the fact that Munch loved magazines that were illustrated with photographs. Many were kept in his archives, including some featuring this kind of pedestrian portraits. Munch, without a doubt, would have thought back to them at the time he was painting Norwegian lawyer, Thorvald Løchen's portrait.

Avenue in Snow Flurry

This 1906 tableau – just like *Murder on the Road* (1919), also presented in this exhibit hall – reveals the very special attention that Munch lent to the representation of pictorial space. The very pronounced oblique line, formed by the road and the protuberance in the foreground, which is cut off by the painting's frame, brings to mind stereoscopic photographs, that is to say, three dimensional ones that, beginning in the mid-19th century, used those effects to a high degree. The painter's interest in dynamic perspectives becomes more intense after 1900, when he discovered films. The cinema invented the projected image that burst from the screen, literally throwing itself out onto the viewer. Munch utilized a lot of these film effects in the paintings he created during the initial decades of the 20th century, such as when he increasingly painted bodies that seemed to be moving forward, towards the work's foreground. In that way, he strengthened the relationship between the painting and the one gazing at it.

Death Struggle

In this painting Munch presents his memory of the death of his sister, Sophie, which occurred in 1877. Between 1893 and 1915, the artist executed, under different titles, four paintings, several drawings, and a lithograph around this theme. This version differs, rather sharply, from the initial-version. During this 22-year period, the artist would discover van Gogh's paintings, in particular, and would come to know Expressionism and avant-garde theater. Through exchanges with Max Reinhardt, director of the Kammerspiele theater in Berlin, Munch had retained different lessons, such as how to create a space of ambiance ("Stimmungsraum"), something he made use of for this canvas. The red blotches on the room's walls, as well as the powerful effects of light and shadows, contribute to the creation of a dramatic atmosphere. The family seems lit up, foot to head, as if there might be footlights on the floor. Coupled with its general ambiance, the tableau's spatial construction incites the viewer to take part in the mourning.

Panic in Oslo

Panic in Oslo is part of an ensemble of graphic works that Munch produced during the First World War. Preoccupied with the fighting that was setting Europe on fire at that time, the artist kept himself informed about how events were unfolding by reading newspapers and watching newsreels. The crowd in the picture, as it moves towards the viewer, seems menacing; the faces, anxious. In a letter addressed to Gustav Schiefler, dated October, 1922, Munch explains his source of inspiration for this motif, which he had already tried out in 1915 (in *Panic*): "I produced *Panic in Oslo* after some disturbances on one of the streets in Kristiania [Oslo]." Norway, because it became affected by serious shortages, was beset by social upheaval at the time. This engraving also echoes the illustrative work the artist carried out, at that same time, for Henrik Ibsen's play, *Pretenders to the Throne.* In Act IV, Oslo's citizens are forced to flee from the enemy army's assault.

The Artist's injured Eye
20th Sept.

The distance between the beak of the bird
and the new beak below seems
longer
longer.
We see 2 letters
while before 1 let(ter ?)*
The neck of the bird
seems longer
I lighten on
the left side –
It means that
the chin (?) is devoured on this
side
N The bird's head with
the beak

* Note from the translator: I suppose that Munch only has written half the word “boks-tav” (letter). Otherwise the word “boks” (box) wouldn‘t make any sense.

Edvard Munch Exhibition at Blomqvist’s in Kristiania

On September 24, 1902, Munch opened an exhibition of his paintings at the Blomqvist Gallery in Kristiania [Oslo]. Hardly anyone went to see it until an anonymous letter calling for its boycott was published by the newspaper, Aftenposten, on October 2nd. That sparked the public’s curiosity; the exhibit became a hit because of the scandal. Two weeks later, on October 17th, the satirical newspaper, Tyrihans, reported the incident in form of a double caricature created by Ragnvald Blix, which, first of all, depicted an exhibit haunted by the artist’s solitary silhouette, which is then suddenly assaulted by the crowd. It is this caricature that Munch puts back on center stage, through his use of photography; he deliberately uses extended exposure times so as to lend meaning to his ghostly, phantom-like presence among his paintings. This incorporation of the painter into his own works would occur even more, in other self-portraits. Munch connects with his canvases by using photography.

Self-Portrait in front of Death of Marat

This self-portrait is one of a series of photgraphs produced during 1908 and 1909 at Dr Jacobson’s clinic in Copenhagen, where Munch was being treated for depression. Its title refers to the theme of *Marat‘s Death,* a rather common subject in art history which refers to the murder of Jean Paul Marat, a protagonist of the French Revolution. The artist had started to work on this theme in 1906, four years after a violent argument with his girlfriend, Tulla Larsen, which caused them to break up. While the fight was going on, Munch is accidentally shot in his left hand with a bullet from a revolver. A finger seriously wounded, the painter then, in a regular kind of fashion, represented himself, using Marat’s features and projecting those of Marat’s murderer Charlotte Corday onto his former companion. At the end of his stay at the clinic, Munch goes back, through the use of photography, to the dramatic episode. Taken with the help of a short focal length amateur camera that had no self-timer, the negative produced a large-angle effect that stretched out the distance between the fore- and background. That bears perfect witness to the processes of visual distortion that Munch would develop in his paintings.