

The Letters

LETTER 01

THE CANVAS HAS AN *IDIOTIC STARE*

Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh

2 October 1884

It wasn't until his thirties that Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh found his calling as an artist. Born in Zundert in 1853, his early years saw him flit from job to job, his only real focus being a deepening dedication to religion. In 1879 he took a missionary post in Belgium where he lived in poverty and squalor. His family, who had supported him for years, were losing patience; at one point his father even tried to have him committed to an asylum. In 1881, with financial backing from his younger brother, Theo, Vincent began to paint, and for the remainder of his life spent much of his time creating the work for which he is now known. In 1884, aged thirty-one, he wrote this letter to his brother. It would be six years later, in Auvers-sur-Oise, that Vincent, deeply depressed, would take his own life.

THE LETTER

My dear Theo,
Thanks for your letter, thanks for the enclosure.
Now listen here.

...

I tell you, if one wants to be active, one mustn't be afraid to do something wrong sometimes, not afraid to lapse into some mistakes. To be good – many people think that they'll achieve it by *doing no harm* – and that's a lie, and you said yourself in the past that it was a lie. That leads to stagnation, to mediocrity. Just *slap something on it* when you see a blank canvas staring at you with a sort of imbecility.

You don't know how *paralyzing* it is, that *stare* from a blank canvas that says to the painter you can't *do anything*. The canvas has an idiotic stare, and mesmerizes some painters so that they turn into idiots themselves. Many painters *are afraid* of the blank canvas, but the blank canvas IS AFRAID of the truly passionate painter who dares – and who has once broken the spell of 'you can't'.

Life itself likewise always turns towards one an infinitely *meaningless*, discouraging, dispiriting blank

side on which there is *nothing*, any more than on a blank canvas.

But *however* meaningless and vain, *however* dead life appears, the man of faith, of energy, of warmth, and who knows something, doesn't let himself be fobbed off like that. He steps in and does something, and hangs on to that, in short, breaks, 'violates' – they say.

Let them talk, those cold theologians

‘SUCCESS IS SCIENCE;
IF YOU HAVE THE
CONDITIONS, YOU GET
THE RESULT.’

– *Oscar Wilde*

LETTER 02

FUCK THE ART WORLD PRESSURES

Lucy R. Lippard to a Young Woman Artist

1974

In 1974 Miriam Schapiro, co-founder and director of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, encouraged seventeen of her female students to write to women in the art world with a request: to reply with a letter of advice to a 'Young Woman Artist'. These invaluable pieces of correspondence were then to be compiled in Anonymous Was a Woman, a book to be published as part of that year's Women's Art Festival. Before long, letters arrived from seventy-one of the women, including Lucy R. Lippard, a highly respected and influential writer, curator, art critic and feminist whose achievements are rivalled by very few.

THE LETTER

March 6, 1974

138 Prince St.

NYC 10012

To a Young Woman Artist,

I'm sorry this has to be so short, because I have a lot I'd like to talk about with you, but try to read between the lines. I hope you're angry but get it over with fast and use it while you've got it. I hope you don't stop being angry now and then until things are better for all women, not just artists; I hope you're working from yourself and know how to fuck the art world pressures when you get out there; and I hope you're working for everybody else too; I hope you'll be the one to figure out a way to keep art from being used the wrong way and for the wrong things in this society; I hope you make your art accessible to more people, to all women and to everybody; I hope you think about that now and aren't waiting till you make it, because that's likely to be too late. I hope you remember that being a feminist carries with it a real responsibility to be a human. I hope and I hope and I hope . . .

love,

Lucy Lippard

LETTER 03

HOW BEAUTIFUL!

Salvador Dalí to Federico García Lorca

December 1927

Born in Catalonia in 1904, Salvador Dalí's artworks are known the world over thanks in no small part to their surreal, dreamlike nature. His iconic paintings are filled with optical illusions, distorted scenery, melting objects and sexual imagery. This, coupled with a flamboyant persona that itself was somewhat a work of art, have cemented his place in the annals of art history. At college in 1923, Dalí met and grew close to the poet Federico García Lorca, and for some time they wrote to each other on a whole host of subjects. It is no surprise to learn that Dalí's letters are like nothing written before.