

Exhibition November 6, 2024–March 17, 2025

Sabatini Building, Floor 3

“In the troubled air . . .”



Corinne Mercadier, *Série “Une fois et pas plus” #10* (“Just this once” series #10), 2000.

Courtesy Galerie Binome. © Corinne Mercadier, Madrid, VEGAP, 2024.

**MUSEO NACIONAL
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Curated by the French thinker Georges Didi-Huberman, the exhibition “*In the troubled air . . .*” articulates a political anthropology of emotion in a poetic key, sketching out paths of respiration and resistance that confront the persuasive and all-pervading culture of capitalism. The title, taken from Federico García Lorca’s *Romancero gitano* (*Gypsy Ballads*), appeals to unfettered emotion that is not constrained to a single subject, thus calling Lorca’s idea of *duende* into play. In this way, emotion is here understood as a movement transmitted to the collectivity through a single body and susceptible to development into a “commotion,” meaning a concatenation of emotions that affects a set, an environment, a relationship.

The starting point of the exhibition lies in the words *En el aire conmovido* (In the troubled air) from the poem “Romance de la luna, luna” (Ballad of the Moon, Moon, 1924), with which Lorca agglutinates two invisible elements in a combined movement: one atmospheric (the air) and the other psychic (emotion). Through a suggestive array of artworks and documentary sources, the concept of the show thus adopts the form of an essay on the emotions that goes beyond individual and collective psychology to linger over the significance of places in times and spaces of poetic percussion, where emotion and politics unite.

Today more than ever we experience a rending or unhinging of the emotions before the history that drags us forward. This unhinging seems to affect everything we want to understand or feel, including emotions, increasingly distant from the relationships they stem from, and artworks, whose critical potency has mined the reification that rules the world, transforming everything into an exchangeable or interchangeable object. It is no wonder that the sociology of emotions is linked with the aesthetic paradigm, as emotions are as overvalued as images are overexposed. While the excess of emotions has devalued and anesthetized them, a surplus of images has made them invisible.

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ROMANCE DE LA LUNA, LUNA

A Conchita García Lorca.

Para la gran Lola.
En la madrugada y el canto de

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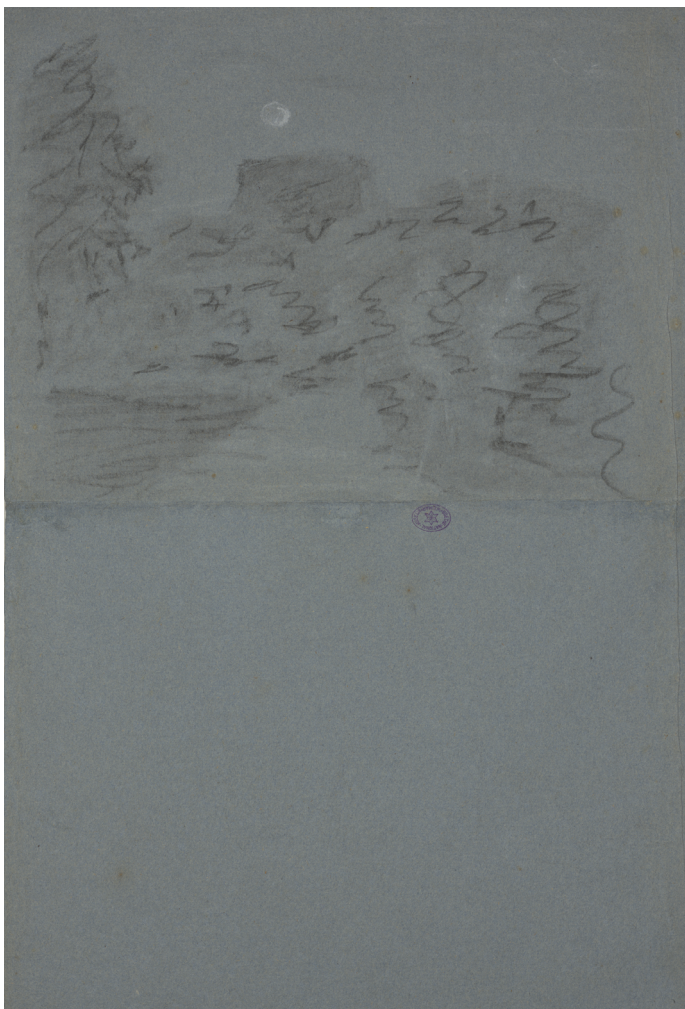
1934

Federico García Lorca, *Gitano andaluz bajo la luna dormida* (Andalusian Gypsy under the sleeping moon, 1934). Archivo Fundación Federico García Lorca. Centro Federico García Lorca, Granada.

The situation recalls Sigmund Freud's final reflection in *Culture and Its Discontents*, where he asks about the uncertain results of the combat that every work of culture engages in against what threatens not only its own life but also human existence.

In past centuries, some thinkers approached the separation between the subject and the object of artistic creation as a reflection of the "emotional tearing" associated with the concept of the "tragedy of culture" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, etc.). Nietzsche affirmed that potency is in the first place *pathos*, the "power to be affected," and in the second place "an essentially plastic principle," an emergence of forms in perpetual metamorphosis. Freud calls the bodily event that expresses a pain originating in some psychic or social depth and that allows us to understand how emotions transform bodies, even acquiring form, a "symptom." Wherever an analogous affect is perceived, the image created by art to express it is also revived. Born in this way, to borrow Aby Warburg's expression, are "formulae typical of *pathos*" (*Pathosformeln*), which are then transmitted and transformed endlessly in the memory of mankind. For the author of *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, these formulae bind together gestures and forms that are inscribed in the history of the art, for which the images act as vehicles. Through them, something like a "survival of the affect" is produced that tends to be tragic, since an affect from the past never returns—or survives—without a rending of the emotions. Warburg proposes a cartography of images in which he finds a psychic and corporal dialectic of revolt whose premise would be the affective turbulence of desire, of the taking-form, recognizable through the forms of *pathos*.

In "Romance de la luna, luna," the poem that opens *Romancero gitano*, the *conmovido* (commotion) passes mysteriously from the moon to the child looking at it, and from him to the "air" in its totality. On that dark night, the pure gaze of the child perceives not only the moon but also the forge where the moon has withdrawn.



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Vollmondnacht im Thüringischen Gebirge* (Night of a full moon in the mountains of Thuringia), 1777. Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Museen. GGz/1057.

Born of the clash, or kiss, between two heterogeneous orders of reality that the air has brought into contact is an emotion that induces a “commotion” in the air itself: “*un aire conmovido*,” a song, a sonorous and musical medium for the hearing and a visual and psychic hyperesthesia for the sight. By extension, the particular modulation and simplicity of the poem causes commotion in those who read it.

The typed manuscript of Lorca’s lecture “Juego y teoría del duende” (Theory and Play of the *Duende*, 1933) is the central piece of the exhibition. The poet affirms here that *duende* is a collective idea rooted in the custom of the Andalusian people. This idea, which was to occupy a neuralgic position in his aesthetic, is incarnated in the emerging gesture, an existential occurrence: the simplicity of the people, the exclusion of the pariah, the smallness of the child, the poverty of the humble, the burden of the soul in torment, and finally the depth of what comes and goes in the bowels of both the psyche and the earth. In 1922, Lorca anticipated his idea of *duende* as an “air of time” that comes from nobody knows where and goes nobody knows whither. In 1932, he ended by referring to the *duende* of the *cante jondo* variety of flamenco song as a power that creeps up the body from the soles of the feet, by which the person singing is inspired, and its own song is exhaled. This “air of time” is, in Lorca’s words, “deeper than the voice that sings it.” In this way, reciting the song would mean giving voice to the air itself, that air which speaks to us so well of all that is ungraspable, which emerges from the clash created by an affective form at once so aerial (allusive, full of evanescences) and so corporal (pathetic, almost hammered down). Lorca understood the knowledge inherent to *duende* as the typically tragic knowledge that Nietzsche had developed philosophically in *The Birth of Tragedy*. There, Nietzsche speaks of the subject that is diffracted in crisis or in festivity. Shattering the idea of the subject that believes in itself, he thus breaks away from the norms of individuation, situating the subject in a ceaseless search for the other, whether psychic or social. Lorca spoke of *cante jondo* as a song “with no voice, with

no breath”: a song of negative potency, one might say, because it aims at deconstructing its own melodic structure and therefore sinking until it “rends the voice,” until the breath makes an active symptom and drama, troubling the air and turning it against itself.

But where does it come from, this feeling of excess that we experience on certain unimaginable occasions, at certain chilling gestures, before certain fascinating images, or upon hearing certain heart-rending songs? Might it not be that excess is manifested on the basis of a certain sovereign potency, even if subterranean? And if that potency exists, should it not be called *duende*? The shared excess typical of *cante jondo* is crucial to the poetics of Lorca, who recognizes it as inscribed in the body of a language and a way of existing differentially. Comparable to the musically unforeseen, such excess reveals and gives sense to the very thing whose agreed significance it has just undone.

The room adjacent to the introductory section of the exhibition contains a selection of treatises that resume the tradition of classifying the emotions and attempting to define the passions. Counterposed with the hierarchies that restricted them to a rational



Matías de Irala, *Metodo sucinto i compendioso de cinco simetrias apropiadas a las cinco ordenes de arquitectura adornada con otras reglas útiles* (A concise and compendious method of five symmetries appropriate to the five orders of architecture with other useful rules), 1731. Patrimonio Nacional. Colecciones Reales. Biblioteca del Palacio Real de Madrid.



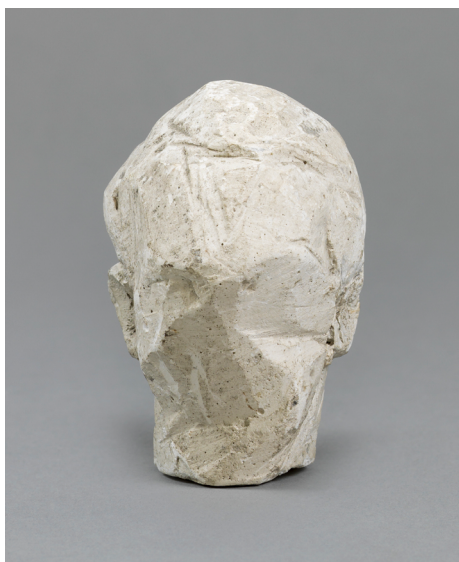
Ludwig van Beethoven, Musical setting of the poem "Wonne der Wehmut" (The Bliss of Melancholy), 1810. Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Museen. S GSA 33/54; GSA 28/183A.



Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Disparate volante* (Flying folly), 1815–1824. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Temporary loan from Calcografía Nacional, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid, 2016.

field from which they escape (René Descartes, Johann Kaspar Lavater, Charles Le Brun, Matías de Irala, Charles Darwin, etc.) are voices like those of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Baruch Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, Hegel, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Nietzsche, who glimpsed the indeterminate and ineffable nature of the emotions as well as their emancipatory power. Also included is a series of books and musical scores that have to do with the idea of *duende* (by Domenico Scarlatti, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Ludwig van Beethoven, José Bergamín, etc.), along with a series of works by Francisco Goya that evoke imps and “fantastic spirits” flying in all directions. Goya gave free rein to the powers of the imagination that can draw out those forms of commotion that project us—and divert us—outside any normal aesthetic situation.

The exhibition continues through two sections that show how emotion is expressed through the face in works by Medardo Rosso, Pablo Picasso, Julio González, and Alberto Giacometti. The ravaged faces of the mourners of Franco Pinna or the



Alberto Giacometti, *Petite tête de Diego* (Small head of Diego), ca. 1936.
Fondation Giacometti. © Succession Alberto Giacometti, VEGAP, Madrid, 2024.



Stills from *Los trabajadores* (The workers), 2012, in Pedro G. Romero and Gonzalo García Pelayo, *Nueve Sevillas* (Nine Seville), 2020.

silence of the survivors of Auschwitz interviewed in the video by Esther Shalev-Gerz point to the affectivity of loss, grief, and lamentation. What first shows itself on the face is rapidly expressed gesturally in works by Auguste Rodin, Salvador Dalí, and Harun Farocki, even taking possession of the body, sometimes inebriated by music (Valeska Gert, Vaslav Nijinsky, or Israel Galván), a hallucinatory state (Henri Michaux), or even the mind itself (Antonin Artaud, Unica Zürn).

When *duende* emerges from bodies and is projected in space, that space is troubled; it modifies its limits, and its surfaces vibrate. Space is also altered by the air that runs through it and by the elements that traverse it and sometimes constrain that air. The torn canvas of Lucio Fontana, the subtle diagonal of Fred Sandback, the washes of Victor Hugo, the photographic

impressions of Étienne-Jules Marey, the clouds that burst into the skies of Goethe, Gerhard Richter, or Tatiana Trouvé, the suggestive images of Corinne Mercadier . . .

Altered voices are also active subjects in the commotion of the air and its context. These voices induce commotion and make of it an active desire, a principle of hope. What oppresses to the point of pain is translated into a scream, lamentation transformed into mourning (Pinna, Bertolt Brecht, Robert Capa . . .). The feeling of loss tends toward the future and bears the potential of revolt, which can consequently be deployed in a political gesture. The epilogue of the exhibition looks at how emotions can be transmitted from the body of a single individual to a set of people and how a mass movement can lead to an uprising. At that moment of the imagination when emotion unleashes the desire for the impossible, a vital potency reemerges, indissociable from hope and utopia (images of the Commune, the Warsaw Ghetto, Käthe Kollwitz, etc.).



Franco Pinna, *Una prefica a Pisticci* (A wailer in Pisticci), 1952. Archivio Franco Pinna.



Losbruch (Outbreak), from the series *Bauernkrieg* (Peasants' War), 1902–1903.
© Käthe Kollwitz Museum Köln, 2024.

The exhibition concludes as it began, by placing the focus on childhood. “One must look with a child’s eyes,” Lorca writes. “What are poets for in times of penury?,” Hölderlin asks. To follow Lorca in answering this question is to give back to the child’s gaze all its double potency of tragedy and utopia. Shown in the last rooms are works like *For Sama* by Waad Al-Kateab and drawings by Guayaki, Syrian, and Japanese children at dramatic moments, such as the bombing of Hiroshima and the tragedy of Aleppo. In 1765, in the context of an impassioned dialogue with Goethe, Friedrich Schiller wrote a crucial text for the European history of art and literature defending a naive poetry that was evocative of childhood and consequently an infinite becoming. Here we find a kind of approximation to *duende* in the way Schiller defines the “naive” poetic character: “the naive is childishness where it was no longer expected, and precisely for that reason it cannot be ascribed strictly speaking to childhood.” The restless, innocent, and playful *duende* wanders through the air in the works of Lorca, Goya, and many other artists found in the course of the exhibition, activating emotion, affects, and mystery in starry, altered, troubled skies.

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