

Press release
Zurich, 8 March 2016

Kunsthau Zurich presents a Francis Picabia retrospective

'Our heads are round so our thoughts can change direction': this celebrated aphorism by Francis Picabia is the chosen title for a retrospective of the French artist's work at the Kunsthau Zurich from 3 June to 25 September 2016.

To mark 100 years since the birth of the Dada movement in Zurich, a large-scale retrospective explores the work of the hitherto under-rated artist Francis Picabia (1879-1953). With some 200 exhibits, the presentation – which is part of the Zurich Festival – examines Picabia's entire career, from his early successes as an Impressionist painter and his crucial contribution to both Dada and the history of modern art.

IMPRESSIONIST, DADAIST, FIGURATIVE AND ABSTRACT

Raised in an affluent household, Francis Picabia studied at the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris from the age of 17. He successfully sold his paintings in the Impressionist style, but soon began to find them too decorative. In 1913 he travelled to New York, where he attended the legendary Armory Show and also came into contact with the influential gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz, who staged a solo exhibition of his work that same year. It was during this period that Picabia created his largest paintings, which incorporated Cubist elements. Unlike with the Cubists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, however, these canvases mix joyous colour experimentation with analysis of moving forms in space.

LOVE OF LANGUAGE AND PRINTED MATTER, SUPPORT FOR TZARA

Picabia did not return to Europe until after the First World War. As a result he was not in Zurich when Dada was born on 5 February 1916; but his close friendship with Tristan Tzara, one of the movement's founders, soon made him one of Tzara's supporters and most important financial backers. In Barcelona in January 1917 he founded the Dada review '391', nineteen issues of which were published before it closed in 1924. The project saw the emergence of another of Picabia's passions: the printed object as artistic format in its own right, and language in prose and poetry. Throughout his life Picabia published remarkably innovative aphorisms, manifestos, essays and illustrated texts. Between 1915 and 1920, during his Dadaist phase, he produced the 'mechanomorphic' pictures that are among his most famous series of works. Owing to internal disagreements, however, Picabia officially parted company with the Dada group in 1921.

FOR AND AGAINST NEOCLASSICISM. THEATRE, DANCE AND FILM

For Picabia, along with Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso and many other artists of his generation, the 1920s marked a 'retour à l'ordre' – a nostalgic reversion to established values. Artistically, these found expression in a formal language that owed much to figuration and naturalism. But Picabia, even though absorbing this trend, too, was a far from uncritical observer of it: during this decade, he also created his most diverse body of work. The years 1923 to 1926 gave rise to mural object collages such as 'Femme aux Allumettes' (Match Woman, private collection) and 'Pailles et cure-Dents' (Drinking straws and Toothpicks, Kunsthaus Zürich), as well as the social criticism of the 'Monster' series (1924 onwards), and the carefully modelled 'Transparency' series (1927 onwards), with their reworking of classical elements. The thematic diversity of his work also manifested itself in technical experimentation: he painted with Ripolin, an enamel normally used for boats. In 1924 Picabia wrote the script for the ballet productions 'Relâche' and 'Ciné-sketch' and worked on the film 'Entr'acte', in which René Clair, Erik Satie, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp were also involved. From 1925 he abandoned the hustle and bustle of Paris for the high life of the Côte d'Azur. The 1930s and 1940s were a period of genuine stylistic experiment: the blatantly erotic and politically controversial 'Pin-Ups' that blended various photographic images drawn from mass culture and can thus be seen as prefiguring Pop Art; and the 'Points', which reveal Picabia's obsession with the impasto qualities of oil paints in extreme formal reduction. Picabia was constantly re-inventing himself. He veered between artistic anguish and euphoria: a tendency that first emerged when he sought treatment for neurasthenia in Étival and Lausanne from 1912 and stayed with him until a stroke in 1951 and his death in 1953.

A BODY OF WORK THAT IS FULL OF SURPRISES

Picabia remains a hotly debated figure among the great artists of the 20th century. Throughout his life he set his face against mechanisms of value judgement that distinguished high art from kitsch and conservatism from radicalism. Self-critically and with acerbic humour, he questions the very basis of the modern. The exhibits that curator Cathérine Hug (Kunsthaus Zürich) has selected together with Anne Umland, curator at MoMA New York, bring out this multiple personality. Picabia's work challenges our understanding of the many familiar 'isms' that emerged in the first half of the 20th century and are now firmly embedded in art history's collective memory. In addition to some 100 paintings, the exhibition includes works on paper, avant-garde magazines and examples of his film and theatre work: a total of approximately 200 artworks and documents from major public and private collections. The presentation is largely chronological, but with caesuras that mirror the changing stylistic phases of Picabia's oeuvre. Immediately striking is the range of painting techniques: ensembles of works in an impressionistic style, stereotypical depictions of

Spanish women, abstracts that evoke technology and machines, and the 'Nudes' inspired by photos from the more salacious media or advertising are grouped together. While the products of Picabia's Dada years are well known, there is no shortage of surprises among his work as a whole. Rediscoveries include a series of pieces from the 1922 exhibition at the Galerie Dalmau in Barcelona, for which André Breton supplied the catalogue foreword. On show for the first time in Zurich are the three-metre by three-metre large formats 'Edtaonisl (Ecclesiastic)' from 1913 (The Art Institute of Chicago) and 'Udnie' from the same year (Musée national d'art moderne, Paris). This pair of abstracts, completed shortly after Picabia's visit to the Armory Show in 1913 and exhibited at the Paris autumn salon in the same year, offer a hint of the excitement and commotion these works provoked a century ago. They are being shown together for the first time in almost 70 years.

ART EDUCATION, LECTURES AND PUBLICATION

An audioguide with explanatory texts (included in the price of admission) aids visitors' appreciation of the works on display. Regular guided tours provide an opportunity for dialogue between art educators and the public.

On Thursday 16 June Dr. Aurélie Verdier (Paris/Berlin) will be giving a lecture entitled «Ego Picabia» on multiple identity in the work and person of Francis Picabia. It is followed by a discussion with curator Cathérine Hug.

At 7 p.m. on Wednesday 22 June the Kunsthaus welcomes Dada and Surrealism expert Arturo Schwarz, for a talk about his memories and a discussion with literary critic Stefan Zweifel moderated by Cathérine Hug. Both events take place in the auditorium of the Kunsthaus Zürich. Admission costs CHF 10, and is free to holders of a ticket to the Picabia exhibition.

A lavishly illustrated catalogue (368 pages, around 300 illustrations) containing new scholarly essays by Cathérine Hug (incorporating comments by Peter Fischli, Albert Oehlen, Rita Vitorelli and other personalities), Anne Umland, George Baker, Carole Boulbès, Masha Chlenova, Michele Cone, Briony Fer, Gordon Hughes, David Joselit, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Bernard Marcadé, Arnaud Pierre, Rachel Silveri, Juri Steiner, Adrian Sudhalter and Aurélie Verdier, is published by N.V. Mercatorfonds (Brussels). It will be available in bookstores and the Kunsthaus shop from June.

The exhibition is a collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where it will be on display from 20 November 2016 to 19 March 2017.

Supported by the Festspiele Zürich, the Ernst Göhner Foundation and the Truus and Gerrit van Riemsdijk Foundation.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich

Tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84, www.kunsthhaus.ch.

Fri-Sun/Tues 10 a.m. – 6 p.m., Wed, Thurs 10 a.m. – 8 p.m. Public holiday opening see www.kunsthhaus.ch.

Admission: CHF 22 / CHF 17 (concessions and groups). Combination tickets including the collection and exhibition CHF 25 / CHF 18. Admission free to visitors up to the age of 16.

Public guided tours

German: Wednesdays 6 p.m., Sundays 11 a.m.

English: Saturday 11 June, 11 a.m. and 9 July, 4 p.m.

French: Saturday 25 June, 4 p.m.

Advance sales: SBB RailAway combination ticket, with discount on travel and admission: at stations and by phoning Rail Service 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19/min. by land line), www.sbb.ch/kunsthhaus-zuerich.

Zurich Tourism: hotel room reservations and ticket sales, Tourist Service at Zurich Main Railway Station, tel. +41 44 215 40 00, information@zuerich.com, www.zuerich.com.

INVITATION AND NOTE TO EDITORS

The press conference will take place on Thursday 2 June at 11 a.m. Registration is not required.

We will be pleased to organize interviews with curator Cathérine Hug by prior arrangement. This press release as well as images are available at www.kunsthhaus.ch > Information > Press. These materials will be updated on 2 June. Advance copies of the catalogue in PDF format are available on request.

For further information, contact:

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