

Sound Surfaces

An inclusive podcast by the Centre Pompidou, Souffleurs de sens and Papiers communs. Created by and for blind and sighted people, *Les surfaces sonores* [Sound Surfaces] invites you to discover the Centre Pompidou and its masterpieces through your listening and your imagination. The audio-described works evoke the sensibility of bodies: body-memory, bodies in motion, bodies hindered or freed from all norms.

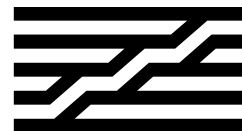
Colour code :

In black, the narrating voice

In green, the quotes

In purple, the music descriptions





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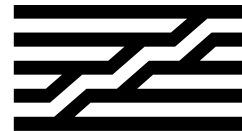
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Podcast transcription

1 – The Centre Pompidou

[rhythmic music] The Centre Pompidou.

At the exit of the Hôtel de Ville metro, I go up rue des Archives, I cross rue Sainte-Croix de la Bretonnerie, rue du Plâtre, then rue des Blancs Manteaux, and take rue du Temple. The streets are bustling and narrow and their names evoke the Middle Ages.



Through the opening of two small streets, rue Simon Lefranc and rue Geoffroy l'Angevin, a building appears that resembles a factory with multicoloured pipes. It's unusual and anachronistic amidst this mesh of stone buildings.

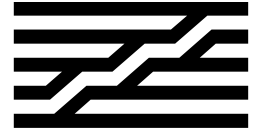
Then, as I arrive at rue du Renard, the previously narrow and furtive vision becomes panoramic: a 166-metre long side with a height of 42 metres, covered with pipes running from top to bottom and bottom to top. Essentially blue ones and green ones with a few red and yellow notes. I'm facing the East façade of the Centre Pompidou.

It flaunts its pipes unashamedly. Large blue pipes for air, some of them to make the air rise, others to bring clean air down once it has been purified in the large blue containers on the roof. The same holds true for the green pipes which carry clean water and wastewater. The red elements? They are lifts. The yellow covers the protection grids for electric cables. Blue, green, yellow, red: the whole circulation system of the Centre, like a back-kitchen or the viscera of a body.

[soft music] Now let's take rue Rambuteau along the north side of the building. A change of decor here: large white posts and 45-metre long horizontal beams form a white metallic web. The big machine has nothing to hide, not even its skeleton. Here it resembles an ocean liner at berth, dominating the whole neighbourhood, exposed to the wind, the clouds and the sun's rays.

I continue on my way and arrive at the rue Saint-Martin, which affords a view of the West facade, the piazza side, the entrance side. "Piazza": a word used in Siena in Italy for the main square before the town hall: the Piazza del Campo. And here too, in the heart of the city, a large paved plaza, as long as the building, slopes down like an amphitheatre.

As previously, the medieval atmosphere goes hand in hand with the greatest modernity. The stone paving is overlooked by a glass façade punctuated with beams and metal posts, but above all by a large transparent tube that crosses the façade in a



diagonal line starting at the lower left side and rising to the upper right side. A linear tube that climbs a notch at each of the 6 floors. I can see silhouettes moving inside, positioned on an escalator. Strange and intriguing!

Like a marble, I drift down to the bottom of the piazza to arrive naturally at the entrance to the building. Several glass doors: to the left, the one reserved for users of the BPI, the public information library. In the middle, the one reserved for members. I take the one on the right, for the general public.

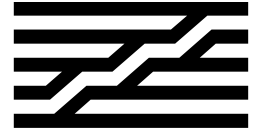
I arrive at the Forum. It's like a beehive. "Forum": in Latin means the public square where citizens came together to discuss issues, do business and meet friends. It's the same here. People arrange to meet here, they move about, gather information, plan their visit and buy their tickets. It's vast. There are lots of people. It takes time to get your bearings.

[soft music] A mezzanine runs around it halfway up. The ceiling is high, very high, more than 10 metres. Here we find the pipes again, the blue and green ones, tracing strange circuits over our heads as if we had opened up an electronic device.

Piazza, Forum, Mezzanine: why all these names from Latin or Italian? Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, the architects of the Centre Pompidou, are both of Italian origin. They imagined this centre for the arts so that it would be open to all. A place that is open to the city and to life.

The Forum is a veritable nerve centre. If we were in a human body, we would be in the central nervous system, where all information passes.

A body with a steel and concrete framework, with vital organs made of blue and green pipes; yellow sheaths for providing electrical energy. And red escalators and lifts for the circulation channels. Red like the blood that circulates in the body. Here, we are the red blood cells: the users, visitors, employees.



From the Forum we can get to the south galleries, go and enjoy a coffee on the mezzanine or take a little escalator that will enable us to reach all the floors.

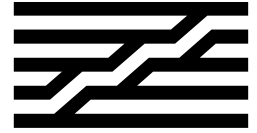
[soft music] At the top of the escalator, I find myself on the mezzanine, at the northern end of the building. I go through a glass door and then, it's as if I were outside and inside at the same time. I'm in the large glass tube I saw earlier on from the piazza and which makes the building look like a spaceship. It is modestly referred to as the "caterpillar", because of its undulations which are reminiscent of the little insect when it moves. The caterpillar houses the series of escalators that rise up to the 6th floor and go back down to the first.

Inside the caterpillar: I feel like an explorer in this great architectural body, swallowed up, taken down into its entrails. The noises of the mechanism mix with the sounds of Paris and those of the visitors. When it rains, the water falls heavily, hammering the transparent skin of the caterpillar. Little by little, I rise up, overlooking the piazza and the visitors flocking toward the entrance, just as I did a while ago. Not until I reach the 4th floor do I finally rise over the roofs of the buildings opposite and discover Paris.

The zinc roofs, the terraces. On my left, the Eiffel Tower and the gilded dome of Les Invalides; in the distance the tower blocks of La Défense; on the right, the greenish roof of the Opera House, and on the heights of Montmartre, the Sacré Cœur!

[rhythmic music] Floor after floor, I make my way to the heart of the building: the museum, the artworks.

On the 5th floor, I leave the transparent tunnel of the caterpillar and arrive in a vast luminous space. To the left, an outdoor terrace with ponds and sculptures of naked women, crouching, lounging, standing. I enter and take the route leading through the rooms. Following each other, the colourful paintings of the Fauves, the geometrical and fractioned paintings of the Cubists.



I arrive in the room of German Expressionist paintings, with colours applied with large intense strokes. Among them, a painting made up of shades of blue, a woman seated before her dressing table with her back turned to us...

2 – Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Toilette - Frau vor dem Spiegel* (Toilette – Woman Before the Mirror), [1913 / 1920]

[rhythmic music] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Toilette - Frau vor dem Spiegel* (Toilette - Woman before the Mirror), [1913 / 1920].

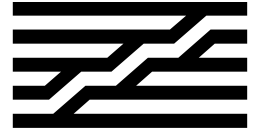
The modern collection in the Centre Pompidou begins in 1905 with a particular focus on Fauvist works. But this modernity found other centres besides Paris, and works evoking it are rare. In Dresden in 1905 a group of four architecture students, including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, founded the Die Brücke (The Bridge) group, which paved the way for Expressionism, an avant-garde German movement.

[soft music] These artists wished to establish a bridge, a link between different cultures and sources ranging from Primitivism to the Gothic. They developed a style that was often marked by speed of execution, crude scalpel-like strokes and pure flamboyant tones.

Toilette - Woman before the Mirror, an oil on canvas, 1 metre high and 75 cm wide, is representative of this style.

To observe this painting by Kirchner is to intrude on a young woman's privacy as she contemplates her reflection in the bluish atmosphere of a dressing room.

A diagonal, running from the upper left corner of the picture to the lower right corner, structures the picture. On the left, a coquettish woman, her skin lit up with ochre and



orange tones, is wearing a dazzling white dress. On the right, we find a chest of drawers, her dressing table, with a large rectangular mirror on it. The wall all around is brushed with dark and light blues that the painter superimposes. Their contrast adds movement and vibration to this background.

To the left, the woman is seated on a very low stool. Her back is turned to us. She is lightly dressed in a very short, white corset dress with tassels resting on her upper thighs. Her dress is reminiscent of underwear but it's really a cabaret costume. She is painted with quick, large brushstrokes and a thick touch.

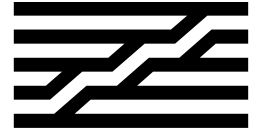
The woman's legs, arms and upper back are bare. Her skin is ochre-coloured, almost sallow, in stark contrast with the white of her dress.

The woman's bare arms reach back in an acrobatic and improbable gesture, as if to comb her black, bobbed, almost boyish hairstyle: her arms folded back behind her neck seem relaxed and very supple. They contrast with her slim-waisted torso, depicted in the shape of a "V". Like an upside-down triangle, her waist seems to be rooted to the top of her legs, which are folded to the right of the stool.

Her feet in blue shoes are positioned on a colourful carpet with touches of swiftly brushed pink and green, brightening up the mainly blue and cold composition of this picture.

[suspenseful music] Facing her is the mirror in which we see the reflection of her face. The woman is looking at herself. Her dressing table, the chest of drawers with the mirror, seems to tilt, pitch and slide to the right of the picture, taking some bottles and perhaps a powder compact with it. We are intrigued by the mirror. It reflects nothing of the model who is looking at herself in it.

The two arms and hands that were behind her head have disappeared.



Only one hand, to the front, supports a weary and pensive face with a pointed chin, wedged between hunched shoulders that seem to carry an immensely melancholic burden.

Her vacant gaze and ringed eyes betray great weariness or sadness. However, the mouth with a little smile, or pout, renders the expression of the face ambiguous. The picture appears to be cut in two, providing two opposed visions.

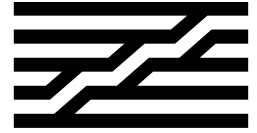
In his palette the painter establishes a contrast between blue and another primary colour, yellow ochre. He contrasts the pinks and greens of the carpet, the lunar blue of the walls and the white light of the dress.

The touch is sharp and vigorous. The composition is a combination of tensions, transposed shapes and dominant primary colours, giving expression to a reality that is palpable rather than visible.

It is both an observed and an observing woman, who like a *mise en abîme*, questions herself as much as she questions us. It's a mirror that refuses to settle for reflecting an image, the mirror itself is reflected, considered...

[soft music] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner very likely painted this picture in 1913 after leaving Dresden for the great city of Berlin, which inspired and invigorated him with its hustle and bustle. He translated this feeling in a series he called *Images of the Big City*, images that also betray a certain angst.

He painted the busy streets and frequented the city's nightlife. It was in a cabaret that he met two sisters, who became his models. Erna and Gerda Schilling were dancers, as indicated by the white dress reminiscent of a stage costume. Erna became the artist's companion. She's the one he represented in this painting. Their relationship lasted until Kirchner's death in 1938 at the age of 58. Having long suffered from depression, he committed suicide.



[sad music] Particularly harrowed by the First World War, the artist was not spared by Nazi policy, which declared his art to be degenerate. Very few artists have seen so many of their works destroyed.

His death in 1938 left a world on the brink of a new worldwide conflict and companion, Erna, alone with her memories of the painter.

[rhythmic music] This picture also represents a memory of Kirchner: he presents an intimate view of a woman who is smiling and elegant in public whom he also knew to be very melancholic. This crack, this duality of a performer perceived in the privacy of her dressing room, renders this character disturbing and attaching.

Behind the glitter, the melancholy. Behind the smile and charm, doubts and fragility.

Kirchner touches on universal questions as he represents the memory of his lover. Is life in society a permanent performance, peopled with masks that conceal vulnerabilities? Between the image we project for others, the one we think we project, and our vision of ourselves: who are we really? The painter poses these burning questions in the behind-the-scenes blue of the nightclub, without leaving an answer.

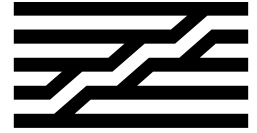
3 – Sonia Delaunay, *Le Bal Bullier*, 1913

[rhythmic music] Sonia Delaunay, *Le Bal Bullier*, 1913

When we enter the museum room dedicated to the works of Sonia and Robert Delaunay, this picture is on the wall to the left, alone, in a central position.

This long and very colourful work measures 4 metres by 1.

At first sight it exudes energy, movement, rhythm. A multitude of colours come together in interwoven geometrical forms. Our first impression is of an abstract work.



Sonia Delaunay painted this picture on a mattress canvas. Although the lines of the fabric that acts as a support for the painting are almost invisible now, we can imagine they helped to structure this picture, like a musical score, *Le Bal Bullier*.

[soft music] As we look more carefully, characters begin to emerge among the geometrical shapes: one, two, three couples in each other's arms. We also see one man alone, and even a brown jacket that seems to float in the indistinct decor made up of multicoloured shapes.

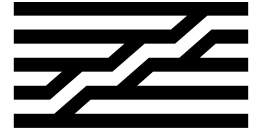
[rhythmic music] So it is not just an abstract work! We are witnessing a scene at a ball, as viewed through a kaleidoscope. The colours vibrate in contrast with each other. Red with Green. Purple with Yellow. Brown with White. All whirling about.

Let's look more closely at the silhouettes that come to the fore in this colourful hotchpotch. Enthroned in a central position, the jacket that seems to float in the air. It is alone, without a body. The shape is reminiscent of a waistcoat, dark brown, in contrast with the brightly coloured geometrical elements unfolding to the left and right.

[suspenseful music] Toward the middle of the right-hand part of the picture, an assemblage of curved sinuous shapes suggests the silhouette of a couple in each other's arms, occupying almost the full height of the canvas.

The woman's torso consists of oval elements with orange-red interlaces. Her head is a black circle, painted in flat colour, crowned with a violet semicircle, a beret perhaps. The serpentine form of her orange arm is wrapped around a circular green shape: her partner's face! A yellow rectangle over his head suggests he's wearing a hat. The curved shapes of his green, blue-waisted suit interlock with and adhere to those of the woman. Red with green. Complementary colours.

Let's get back to our reference point in the middle of the picture. The dark brown jacket. To the left, this time, the silhouette of another couple reaches only half the height of the picture. Smaller, the duo seems to be further removed, in the



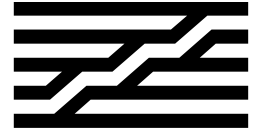
background. The man and woman are holding each other and dancing. The woman is wearing warm colours: orange touches on her amply rounded left thigh.

A red semicircle represents her leg as it steps outside the intertwined bodies. Could it be that the woman is executing a stylistic move specific to the tango? A lime green band circles her waist like a wide belt. Her face: a pink spot, crowned with a top hat, brushed neatly with two thick black lines at right angles. The woman leans her head against her partner's. The man, whose violet jacket and green trousers are less geometrically shaped, though rapidly sketched, enlaces his partner. The colour of his garment is again complementary with the body of the woman. Violet with yellow.

To the left of this couple captured in the dance movement, we distinguish a similarly sized silhouette. It could be a man. It is facing us. Straight and static. The body is painted as a flat dark-brown form and creates depth. The man is sporting a beard: a light-pink triangle turned on its apex. The top of his oval face is brown. The artist painted a magenta-pink semicircle, the straight line of which is placed horizontally on the man's head. His hat, no doubt, as wide as his extremely rounded shoulders. A rectangular shape is placed on his right shoulder and along his arm: sky blue, it brings out the squareness of this character who is not dancing but observing.

[rhythmic music] To the left of this man, we can distinguish another entwined couple. Unless it's the same couple three times over, immortalised in different places and with different lights, like a series of photos breaking down the dance movements. The very long format of the picture reinforces this impression of a succession of images. As if Sonia Delaunay had translated into painting the travelling shot, a filming technique in which the camera moves to follow the subject being filmed.

[soft music] Dressed in white, the woman in this third couple is leaning against the man who is bending backward. He is holding her by the waist and lifting her up. Their bodies are represented with curvilinear shapes that interlock with their partner. The man leans his green, oval face against the woman's pink and electric blue face.



She is wearing a red hat with rounded shapes, mirroring the brown-coloured hat worn by the man. Their costumes create a luminous contrast: dark for the man, bright for the woman. Brown with White.

Pairs of swirling entwined bodies and colours: perhaps a tango has drawn them onto the floor. At the top of the picture on the right, over the first couple and the abstract decor, round, brightly-coloured shapes, some bluish, others orange-coloured, evoke light globes.

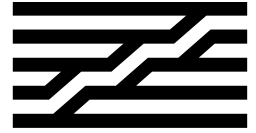
It was 1913. Paris was equipped with an electricity network since the late 19th century and this invention revolutionised nights in the capital. This scene takes place in the Bal Bullier, a centre for Parisian festivities during the Belle Époque. Located in the Montparnasse district, this cabaret welcomed artists like Picasso, Matisse and Apollinaire. The Delaunays also frequented it. They became a couple in 1910, and shared their studio and their works. Sonia Delaunay, born Sonia Stern in 1885, was Ukrainian. On arriving in France, she attended the Académie de la Palette in Montparnasse for a while, but quickly preferred to work alone.

The warm colours of her early work brought her closer to the Fauvists. Her pictorial research was complemented by work on textiles, with a first abstract work in 1911: a blanket for her son, Charles. Moving away from the Fauvists little by little, she and her husband experimented with works on the simultaneity of colours and forms.

This way of using colours in painting was continued in her textile creations. The Delaunay couple wore Sonia's creations to go dancing in the Bal Bullier.

"You have to go to Bullier on Thursdays and Sundays to see Mr and Mrs Robert Delaunay, painters, who are introducing dress reform there." (Guillaume Apollinaire)

[rhythmic music] Sonia Delaunay used colours to translate emotions, texts and music into painting. The rhythm came from the contrast of colours in a vibrant patchwork.



"The real new painting will begin when we understand that colour has a life of its own, that the infinite combinations of colour have their poetry and their poetic language that is much more expressive than through the old means. It's a mysterious language that relates to vibrations, the very life of colour. The new possibilities in this domain are infinite." (Sonia Delaunay)

4 – Pablo Picasso, *Arlequin* (Harlequin), 1923

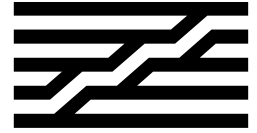
[rhythmic music] Pablo Picasso, *Arlequin* (Harlequin), 1923

Born in Malaga, Spain, in 1881, Picasso is considered, along with Georges Braque, to be one of the founders of Cubism which revolutionised art in 1907. A witness and precursor to the aesthetic upheavals associated with the avant-garde, all through his life, Picasso augmented the techniques, supports and possibilities available to his particularly productive genius, until his death in 1973.

An essential 20th century creator, the Spanish artist stands out for his capacity to renew himself, constantly deconstructing and reinventing his painting. Despite the multitude of artistic styles that Picasso adopted in the course of his career, some figures are recurrent in his work. The Centre Pompidou introduces one of these characters.

[soft music] Here is the picture entitled *Harlequin*. This is a large oil painting on canvas, dating from 1923. It is about 1.30 metre high and 1 metre wide.

The character who is represented in a classic, realistic manner, seems to be almost on a human scale.



The young man posing is seated on a stool in the foreground, at a slight angle. He occupies almost the whole format. The background is grey, flat, laid on with broad brushstrokes. We can still see their traces.

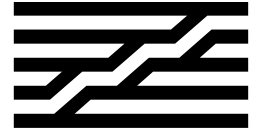
His thighs are slightly open, cut at knee height by the bottom of the format. He has his crossed hands resting before his crotch. His arms are close to the sides of his torso. As he is sitting, his costume creates folds at the level of his stomach. The arc of his collar bone and his shoulders is very curved. As if he has slackened his upper back, relaxed, leaning forward slightly. He is wearing straight trousers, a tight jacket, adjusted at the waist, adorned with a broad belt with a rectangular buckle. The collar is large and pointed, his sleeves are turned up, revealing undulating corolla-like flounces.

[soft music] All his clothes are devoid of colour. Our attention thus focuses on the very oval and chubby, almost babyish, face of this Harlequin. His forehead is high and smooth, his hair brown and close-cropped, crowned with a black cocked hat. It's a tall hat with a curved horn at the sides. His large black, globular eyes are highlighted by very slim eyebrows. His long nose is straight and makes him look like an ancient sculpture. His very small and closed mouth can only express silence. His chin is dimpled.

Lost in a dream, his downcast eyes are unaware of the spectator.

Crowned with a cocked hat, his face is first lit up with a white halo, like an aura painted all around it with irregular brushstrokes that disperses like a cloud into the grey background.

His hat, tilted slightly backward, is treated like an engraving. The strokes are fine and criss-crossed. The accumulation of lines is so dense that it seems to be woven into the very canvas. The same pictorial treatment is applied to his face. Picasso used little strokes to give shape to the pink flesh, the shadows and orange-coloured lights that sculpt the volumes.



On his upper right arm and shoulder, the diamond motifs characteristic of a Harlequin's costume are painted by contrast in a uniform manner in shades of ochre, pink and pale blue. The edges of these geometrical forms are represented with embroidered sparkling yellow sequins.

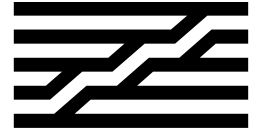
Conversely, from his upper left shoulder down to his knees, the costume abandons all colour, leaving only black lines on a white background, like an engraving that covers the whole garment. Like an unfinished picture.

No doubt painted with a very fine brush, the folds are detailed, the shadows and reliefs drawn with hatching and fine lines, as if traced with a pen.

While, in a painting process, the beginning of a hue appears like a flash of light, the portrait seems to withdraw into the whole composition. It's a very round slightly Napoleonic face that appears in this version of Harlequin. It is reminiscent of great classic 19th century paintings, a compromise between a drawn work and a painted work.

[rhythmic music] The painting displays the principal stages in its production, from the sketch to the colouring, including the hatching technique specific to engravers. The deliberate incompleteness of the canvas highlights a virtuoso and precise drawing, derived from the classic tradition that inspired the artist. The whole picture, with the exception of the head, gives the impression of a page from a colouring book, calling out for colour to come and breathe life into this costume that is too dull for such a "colourful" character.

Picasso's *Harlequin* gives us the impression of a man who is waiting, politely reserved, discreet and patient. We may wonder: what is happening to the character? What is this harlequin thinking about? Is he melancholic because his colours have disappeared? Has he thus lost his identity? His function?



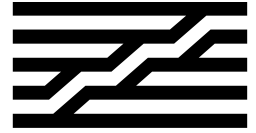
Harlequins are usually known to be festive, playful characters. Tricksters, they develop games through their costumes and their relations with others. Here, on the contrary, he seems to be almost virginal, as if he has lost everything that gave him his stature, his joie de vivre. This Commedia dell'arte character in perpetual metamorphosis appears here to be a melancholic double of the artist, embodying his solitude and fragility.

In 1923 Picasso was no longer the great Cubist artist leading the avant-garde. He was a slightly nostalgic man, known as the Spaniard, who had lost his luster. A man who may have seemed a little outmoded by the new generations setting the scene in Paris.

Whereas when he was young at the Bateau-Lavoir, the famous residence and meeting place for artists in Montmartre, it was Picasso who was the driving force behind artistic trends and fashions. People like Picabia and Jean Cocteau now reigned on the cocktail scene. At the time, people ordered [female voice] "one cocktail or two Cocteaux".

By contrast, the Spaniard, Picasso, had become a classic painter, famous and established. Having broken all the rules with Cubism, the man now turned toward Neo-Classicism. In fact, people referred to his Ingres period. Ingres, the great 19th century master of the portrait, provided him with all the indications of Neo-Classical style. By focussing on portraits, Picasso reminds us of the high standards of his predecessor: Ingres hesitated between line and colour, considering the line to be the primordial element of the composition, while colour as a wild and irrational element.

[soft music] Here Picasso establishes a balance, a contrast, between drawing and colour. On the one hand, the lower part of *Harlequin* showcases drawing and construction, while colour takes over in the upper part where we find the face. A reminder of Ingres' great specificity, the portrait, and Picasso's dialogue with him. In this *Harlequin* we can recognise his attention to lines, his love of technique and composition.



In the 1920s, Picasso made a much-remarked return to figuration and classicism. Several biographical elements enable us to identify certain sources for the picture.

The poet Jean Cocteau, for whose play *Antigone* Picasso designed the set in 1922, gifted him with the harlequin costume in which the young man poses.

The model has also been identified: Joaquín Salvado, a Spanish painter.

Perhaps Picasso had a nostalgic view of this artist, a painter like himself: a double in whom he recognised his younger self? This work highlights not only Picasso's very particular choices, but also a watershed moment in his life.

[rhythmic music] Is the picture finished or not? Perhaps it's up to the spectators to project colours onto the Harlequin and dress him?

For Matisse, the reserve, the unpainted part, is "a space that is necessary in order for colour to express itself." Did Picasso use this lacuna, this absence to offer us a dream space? Freedom for everyone's eye or imagination?

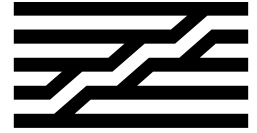
With the delicate combination of strokes and paint as they interweave and model the face, and the pencilwork in the rest of the picture, Picasso presents new variations on the use of line and colour, two fundamental elements in the history of painting.

This is a virtuoso work which, since it entered the museum in 1965, has become one of the most emblematic and reproduced paintings in the collection of the Centre Pompidou.

5 – Frida Kahlo, *The Frame*, 1938

[rhythmic music] Pablo Frida Kahlo, *The Frame*, 1938

Let's approach this small-format Frida Kahlo painting together: it's about 30 cm high and 20 cm wide. It's no bigger than a magazine we could hold in our hands.



Frida Kahlo, an early 20th century Mexican artist, presents herself in this work, called *The Frame* in English.

[soft music] It is a self-portrait, painted in 1938. Her face is at the centre of the picture. It is surrounded by flowers and birds. The outer frame of the picture consists of slim wooden strips painted red.

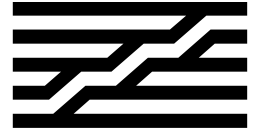
"I am my own muse, the subject I know best." (Frida Kahlo)

Muse or religious icon? Frida Kahlo blurs the lines. Here she adopts artistic conventions associated with pious images in her country's local traditions. Frida Kahlo painted herself on an aluminium support which she coloured with a luminous blue background, then slipped it under a sheet of transparent glass with flowers and birds painted on it. This work thus consists of these two superimposed parts. The painter bought the sheet of glass in a market. Traditionally used to frame images of saints, it was already painted with motifs.

[soft music] A daughter of the revolution, Frida Kahlo was born in 1907 in Coyoacan, a bourgeois residential suburb of Mexico City. The luminous blue colour we find in the background of the portrait is reminiscent of her family home, called Casa Azul, 'the blue house', in Spanish, in reference to its indigo walls.

Frida Kahlo's health as a child was delicate. She contracted polio aged 6, a disease that would affect her right leg and left her with a lifelong limp. This limp caused her to be mocked by the children in her school and neighbourhood who nicknamed her "Frida the peg-leg".

At the age of 18, she was the victim of a very serious bus accident: a handrail pierced her back and uterus, her right foot was crushed and she was diagnosed with multiple fractures of the spine. She suffered pain for the rest of her life. Immobilised in a plaster corset and isolated, Frida Kahlo began to paint. A mirror attached to her bed frame enabled her to see herself lying down, to produce her self-portraits.



"I paint myself because I spend a lot of time alone and because I am the motif I know best ". (Frida Kahlo)

[soft music] Frida Kahlo used her self-portraits to fight her suffering. She recovered possession of her body, recomposed her image and presented us with her own reality. She was 31 when she painted this self-portrait. Free from the aesthetic stereotypes applied to women, she painted herself in a very realistic manner.

"I have the moustache of the opposite sex!" (Frida Kahlo)

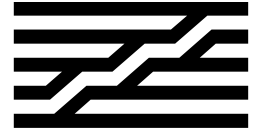
In *The Frame*, the artist discreetly depicted a light, slightly dark down over her mouth. She is not smiling. Her full, well-defined lips are rounded with sensual curves that Frida Kahlo adorned with bright, blood-red lipstick!

Frida Kahlo looks calm as she faces us in a stiff pose. She is looking straight at us. Her torso ends at the level of her chest. She is wearing a dark green dress, painted uniformly as a block.

[soft music] The collar around her neck is round. It is painted with fine yellow borders, like an embroidery of gold interwoven and criss-crossed threads. Her neck is slender, her face oval-shaped and her skin is smooth and brown. Touches of light underscore the dimple on her chin, her cheeks and the centre of her large clear brow. Her cheekbones are high and prominent, red with vitality.

Wherever we stand, when we look at this picture – whether we are central, more to the left or to the right – Frida Kahlo's large brown eyes seem to follow us, like a Mexican Mona Lisa. The artist highlights her magnetic eyes with a black, finely arched brushstroke.

Here the artist represents Frida Kahlo's famous eyebrows with a multitude of thick, very dense black hair. The eyebrows come together over her nose. Her husband



Diego Rivera liked to compare this unibrow to the outstretched wings of a bird taking flight.

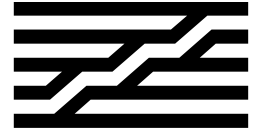
Frida Kahlo's jet-black hair is combed into two intertwined plaits with a green ribbon, forming a crown on the top of her head, into which she inserted 3 voluminous yellow flowers with abundant petals clustered in soft downy layers that shake like pompoms over her forehead.

The sheet of glass that Frida Kahlo superimposed on this portrait also acts as an adornment. With this traditional frame, Frida Kahlo pays homage to Mexico and its culture, which played a role in the nationalist renaissance born out of the revolution: Mexicanidad. Mexico returned to its roots, its history, folklore and music in a firework of colours and aromas. Frida Kahlo was proud to wear traditional Tehuana dresses as a sign of her commitment.

Let's get back to the picture: the sheet of transparent glass superimposed on Frida Kahlo's portrait creates a first frame consisting of a decor of flowers and birds with shimmering translucent colours (red, pink fuchsia, yellow and indigo-blue), arranged symmetrically around the face.

The lower part of the picture is taken up by an enormous centrally-positioned flower with a parrot on either side. The motifs are sketched in a naive style and painted in a flat uniform manner devoid of shadow. The large flower is fuchsia pink with open petals and a heart of indigo-blue.

Each of the two birds is positioned in profile in a corner at the base of the picture, in front of Frida Kahlo's shoulders. Perfectly symmetrical, the parrots with fuchsia-pink bodies are facing each other. Beaks, wings and feathers are yellow. The tops of their heads are adorned with crests of fan-shaped blue feathers that seem to enthrone Frida Kahlo's face. In Pre-Columbian culture whose codes Frida Kahlo embraced, these birds are a symbol of the after-life and are invested with a sacred dimension.



This palette of four colours – red, pink, yellow and blue – is repeated in all the quickly sketched flowers, like rough sketches or diluted ink stains, located all along the vertical sides flanking Frida Kahlo's portrait.

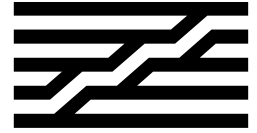
Continuing this frame consisting of vegetal motifs running to the top of the picture, we find a canopy laid out like a wall hanging. It is shaped into a semicircle, creating a little vault over Frida Kahlo's face.

All together, these elements constitute the setting in which Frida Kahlo places her portrait. The small format consolidates this impression of preciousness, like a medallion, a complex and delicate jewel. Because if Frida Kahlo captures her features very well, it is because she is telling her story through her self-portraits.

Frida Kahlo was an avant-garde artist, one of the first women to paint disability, childbirth and the female sexual organs. When she embraced the conventions of Mexican folklore in *The Frame*, Frida Kahlo knew very well that this frame, this ex-voto, was originally destined to make a supplication to a saint in order to exorcise trauma. [\[transitional sound\]](#)

We are indebted to André Breton for the 1939 Mexico exhibition at the Renou and Colle gallery in Paris. On this occasion the painting entitled *The Frame* was acquired by the Jeu de Paume prior to being included in the Centre Pompidou collection. [\[transitional sound\]](#)

Breton met Frida Kahlo while on a business trip to Mexico City and was enchanted by her painting. He said that Frida Kahlo was the ribbon around the bomb and we can view this picture in a similar way. The explosive Frida Kahlo appears here in an *azul* aperture, surrounded by flowers and birds of paradise. In this picture, Frida Kahlo freed herself from a body that was too heavy to carry, that she did not paint.



[rhythmic music] In the centre of this work, she offers us her eyes as a gateway to her personal history. Like the outstretched wings of a black hummingbird, a symbol of hope and freedom in Mexico, her emblematic eyebrows invite us to fly away with her to an invisible world where Frida Kahlo the icon becomes eternal.

6 – Niki de Saint Phalle, *La Mariée (The Bride)*, 1963

[rhythmic music] Niki de Saint Phalle, *La Mariée (The Bride)*, 1963

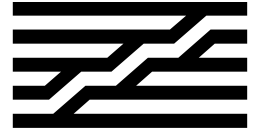
A bride takes pride of place at the end of the long aisle running through level 5 of the Centre Pompidou. Her imposing size renders her clearly visible from a distance. *The Bride* is a 2.26-metre-high sculpture made by French artist Niki de Saint Phalle in 1963. The work represents a woman wearing a wedding dress.

The lace base of the dress extends over a 2-metre base on the floor and rises up to the flared bust. Her right hand is holding a bouquet of flowers that she clutches to her torso; her disproportionately large left hand is placed on her stomach, fingers outspread, already making her a potential mother.

Her shoulders are very broad – endowing her with an unusual character – contrasting with her small head leaning to her left. Her long, dishevelled hair is undone. She is not wearing any veil.

The whole is entirely covered with plaster and off-white paint.

[soft music] Her hastily and coarsely fashioned face is distorted. Its rough surface makes it terribly expressive and disturbing. The right eye is shut while the left seems to gape open like an abyss. The mouth is also gaping, as if to reflect the eye. Is it the grin of a painful smile, the exhalation of a last breath, a desperate cry that escapes from this strained mouth? This bride is transfixed, deformed by suffering.



Her pitiful and frightening head leans sideways in a painful distortion.

The bride's arms and corsage are teeming with overlapping plastic toys partially buried in the plaster.

[suspenseful music] Among these objects are naked dislocated baby dolls, sometimes no more than dismembered limbs, arms and legs. One of the baby dolls stands out: it measures about 15 cm and its head is located quite close to the bride's chin. Its arms are raised, its right leg stretching downward, the other raised toward us, as if about to kick us.

There are also little cars, trucks, missiles, planes, helicopters, a tractor, soldiers and warriors, weapons, a small fan, a skull. Finally, there are animal figurines: snakes, horses, a fawn.

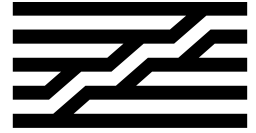
Two figurines stand out: a lizard is positioned on her right shoulder. Its long tail snakes along her arm. A bird that resembles a sparrow is sitting peacefully on her left shoulder. They are both looking at the bride's petrified face.

Niki de Saint Phalle brings together heterogeneous elements and covers them uniformly with white paint. Some evoke maternity and childhood; others, like the snake, are a reference to violence, to her past life as a little girl abused by her father.

Branches adorned with artificial leaves and flowers slip among these toys and these junk items, as if to echo the bouquet that the bride holds clutched to her chest.

The bouquet is made up of three large chrysanthemums and four poppies, traditionally associated with mourning. One of the chrysanthemums is pointing toward us, at eye level. The other flowers are leaning downward, as if withered.

The bride seems to carry the bouquet as if it were a burden.



Is this the burden of duty?

"Marriage is the death of the individual, it's the death of love. The bride is a sort of disguise", Niki de Saint Phalle declared.

Very near this bouquet, instead of the left breast, at the level of the heart, a gaping hole. The arm of a baby doll seems to want to touch this inexistent breast and restore it to its motherly duty. The absence of a heart contributes to the horror of this representation of the bride, to the absence of "humanity", of feelings, of her own desires and dreams.

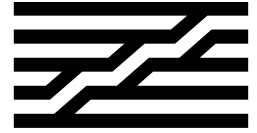
The long lace wedding dress seems stiff, saturated with white paint.

As we walk around the sculpture, we discover that her whole body is leaning forward, as if doubled over with pain. Carrying the weight that society gives her to bear: that of an object of desire, that of a woman, wife and mother. This torso leaning forward represents the accumulation of what she has suffered, suffers and has yet to suffer.

[rhythmic music] The back of the sculpture is treated roughly, in an uneven manner, giving an impression of incompleteness. Through the plaster we can discern sections of the metal mesh that makes up the internal structure. Could it be that by revealing its constitutional elements, the bride is breaking free from her paralysing plaster dress?

"The symbol of these dead brides is a new life. I think we're going to reach a new social state. The matriarchy". (Niki de Saint Phalle)

Born into an old aristocratic French family in 1930 and reared between France and the United States, she claimed to have always sought in her work to express not what she thought but what she felt. With *The Bride*, she reappropriates this symbolic ceremonial dress in order to question the romantic and stereotypical vision of married life.



[soft music] Following a period of depression and some time in a psychiatric hospital, Niki de Saint Phalle left her husband and two children to dedicate herself to art. Self-taught, she quickly came to be celebrated for the radicality and imaginative wealth of her works.

In *The Bride*, Niki de Saint Phalle transgresses the standards of beauty and grace traditionally associated with the female figure. The bride she represents is disproportionate, frightening, and questions the female condition of the 1960s.

"I wouldn't accept the limits that my mother attempted to impose on my life because I was a woman. NO. I would overcome the limits in order to reach the world of men which seemed to be adventurous, mysterious and exciting" (Niki de Saint Phalle)

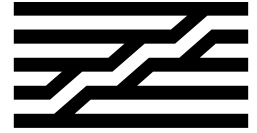
[soft music] This self-taught artist with a unique career was one of the first to consider the female condition and to make it a central subject of her work.

Niki de Saint Phalle questions the role of the wife and mother that is passed on from generation to generation. Her sculptures present a new representation of women's bodies and roles. Brides, Mothers, Prostitutes, Goddesses and Witches: the women she represents are victims of their condition but may also be potential heroines.

7 – Jean Dubuffet, *Le jardin d'hiver* (The Winter Garden), 1968-1970

[rhythmic music] Jean Dubuffet, *Le jardin d'hiver* (The Winter Garden), 1968-1970

As I approach Jean Dubuffet's *Winter Garden*, the first thing I first notice is a large white door with irregular edges, like a rock or like a piece from a giant jigsaw puzzle. With its contours marked by a thick black line, it seems to have emerged from a comic strip.



The door opens on the right and leads to a dark space. We have to go up 3 steps to get to it and step through this strange opening. I take the opportunity to run my hand along it. It is cold and smooth, although there are a lot of rough edges. Once in the doorway, which is large enough for an adult, we have to watch out for the step down. As we enter the *Winter Garden*, sounds begin to resonate and the light begins to fade.

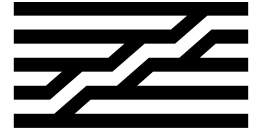
[soft music] So I go down the little step and tread on the floor of the work. It makes noise when I walk because the sounds are now resonating a lot. The floor is bumpy and smooth but we don't slip on it. We have to feel our way along in order not to fall.

Pause, first glance. A rounded irregular space about 10 metres long by 4 wide opens up before me. All the surfaces are uneven, the floor, the walls, all the way up to the ceiling, which is also in relief. This is why this work is known more familiarly as Dubuffet's cave. The whole space is divided into two roughly equal parts, separated by a slight narrowing in width.

This whole surface of the floor, walls and ceiling is white, covered with a network of black lines that are thick and curved. These lines depict a labyrinth rather than entanglement. They form a mesh that underscores the reliefs, with the addition of other lines. While certain lines follow the contours of the bumps and hollows, others compartmentalise them into something like cells or stones in an old wall.

The Winter Garden was made by Jean Dubuffet in 1968 during his period known as "the Hourloupe". During this time, he made pictures covered with these same black lines. He got the idea while looking at the scribbles he made automatically while on the telephone. These circumvolutions gave him the feeling that he could see the meanderings of his thoughts.

[soft music] But let's keep walking. At the door, I am offered several possible ways of entering the *Winter Garden*: I choose to go straight ahead and up a little step. I find myself on a platform that stretches out irregularly to the left. From there, I see another platform stretching in the same direction with a bottleneck in the middle.



Between these two cliffs, as in a canyon, there is a hollow in which an adult or two children could curl up.

I turn around and look toward the entrance door and notice that a sort of sunken channel runs around these platforms, like a riverbed. I take two careful steps from my platform toward the back. It goes down a little but I steady myself on a flat shape and find myself in the middle of the cave, where it narrows. A projection emerges from the wall.

I take a step closer, touch it and let my hands follow a black line that follows a rounded hump. A black line surrounds it. I stroke the wall as I make my way all around this shape. I knock my finger as if knocking on a door. I can feel and hear the hollow behind the material.

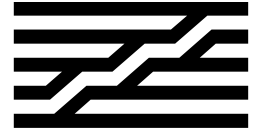
I continue on from this point and let myself be guided by the rough humps and hollows along the wall. As I advance, I enter into the second space in the cave. My right hand rises and descends toward another level that is pleasant to follow, like a gently curved handrail on stairs. I arrive at the back, quite a bit lower than the entrance.

Pause. Here I can sit down and lean my back against the wall. I am in the darkest part, facing the entrance, but I enjoy the light coming through the doorway.

I see the black lines like pathways I can take, that begin to delineate shapes.

The Winter Garden now seems to be a great drawn game in which I can find figures. All these shapes fit together like the countries of an enormous continent or the districts of a big city, making up a giant jigsaw puzzle in relief.

The sounds of other works in the museum come to me: a film with the cries of birds, wind or a horse neighing. Each time I move my legs, a dull sound emerges. I knock my hand in different places and hear more or less muffled sounds, depending on the hollows behind the wall.



[rhythmic music] Back to the door. It's time to leave. I get up and continue to follow the rounded wall from the back of the cave. Again, the wall creates a sort of ramp at hand level. I am on the other side of the central recess. A sort of buttress rises from the floor to the ceiling and breaks through. After this, the very rounded wall turns gently to the right, bringing me closer to the door. I have to go down into a little hollow. I then find myself lower than the first platform where I was as I entered the cave.

Last stage of the journey. Sitting on the platform, I feel like a giant in a landscape that could just as easily be dry like the Grand Canyon, as frozen as an ice floe. As I think about Dubuffet's title, *The Winter Garden*, I tend to lean toward the latter option.

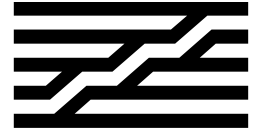
It's true that the polyurethane surface is cold and hard. But in spite of that, or because of that, we feel soothed and welcome in this space which, in spite of the constraints of the reliefs, leaves the body free to walk (slowly), to sit or lie down. The slowness we have to adopt in order not fall seems conducive to calming our minds. It is this imposed calm that makes the cave a meditative architecture which, let's not forget, derived originally from the wandering thoughts of the artist on the telephone. This immersive break soothes me all the more because I am already in a museum, a place conducive to contemplation.

[soft music] Going down the three steps as I leave, the museum seems livelier than before. The immersive break is really just as relaxing as if I had taken a break on a sofa amidst the peace and quiet afforded by bare trees in a winter garden.

8 – Bart Hess, *Digital Artifacts*, 2013

[rhythmic music] Bart Hess, *Digital Artifacts*, 2013.

Bart Hess is a fashion designer who thinks less in terms of garments than of texture. He dresses bodies with strange materials: shaving foam, latex, toothpaste and pins, even earth and grass.



[soft music] In 2010, his sticky and viscous slime dress, designed especially for Lady Gaga, created quite a sensation!

The human body and material.

He is passionate about exploring new relationship between the skin and materials.

"When I create a new design, I always put it on my own skin, even if it was originally created, for example, as a flooring material. By using a material on the body that doesn't belong to the body, but by giving it the impression that it could, I create a tension between the body and the material". (Bart Hess)

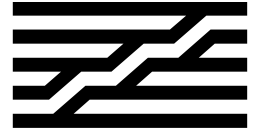
Bart Hess was born in Holland in 1984. After studying design in Eindhoven, he took photographs and organised events for big fashion names: *Vogue*, Thierry Mugler, Walter Van Beirendonck.

In 2007 he created the *Hunt for High-Tech* series, drawing inspiration from the coats of certain animals. In 2013, he created a collection in an equally unexpected material: wax. To do so, he applied the laws of physics: a woman's body was immersed in a pool of water, the surface of which was covered with a thin layer of molten wax. As the body enters the water, the wax clings to it, cools, gels and dresses the body. Wax becomes a textile.

Let's look at the video called *Digital Artifacts*, which immortalises this performance. It's an assemblage of images that lasts only one minute and sixteen seconds and juxtaposes different stages without any transition.

Audio description.

[suspenseful music, crackles] Wide shot: a dark room, a giant cube, about two metres high, made of transparent glass. It is full to the brim with water. Zoom in. Close up: the surface of the water is broken by two naked feet that point downward and take a white, milky material with them. The thin layer of wax suspended in the water crumples. The wax folds like a fabric.



The camera rises up along the legs. The body turns. An arm is extended. The wax creates a sort of baggy sleeve. A succession of very close shots of the texture of the crystallised wax.

Close up of the fingers of a hand opening out. Medium shot of the torso: the body is suspended from a harness and turns on itself.

It is now out of the water. Enveloped from head to foot in a coat of wax, that clings to her body like a wet cloth. The body turns. A foot moves and tears the wax. A knee folds. The material cracks. A hand slips under the wax, which comes away from the thigh.

The camera rises up along the body. A completely inexpressive masked face stares us straight in the eye. The End.

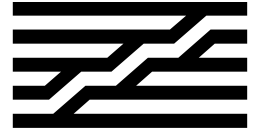
[soft music] A wax drape.

In this video, Bart Hess showcases the sculptural qualities of wax.

When the body enters the water progressively, the movement shifts the wax around it. The wax solidifies into random, imperfect and organic shapes: tight folds, ample folds, flounces, veils, fringes, veins, etc. The wax reveals fluidity. It becomes "the echo of the movement, its history", the artist explains.

As we watch these shapes forming progressively before our eyes, we are reminded of the innumerable drapes that adorn bodies in the history of art.

Bart Hess starts working in an artisanal manner. He spends hours and hours observing the reactions of materials in detail. He uses dancers in order to identify which movements create the most interesting shapes. He thus obtains results that a computer could never produce.



[suspenseful music] Digital Artifacts.

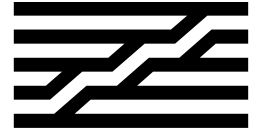
At the end of the performance the more or less dense strips of wax, a few centimetres thick, are exhibited for some time, suspended from hooks, then destined to disappear. They present the static remnants of a body moulded in action. They are the print of a unique and nevertheless absent body. They resemble the sloughed skins of animals or aliens. Their ghostly beauty generates contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion.

Then comes the second creative phase. This time it's digital. Bart Hess touches up the images on a computer, creates special effects, slow motion effects and sound effects. Here, the crackling sets the rhythm and electrifies the atmosphere. It then becomes impossible to know whether what we are looking at is real or virtual. Bart Hess blurs the lines.

[rhythmic music] The digital body.

Umberto Boccioni sculpted the speed of modern man in 1913 with *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, by grafting aerodynamic forms onto him. Bart Hess also creates hybrid and augmented technological bodies. The way he pushes back the limits of fashion is a reflection of our time.

In contact with technological objects, the human body alters its appearance and redefines its contours. In order to imagine our future, Bart Hess combines things that we usually see as opposed: craftsmanship and digital technology / the organic and the technological. He is one of the representatives of what is currently called, not haute-couture, but cyber couture: futuristic fashion for cyborgs! Nightmare or Utopia? You decide...



9 – Annette Messenger, *Les Piques* (The Pikes), 1992-1993

[rhythmic music] Annette Messenger, *Les Piques* (The Pikes), 1992-1993

We advance along the central aisle on level 4 of the Centre Pompidou and turn right into a walkway. Scanning the scene, our curious eyes pause on the threshold of a large doorway: before us in the distance, we observe a strange installation stretching along a white 4-metre-long wall.

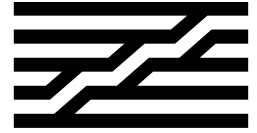
[soft music] Luminous halos shed feeble light on a multitude of coloured objects propped against the wall at different heights. Each one is placed at the tip of a long, very thin metal pole, or pike. There are a lot of them! Dozens of black bars are standing on the floor and leaning against the nearby wall. Some are very tall, about 3 metres high. There are also shorter pikes, the height of an adult; others are the height of a child.

A strange impression! We recognise children's toys and drawings that seem to be impaled on the tips of these steel pikes.

There are colourful rag dolls, sometimes only their legs. We find other limbs hanging from the wall. Baby pink, pale blue or off-white, the soft bright shades are reminiscent of the cuddly toys we give to new-born babies.

The little bodies aren't threatening, yet they seem to be mortified: dismembered, torn apart and bent with fatigue and suffering.

Look, there's a bat! It stands out from a distance because of its black colour and simplified shape, such as a child might draw. Its wings are outspread but it is condemned to immobility by the long metal rod pinning it to the wall.



Scattered here and there among this jumble of objects made of fabric, there are just as many drawings at the end of their respective rods. In various formats, some could fit in the palm of our hand, the larger ones seem no larger than our heads.

This work emanates an ambivalence that catches our eye with its brutality.

Is it the nightmare or the act of an angry child who has punished and broken their toys? No, it's the work of Annette Messager, made in 1992-1993... entitled: *The Pikes!*

Annette Messager is a major contemporary artist. Born in France in 1943, she works in different forms, combining illustration, sculpture and photography in presentations that are as sensational as they are terrifying, in which the atmosphere swings between humour and gravity.

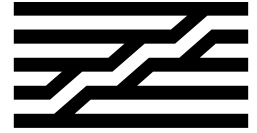
Since 1970, she has also been influenced by feminism, often subverting objects associated with the home and family life. She notably reuses simple everyday materials that evoke childhood and the manual work of the mother figure, such as sewing, knitting, embroidery and making rag dolls.

This is true of this work or, to be more precise, this installation, which requires us to move about in the environment in order to discover all the elements: 130 steel pikes, 79 drawings framed under glass, 78 textile objects, nylon stockings and coloured pencils.

[suspenseful music] But where are they? We didn't see all that at first glance! Let's continue our visit. Are you scared, nervous or more inclined to laugh?

Let's enter the room and decide. Surprise! On the 8-metre-long wall to the left, we find some hundred pikes, all equally studded with childish-looking objects, which the artist subverts here to evoke adult subjects.

Let's get closer to this new row of pikes, like a metal forest scattered with fantastical objects. Let's begin by examining the first elements at this end. We'll continue along to the corner of the room until we finally reach the wall facing the entrance.



Single-coloured (e.g. white, pink, red or blue) rag dolls are skewered in groups clustered along the length of several pikes. Some are falling floorward in bunches, legs and arms dangling.

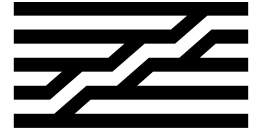
Curious objects made of cotton and stuffed with padding material made up of very fine, light and downy threads, giving a soft look to these little dolls with simplified shapes. A ball for a head, oblong shapes for the torso, arms and legs. With neither eyes nor hair, they have no gender or identity markers. They are elementary and anonymous. Like little, quickly-sewn rag toys used for black magic.

[soft music] Among these rudimentary-looking textile confections, there are also little tubes that are likely to evoke arms or legs ripped from these dolls. Some have hybrid shapes. They look like cushions in the shape of organs: Could some pink ones be breasts? Could other beige ones be livers? Guts? A penis? The artist gives free rein to our imagination.

[rhythmic music] There are drawings here, placed under glass and framed with grey metal. These doodles are scattered sparsely around the skewers of rag toys. Bright white against a black background, or scary black against a red background, the doodling forms concentric circles and frenetically and violently scratched zigzag stripes, as if a child had leaned too hard and too long on a colour pencil.

Let's continue to the right. Two rag dolls patched with pieces of white and beige fabric are curled in on themselves like foetuses, and enclosed in black nylon stockings. Their weight stretches the stockings hanging from the tip of the pike and opens the weave of the nylon, letting us see inside through an interplay of transparency. In another chrysalis, one of their sisters is upright, limbs compressed, tight against the body, like a little mummy.

Another seems to have attempted to escape through the lower part of the installation: rid of the nylon stocking and very small, it is reminiscent of biscuits in the shape of a



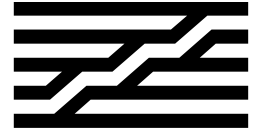
little man that children eat during the Christmas festivities. Stopped abruptly in its escape by a short pike that runs through it at the level of its genital organs, the rag doll seems to be projected backward against the wall, arms and legs raised, as if frozen in their backward fall. Some ten pieces of coloured pencils spring from its crotch, the tips pointing outward, like makeshift defences deployed in reaction to the pike.

[suspenseful music] Let's continue on our way. We are now in the middle of the row of pikes. To pass this visually gripping stage, our eyes have to confront a host of grotesque, menacing heads. Balls of white cotton fabric of the size of a head are enveloped in black nylon stockings. They hang from the tips of more or less tall pikes. The group resembles drops of petroleum as they stretch and ooze; their faces deformed by gravity.

The artist tore the mesh of the nylon stocking to make little holes in the place of the eyes and mouth. Some form a line of sharp teeth sometimes. Others a cruel and pernicious smile. We seem to recognise monstrous faces, like burglars who wear a nylon stocking over their face to efface the features of their identity, or masked militiamen ready for battle.

[soft music] Among these strange creatures are pikes crowned with drawings that contrast with their realism. Made with pastel, these are close-ups of faces, leaning horizontally. Turned toward us, they are looking at us. Peaceful and calm. Are they still alive? Their lack of expression suggests they're not. Others, on the other hand, seem to be in agony and turn away, their eyes shut, mouths open, as if to catch one last breath of oxygen.

Each of these heads refers us back to the title of the work, originally called *The Revolution*. They are reminiscent of the period of Terror in 1793, during which guillotined heads were exhibited on the tips of pikes.



At this point we may ask: is Annette Messenger representing the victims or the executioners of this murderous madness?

Let's take a few more steps to the right. At the end of this row, drawings of war scenes are represented in small metal frames. Bombers, tanks and armoured vehicles charging at full speed, the coloured pencil drawings are executed as if by an adolescent: while the forms are realistic, the colours are eerie.

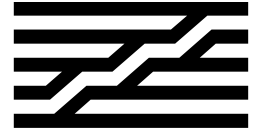
Each frame evokes the panels of a comic strip. Is this the history of our world? Annette Messenger borrows these scenes of catastrophes from the international news in the late 1980s, early 1990s. Victims, terrorist attacks, wars. Does this whole installation constitute a map of our humanity in shreds?

Our eyes find another nylon stocking: flesh-coloured, torn, bleeding a mass of fabric in the form of tubes, stitched together like the little rag dolls. Combined with the images of war, they evoke coloured guts or entrails tumbling to the floor. They echo a skewer of soft belts lower down, also made of fabric with the same single shades, white, pink, red and blue, that trickle down the length of their pikes like viscera.

There are also drawings of maps and regions, no doubt devastated by the same combat vehicles that we find in one of the frames higher up. The names of the countries are inscribed in coloured pencil, the letters incomplete as if in the process of being erased.

Could it be that Annette Messenger represents the barbarity of the world in order not to forget? Could it be that we are face to face with a memorial to the tragedies of humanity?

The question remains unanswered. And thus ends our epic journey through this row of pikes.



We make a turn back towards the exit. [rhythmic music] Just as we are about to leave the room, we look back one last time. Seen from a distance, the drawings and figures with their cheerful colours look like familiar children's objects. Then the hundred-odd pikes immediately remind us of the cruelty of this apparently playful world.

One last stuffed fabric object captures our attention: a pair of candy pink legs is doing a frontal split over a pike. The feet are in the form of high-heeled shoes. The legs give birth to a Barbie doll made of fabric, which – by a twist of fate – is no sooner born than it is skewered by a pike! She recalls us of the vulnerability of our own flesh. Annette Messager thus reminds us of the eternal cycle of creation... and destruction.

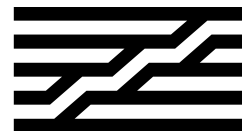
10 – Louise Bourgeois, *Precious liquids*, 1992

[rhythmic music] Louise Bourgeois, *Precious liquids*, 1992

We turn right at the end of the central aisle on level 4 of the Centre Pompidou. There at the end of the passage is the monumental *Precious Liquids* installation, created by Louise Bourgeois in 1992. A barrel more than 4-metres-high and 4 and a half metres in diameter is placed vertically in the centre of a room so that we can move around it.

This dark wooden barrel is a water tank that the artist reconstituted in imitation of the ones we find on the top of buildings in New York. [soft music] On an iron band running all around the barrel, we can read the following words written in relief in capital letters, like a warning: "Art is a guarantee of sanity". This is the artist's credo. For Louise Bourgeois, art was a therapy that enabled her to exorcise the trauma of her childhood.

"Every day you have to abandon the past or accept it. If you cannot accept it, you become a sculptor". (Louise Bourgeois)



From the outside, the barrel is almost totally closed: it has only two openings, like the entrance to and the exit from the same room. We'll call them "entrance" and "exit". Each one is equipped with a door with an iron handle that opens to the right. On the "entrance" door we can distinguish a hole of the size of a marble, which is used to observe the interior while remaining hidden.

Our instinct as voyeurs is awakened and we are immediately attracted to what the barrel contains. As we approach, we notice that the vertical wooden staves making up the barrel have a rough finish. Inside, the floor and walls are made of these same rough wooden staves.

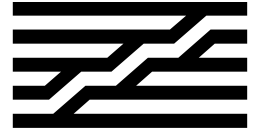
First impression: it is dark in this barrel room, although there is no roof. When we look up, we see the ceiling of the museum with white and green pipes running across it.

We immediately notice the diversity in the materials used: dark cedar wood, smooth and cold-looking metal, glass, clean-cut and dry rubber. But also in the fabric, the water, the alabaster and even the electricity.

Our eyes scan the room in a clockwise direction. Facing us, the opening we call "exit". On the left, an iron bed without a mattress, a base made of a sheet of metal. In the middle of the base we find a small pool of water.

Over the bed, glass vessels of different shapes and sizes seem to float over each other. As we look more carefully, we see that they are held in place by vertical metal tubes about two metres high, placed at the four legs of the bed, like the framework for a canopy. Each tube is pierced on every side from top to bottom with horizontal little metal rods ending in hoops that hold the glass vessels in position. A little like four trees whose metal branches, directed toward the bed, bear heavy glass fruits.

Some globes are completely spherical and closed. Their sizes vary from that of a watermelon to a melon to a grape. Some are also open at the top and bottom like



some kind of flask from a chemistry laboratory. Some are oval-shaped, others in the shape of an hourglass, narrow at the waist and rounded at the extremities.

[soft music] This glass and iron machine gives us a strange impression. We hesitate between a torture machine and a marvellous system invented by a mad scientist. What are all these glass vessels for? Where does this little pool of water on the bed come from?

"For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture. Glass becomes a metaphor for muscles. It represents the subtlety of emotions, the organic mechanism, also its instability. When the muscles relax and untense, a liquid is produced. Intense emotions become a material liquid, a precious liquid." (Louise Bourgeois)

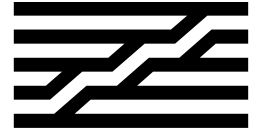
Louise Bourgeois saw this piece as a system of circulation for the liquids produced by the body in moments of great emotion: sweat, tears, urine, semen, etc.

The water that has flowed from these glass vessels forms a little pool on the bed. The water will evaporate, to condense again and fall again drop by drop to re-form this pool of precious liquid. *Precious Liquids* is like a living body, reacting to emotions. It is a little girl's body confronted with fear and anger.

"My childhood never lost its magic, its mystery and its intensity. All my works, all the subjects that inspire me, found their inspiration in my childhood." (Louise Bourgeois)

Louise Bourgeois did not emerge unscathed from her childhood. One traumatic event returns incessantly in her work: her father's infidelities. In the 1920s, when Louise was a teenage girl, her father began an adulterous relationship with the very young Sadie, the governess of Louise and her two brothers, under the tacit gaze of her mother. Louise Bourgeois created *Precious Liquids* to make peace with this past.

[soft music] Let's continue to observe the piece, still in a clockwise direction.



To the right of the bed and glass vessels, the exit is facing us.

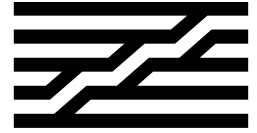
To the right of the exit door, two wooden spheres with irregular surfaces and measuring about one metre high are positioned on the floor. They are painted a faded yellowish colour that lets the dark colour of the wood come through in places.

Disproportionately sized in relation to the bed, they represent the viewpoint of the artist as a little girl. They are reminiscent of the balls of wool that filled the family home. Louise Bourgeois' parents collected tapestries and sculptures and their house was also a restoration studio where Louise lent a helping hand while still a child.

Our gaze continues to the right, where it encounters a strange luminous sculpture, smaller and placed on the floor. This sculpture is about twenty centimetres high, milky white with a surface as smooth as marble. It emits a very gentle light from a bulb that illuminates it from the inside. It is like a reassuring maternal presence. It is called *Trani Episode*. Its shape: an assemblage of two crossed elongated protuberances, one resting over the other. These protuberances seem soft, although they are hewn from alabaster. They resemble penises at rest, or elongated breasts: at the end of each protuberance, we can distinguish a nipple.

To the right of *Trani Episode*, and very near the entrance door, we see a man's coat that is black and seems disproportionately large. Suspended from a hanger hooked to a wire, it appears to float before the wall. At its feet, on the floor, two black spheres, about a metre high, like the wooden spheres we saw a little earlier. Except that these are smooth with an almost clinical aspect. Although they are made of rubber, one could almost believe they are made of leather.

From where we are, it is difficult to observe this black coat because we lack perspective. So we go around the barrel tank by the outside to look through the exit door. The bed is now on our right and we immediately notice the interplay of shadows and reflections on the dark wooden wall, created by the light coming through the glass vessels.



Very near us on the left, the two wooden balls painted pale yellow, a little further on, the *Trani Episode* sculpture that seems to oversee the whole of this little world and, in the axis of our diagonal, the famous hanging coat complete with the two smooth black spheres.

Now that we can see them in better perspective, the phallic symbol is obvious. The coat dominates the whole room like a disturbing shadow. It symbolises the authoritarian father who brought conflict into the home. Its apparently disproportionate size reflects the point of view of the artist as a little girl.

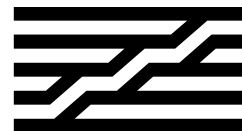
Inside the coat, a child's nightshirt, buttoned up to the neck and stuffed, sewn at the bottom like a cushion. On each side of the shirt we can make out a sky-blue word embroidered vertically: on the left "MERCi", which means "thank you" in French, and on the right: "MERCY".

[soft music] Louise Bourgeois brings together opposing elements, glass and liquid, fabric and stone, wood and metal, masculine and feminine. She associates a gesture she sees as destructive – sculpture – with restoration work: the assemblage of pre-existing objects, which is a "labour of love" for her.

"My sculpture allows me to re-experience fear, to give it a body so I am able to hack away at it. Fear becomes a manageable reality." (Louise Bourgeois)

By coming to grips with her memories, Louise Bourgeois touches on the universal. When we see *Precious Liquids*, we think of the myth of Oedipus but also the world of fairy tales. This empty barrel house made of wood, in which we find a bed, a disproportionately large garment, could well be Goldilocks' house ...

"*Precious Liquids* is about a girl who grows up and finds passion instead of terror. She stops being frightened and discovers passion." (Louise Bourgeois)



[rhythmic music] Louise Bourgeois created works to make peace with the past. She represented fear in order to rid herself of it and survive. This brings us back to the epigraph over the entrance to the barrel: "Art is a guarantee of sanity".

Credits

Voices: Claire Olivier, Marianne Bergès, Fabrice Scott

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Music: Maxime Daoud

Sound design: Sixième son

Recording: Ivan Gariel

Mixing: Antoine Dahan

Artistic direction: Charlotte Mounier

Thanks to: Souad, Mariam, Jean-Luc, Jean-Michel, Agnès, Tatiana and Sabrina

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