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Vincent & Us

Isabelle Rutens

Long Island University, Isabelle.Rutens@my.liu.edu

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Vincent & Us

An Honors Program Thesis

By

Isabelle Rutens

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Theatre

(advisor) David Hugo

(reader) Cara Gargano

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Abstract

This study focuses on Vincent Van Gogh and how we relate to him today through his paintings and his writings. My initial thesis question was based around the idea that there must be something about this man and his works that connects us to him in an embodied and profound way. Through my research, writing, and the creative process of creating a devised piece of physical theatre, I grew to believe that the connection we have with him is based around the unique experience of being human. In the following pages, I explore the idea of our shared human experience with Van Gogh through research about his life, research on how the human brain processes art, and many different examples of unique ways that people have connected with and responded to Van Gogh's work. Additionally, I explore this idea by creating a devised piece of physical theatre using Van Gogh's paintings as inspiration, and using his writings in combination with the writings of three actors to create a script and a piece of art that highlights the experience of being human.

Vincent & Us

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Introduction

This study focuses on how Vincent Van Gogh, through conveying his own human experience with his art, can connect with people today, over a hundred years after his death. Initially, I will explore the intimate relationship between painter and viewer by exploring how humans process art in their brains by drawing upon their own human experiences. Then, I will discuss the many different ways that people can connect with Van Gogh's work. Finally, I will explain how I created a devised physical theater piece using these ideas, all of my research, and the experiences of three actors.

I cannot imagine that there is someone in the world who would say "I hate Vincent Van Gogh. His art is objectively bad." Someone may not know his work very well, or may only know the major works such as *Starry Night (1889)* and *Sunflowers (1887)*, but never would someone say they truly hate his work. Why is this? What is it about this long dead painter and his works that still strikes some chord with human beings today? I suggest that the answer lies in the way his paintings and writings speak to the viewer in an emotional, embodied way. In other words, it is about the universal experience of being human.

Vincent Van Gogh became the topic of my thesis project in my sophomore year. I've always loved his art and I've always felt very drawn to him, but one November day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, that multiplied a hundredfold. I was browsing the impressionist art and looking at a few of his works when I stumbled upon Van Gogh's *Self Portrait With a Straw Hat (1887)*. I stopped dead in my tracks and looked into this man's eyes and I felt this profound

connection, unlike anything I had felt before. All of his sadness became my sadness, all of his struggles became my struggles, and his human experience became my human experience.

From that moment on, I knew he was going to be the central topic of my thesis, but I wasn't quite sure how. Would I write a play about his life? Would I do a devised theatre piece? Would I act? Would I direct? Would I write? Nothing was set in stone at that point. There were a million thoughts floating around in my head, but none of them were concrete. The only concrete thing was the connection I felt with this man. This connection was so strong and so real, I was sure that I couldn't be the only one who felt it. I knew there was something special and important about it.

During the second semester of my sophomore year, I was involved in another thesis project. I was an actor in Daniel George's thesis project *Apart/A Part* (2017), and it was through that experience that I discovered how much I loved creating devised theatre. In the first semester of my junior year, I proposed my thesis project, hoping to begin my tutorial in the spring. I had this concept of doing a devised environmental piece in nature, mainly a sunflower field. I had this idea because nature was such an inspiration to Van Gogh, and I wanted it to be a film so that I could play with perspective, and so that it would be possible to have different moments in different settings in the environment. I proposed the project, and it was approved by the theatre department.

Tutorial

I registered to do my tutorial in Spring 2018 with Barbara Applegate. I chose Professor Applegate for my tutorial advisor because she is an expert in the field of art history, a topic which was crucial to my research. I started my research by learning a little more about Van

Gogh's life. I read the biography that is found on the Vincent Van Gogh Museum's website (<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/vincent-van-gogh-life-and-work>). I learned about his religious background, his struggle with his illness, and his art. Something interesting that Professor Applegate and I discovered while analyzing the biography from the museum website was that there was one section labeled "The Ear Incident," which was about the instance where he cut off part of his earlobe and gifted it to a prostitute. We both chuckled and found it funny how casual that section title sounded, but after talking about it and knowing what we knew about the man, we understood why it was phrased that way. The fact that Vincent Van Gogh was severely mentally ill and it drove him to cut off his ear is not who he is. He is so much more than that. He is a complex human being and that makes him so much more than one incident where he went too far, yet people often tend to reduce him to that.

This is an idea that I really felt connected to and I wanted to make it a common thread throughout this piece. I wanted to keep it a central idea that people are more than what meets the eye, people are more than labels, and people are more than their mistakes.

During the discussions Professor Applegate and I had in my tutorial, we found that simply asking actors to choose some paintings that spoke to them out of Van Gogh's entire oeuvre was not going to work: there are just too many paintings and too many subjects. We discovered that Van Gogh's works can be categorized into periods based on where he was living and what environment he was in at the time. The environment had an incredible affect on him, and one can see that through his work. For example, the paintings he did in Paris are more realistic, and they seem to follow the classical rules of the time more closely than the paintings he did in the Saint-Remy asylum.

Based on this discovery, I decided on the three periods of Van Gogh's work I wanted to explore. I chose the paintings from Paris, the Saint-Remy Asylum, and Auvers-sur-Oise. I chose these periods because I felt they flowed together really nicely, and they would make for a cohesive and interesting piece of art. When I gathered my chosen paintings from each period and laid them out in groups and looked at them I found that it appeared that in Paris, Van Gogh tried to follow the classical rules of the time period and paint things that should be commercially successful. In the asylum, he did whatever his brush wanted and whatever his soul told him to do. The paintings from the asylum are the most non-traditional. In Auvers-sur-Oise, toward the end of his life, his paintings still had the whimsy and mystical traits of the asylum paintings, but they were slightly more subdued. Personally, when I look at the paintings from Auvers-sur-Oise, I find them to be the perfect synthesis of the paintings from Paris and from the Saint-Remy asylum.

I realize that this conclusion is simply *my* opinion, and that others may have a completely different understanding of these periods. This is an idea I really connected with during my tutorial semester. While looking for sources, I came upon a vast variety of opinions and arguments. What really fascinated me was how there are seemingly endless possibilities in terms of how someone interprets Van Gogh's work. For example, in *A Reexamination of Van Gogh's Pictorial Space*, John L. Ward of the University of Florida deduces what Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles actually looked like by studying the *Bedroom at Arles* painting (1888), as well as the sketches by Van Gogh leading up to the painting. In this article, Ward even discusses what direction he believes Van Gogh must have been sitting in order to sketch the bedroom as he did,

as well as using clear evidence to show that Van Gogh changed the direction he was sitting in the middle of sketching the floorboards (which really fascinated me).

In addition to Ward's unique investigation of Van Gogh's work, I was also fascinated by the piece entitled *The Meteorological Odyssey of Vincent Van Gogh* by Stanley David Gedzelman. In this piece, Gedzelman investigates the clouds of Van Gogh's works to discover what kind of weather Van Gogh was experiencing. I found it to be such an exciting and unique take on Van Gogh's work. Another interesting article I found was *Van Gogh's Agony* by Lauren Soth; in this piece Soth discusses why she believes Van Gogh's *Starry Night* to be his version of Jesus' Agony in the Garden. All three of these are concepts that can be found and argued for in Van Gogh's work, and the reason that there are so many different ways to see Van Gogh's work is because seeing is "an active process." (Zeki, 74)

For a long time, seeing and vision were considered to be passive, as well as separate from understanding. However, as Semir Zeki argues in his 1998 piece, *Art and the Brain*, seeing and understanding happen simultaneously in the brain, and each is just as important as the other. It is because the act of seeing art is an active neurological function rather than a passive one that we are able to feel a million different things while looking at one singular piece of art.

When a person looks at a piece of art, as they are seeing it, the brain is scanning its stored memory to find anything with any similarity, then takes those similar stored memories, categorizes everything into feelings of either happiness or sadness, and thus we get the million different feelings we feel when we look at art (Zeki, 87). Zeki calls these million different feelings "the certainty of many different and essential conditions, each equal to the others, all expressed in a single painting, profound in its faithful representation of so much." (Zeki, 87). So

much of what we feel when we experience the active process of seeing art is in direct relation to our brain's stored memories. So, everyone sees art differently, depending on their personal human experience. Whatever anyone sees in these paintings is important and unique and deserves to be explored. That was an idea that was very important for me to bring into this piece.

Once I had the periods chosen, some topics to focus on, some ideas to play with, and I was completing my tutorial, I realized a large problem with the project: I had no idea how to make a film. I realized that I did, however, know how to make a physical theatre piece, so that is the direction I chose to pursue.

Finding the Dream Team

For auditions, I planned to look for people who were prepared, who made bold choices with their monologues, and people who had an energy that matched my vision for the piece. For callbacks, I printed out 5 different paintings from each period, and I organized them on the floor accordingly. When there was a group in the room, I counted them off in threes and they would go to their designated period, choose a painting, and then tell me why they chose it and why they were drawn to it. I had a selection of texts on different topics which I would then give them, one that fit them best based on what they told me. Then they would create a movement piece based on that text. The text that I created was pieced together from many different letters. I would find one idea in one letter that was interesting and then I would look in other letters to find if he elaborated on that idea or had another similar idea that could follow in a later or earlier letter. Vincent Van Gogh was an incredible writer, and he wrote a lot, so most often I found what I was looking for: profound thoughts in relation to the human experience.

The following section offers some examples of text used for callbacks:

I think it'll be much more advantageous to work than not to work, despite all the bad luck that's to be foreseen. My dear fellow, upon reflection, I don't say that my work is good, but it's the least bad that I can do. Ah, well, I risk my life for my own work and my reason has half foundered in it...very well. (Letter #874, Letter #RM25)

This text was pieced together from two different letters. The second sentence spoke to me especially, because it sounded like something that I would hear someone saying in one of our acting studios at 3 AM while working on a scene or a monologue. There was something very familiar about the idea that Van Gogh was expressing. I went through some more letters, and I found the other two sentences, expressing similar ideas. What came out of that was this bit of composite text that expressed an idea which I thought would be very relatable to many of the students who would be auditioning, the idea that every artist is trying their best, the work is difficult, but that at the end of the day when the work gets done, there is something very rewarding and special about it that makes all those gruelling hours worth it.

Another option was this text, derived from different sections of one letter (Letter #537). When piecing together this specific piece of text, I wanted to focus on color because I know that color is one of the main reasons that people are drawn to Van Gogh's work. I was anticipating many actors to bring me a painting and when I asked why they felt drawn to it, for them to respond with something about the colors. This became one of the more frequently used texts of the day.

Truly, colors can have quite a lot to say to one another. A painter does well if he starts from the colours on his palette instead of starting from the colours in nature. I retain from nature a certain sequence and a certain correctness of placement of the tones. I study nature so as to not

do anything silly, to remain reasonable- but- I don't really care whether my colours are precisely the same. So long as they look good on my canvas, just as they look good in life.

The other theme I anticipated hearing a lot from the actors was the connection to nature. One looks at one of Van Gogh's nature paintings such as *Iris* (1889) or *Cypresses* (1889) and immediately feels exactly what it must have been like to be in that place on that day. Van Gogh has a connection with nature unlike any other painter, and knowing many of these actors personally, I knew that they also felt that connection with nature and would be drawn to the nature paintings because of that. A third option also became one of the most frequently used texts of the day:

In my life when I'm in the country, it's not so difficult for me to be alone because in the country one feels the bonds that unite us all more easily. Outside the cicadas are singing fit to burst, a strident cry ten times louder than that of the crickets, and the scorched grass is taking on beautiful tones of old gold.

(Composed of different parts of one letter, Letter #787.)

Through auditions and callbacks, I found my dream team of three incredible actors. Each of these women brought something different, unique, and special into the room which is why they were chosen. Actor 1 brought a beautiful intricacy and softness, Actor 2 brought a humor and a special, personable quality, and Actor 3 brought an intense desire to learn and to grow. They were the perfect women for the piece, and all the hard work, time, and energy they gave to it does not go unnoticed or unappreciated.

Matching Period to Actor

Once school was out and the cast lists had been released, it was time to decide which actor would represent each period. I compiled packets including 7 paintings from each respective period, a color wheel, and a handwritten note to physically mail to each actor. I ended up giving Actor 1 the Paris paintings, Actor 3 the Saint-Remy asylum, and Actor 2 the Auvers-sur-Oise paintings. I made these decisions for a variety of reasons. Actor 1 was assigned the Paris paintings because I felt the color scheme of those pieces complimented her aura very well. In the Paris paintings, Van Gogh is very much “following the rules,” of painting. At this point he is painting what he thinks people want to see and buy rather than painting what he feels. I thought this concept fit Actor 1 very well because she is a person who is just teeming with ideas and individuality, but she restrains it to a certain extent. I thought Actor 1 and Van Gogh in Paris mirrored each other as artists.

I assigned Actor 3 the Saint-Remy asylum paintings because when Van Gogh was in the asylum he really started to nurture and appreciate the connection he had with nature. Of course he always felt a strong connection with nature, but when he was writing from the asylum he talks about it more extensively and freely. The paintings he made while in the asylum reflect that as well. Actor 3 is similar to Van Gogh in that they both have very strong connections with nature. Actor 3 loves to be outside feeling the wind in her hair and the grass between her toes. Knowing what I know about her as well as this period in Van Gogh’s life, the asylum era was the clear choice for her.

Actor 2 was assigned the Auvers-sur-Oise paintings because I know her to be a very quiet and introspective person until she gets comfortable with someone. Once she is comfortable with someone she is funny, loud, and vibrant. I feel that those qualities she has mirrors the

qualities that Van Gogh exhibits in the Auvers-sur-Oise period. In the letters he writes from Auvers-sur-Oise, he is thoughtful and introspective, but if you look at many paintings that he made while living there, they are colorful and lively, much like Actor 2.

With the packets, I mailed each woman a handwritten note explaining what they should do with the supplies I had sent them. The script for the piece was going to be pieces of Van Gogh's letters woven in with personal experiences written by these three incredible women. So, when they received their paintings, they were instructed to sit down with them one at a time, take it in, and allow themselves to fully experience what the painting was making them feel. After that, they were to write about their experience: write, and write, and write, and write some more. I wanted them to really delve into their experience and their relationship with the paintings. These writings would later be woven in with Van Gogh's own writings in order to create a script for the piece. The goal was to weave the texts in a way that blurred the lines between these women and Vincent Van Gogh in order to show the connection between Vincent and us.

Amsterdam

Over the summer, I made a visit to the Vincent Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. I felt this trip would be very useful because these paintings have a different effect in person than they do through paper or a computer screen. The museum is incredibly well organized. Floor one is all of the self portraits, so one can walk in a room and simply experience Van Gogh's energy. I made sure to take my time with each portrait, and to really look into his eyes. A few times I found myself thinking "yes, I know exactly what that feeling is." There were many other people around, seemingly having similar experiences, which speaks volumes of the human experience Van Gogh was able to so accurately portray. Each self portrait has its own energy, but each self

portrait is also very honest. Being in the room filled with his self portraits feels like being as close as one can get to being in the room with him.

After “meeting” Van Gogh through his self portraits, the rest of the museum is separated into periods similar to the way that this thesis piece was organized. Each floor and each room has it’s own set of years, starting with early works such as *The Potato Eaters* (1885) and ending on the top floor with works such as *Wheat Fields With Crows* (1890). Walking through each room at the Van Gogh museum is like walking through a period in his life. This man was able to so accurately display his human experience through his paintings that when one walks through a room filled with his paintings, it is impossible to avoid having an emotional response.

Perhaps the most important piece of information I learned from visiting the museum was the fact that *Wheat Field With Crows* was most likely not Van Gogh’s final painting as many (including myself, up until that point) believed. A more likely candidate for Van Gogh’s final painting is actually an unfinished piece called *Tree Roots*. Even before knowing that this painting is likely the last thing Van Gogh worked on before he apparently took his own life, this piece is quite disturbing. The tangled and mangled essence of the roots combined with the use of colors that contrast each other leaves the viewer with a sense of uneasiness and even some of the pain and confusion I imagine Van Gogh must have been feeling when painting it.

Creating a Script

Upon returning from Europe, I had a good amount of text sent to me from the actors, as well as a book including all of Van Gogh’s letters. It was time to start weaving this text together. In order to start this part of the project, I read through all of the text that had been given to me by my cast and I pulled out common themes they shared with Van Gogh, interesting ideas, things

that seemed important to them, and things they mentioned more than once. The creation of the text was tedious, and there was no formula for it that worked every time. The best way to describe the process of weaving all of this text together in order to create cohesiveness is similar to the way that many great musicians describe their songwriting: it happens differently every time, and that is why it is powerful.

To get started, I had my notes from reading the texts the actors had given me, and I had some of Van Gogh's letters already annotated from my tutorial as well as from my book of all of his letters. Flipping through pages, looking at things I had previously highlighted, things I had scribbled stars next to, and so on, I was looking for things that reminded me of the actors' writings. If I found something that seemed to fit, I would highlight it or put a star next to it and write the name of the actor to whom the text seemed to apply. Sometimes I would just write "I don't know for who but I like it!" After I did that, I went back through the writings I had gotten from my actors and did the same thing, but in reverse. I was reading their words and finding themes that reminded me of certain things Van Gogh had written. It was almost like putting a puzzle together: a beautiful and special puzzle. After that, creating the script was a continuation and variation of that method. We ended up with texts that included a composite of fragments from the complete letters, as well as the actors' own writings (See works cited).

Sometimes in the middle of rehearsal, I would just hear text come out of the actor's mouth and realize it needed something, so on the following break I would flip through the book of Van Gogh's letters or I would flip through the actor's writing and I would find something to place there. Sometimes I would just look at some text I had already pieced together, know that there is more to be found there, and off I would go to find it. Sometimes I would look at the text,

I would know what the next line was because I remembered it vaguely from a letter, and then have to go tediously flipping through pages looking for where I highlighted that one specific piece of text that I was thinking of. Sometimes I did not highlight or mark pages, but would later find myself wanting a specific piece of text from a page that I had neglected to mark in any way. When that happened, I would go page by page, scanning line after line to find it. Creating this text was a complete mess, but it was a beautiful mess. In the end that beautiful mess became a beautiful script and a beautiful piece that never got to see the light of day.

Originally when I had started to piece together the text, I wanted each actor to have one complete storyline, and for the piece to be the physicalization of three stories. After spending some time piecing this text together and talking with my advisor about it, I discovered that I had too wide a spectrum of writings on so many different thoughts and feelings that simply choosing one idea or one range of emotion for each actor would be wrong. These women were brave enough to write extensively and with incredible honesty about the raw emotions these paintings stirred in them, their deepest hopes, their deepest fears, what gave them joy, what brought them down, and so much more. Choosing only one of the many paths they had given me to follow would be insulting to them and their courage in sharing all of that with me. It would be reducing them to only one of their struggles, and that is not at all what this piece is about. It seemed to me that reducing each of those women down to one storyline each would be equivalent to reducing Vincent Van Gogh down to being “the crazy painter who cut off his ear.” That is the opposite of what this piece aimed to show. So, in order to show these women and Van Gogh as the dynamic, complicated human beings that they are, I decided to give each woman three small stories. Three

physicalizations of their struggles, their thoughts, and their feelings combined with the struggles, thoughts, and feelings of Vincent Van Gogh.

Devising on Our Feet

For Actor 1, her first piece was about how she feels at peace in the world when she is in nature, and about how it is okay to be alone because nature is what connects us all. Creating this piece physically went through many stages. It was something we struggled with every rehearsal for a whole week, but on the last day of that week, we finally had something. We wanted to play with the idea of color because there was some beautiful text from Van Gogh within the piece that included some musings on color and it's beauty:

Truly colors can have a lot to say to one another. Looking at flowers in the daylight, the colors are incredibly vibrant. There's so much life hanging out there in nature that you'd never recognize if you didn't stop for a second look. The burnt oranges fade to lime greens and pale yellows. The Cicadas are singing fit to burst, a strident cry ten times louder than that of the crickets, and the scorched grass is taking on beautiful tones of old gold. The more I look, the more I feel a sense of loneliness. A desperation for attention. A beauty that is threatened to fade.

We also had a vision of creating this forest around the actor as she was speaking, and decided we could achieve this by throwing rolls of ribbon across the stage. We tried throwing ribbon across the stage, but we needed something more controlled than tossing rolls of ribbon. So, I thought about the picture I wanted to see with the ribbon, and I thought "how can this be created ahead of time?" I realized that if there were all different colors of ribbon already in place as we wanted, there would be no issue with tossing, and we'd be able to get the exact stage

picture we wanted. So we ended up getting a ton of ribbon donated to our cause by Jen Rice, and we glued them between two branches that our stage manager and I found outside.

We had Actor 2 and Actor 3 hold the branches on either side of the stage, moving the branches in a way that corresponded with the text (for example, they quickly shook the branches when the text was about “the cicadas singing fit to burst.”) After Actor 1 finished the text about the colors in nature and moved onto the text that starts with “I didn’t have very many friends when I was little,” and she started talking about the big tree she used to sit under as a kid, we had Actor 2 and Actor 3 get up on the stair unit and hold the branches so that the ribbon made a U shape and the branches stuck out like a tree. Then we had Actor 1 sit on the stairs as if the ribbons were a swing on the tree as Actor 2 and Actor 3 swayed the branches as if the wind was blowing through the tree.

There is a part of the text that discusses the idea of being alone, and how sometimes alone is not necessarily bad:

I didn't have many friends when I was little. Whenever I felt lonely I would sit in front of this big oak tree on a swing. I would have this elaborate existential conversation with this tree. To me, this tree had every answer to every question. I could sit there for hours with no motivation to leave. We sometimes feel very lonely and long for friends, and we think we'd be quite different and happier if we only found "it", a friend of whom we would say "this is it" but there's a lot of deception behind this.

Sometimes alone isn't bad. For 8 year old me, the conversation with that great green tree was all I would need. In my life, above all when I'm in nature I feel the bonds that unite us more easily.

When working on this section, I gave Actor 1 the best piece of direction I think I've ever given, and I'm very proud of it. I told her to say that text to herself as a child. The minute she started speaking the text as if she was speaking to her young self, the text activated, and it activated in a way that would make the audience feel "warm and fuzzy," for lack of a better word. This small piece is something we struggled with for the entire first week, and once we had something set that we could work with and fine tune, it was very rewarding. In fact, at the end of rehearsal on our first Saturday, we all went outside and had a seat in the grass just to talk about the week, all that we had accomplished, and where we were going from there. Actor 1 said that finding something that worked for that piece was her favorite part of the week. Hearing her say that was almost as heartwarming as the piece and the text itself.

The next piece we really struggled with was Actor 3's text about feeling trapped, which was mainly based on *Prison Courtyard* (1890):

We know so little about life that we're not really in a position to judge between good and bad, just or unjust, and to say that one is unhappy because one suffers hasn't been proven... but I hate feeling trapped in having to do something, it feels degrading. I wish those men weren't whispering. I hate the whispers of others. I immediately feel like it's about me and I'm doing something weird or different. We live in such a disturbed age that there can be no question of having opinions that are firm enough to judge things and people.

I think we struggled with this one because the text really goes on a journey, and it's difficult to really take the audience on a journey with multiple settings and concepts in a small space with three people and only a certain amount of architecture. This piece was not necessarily

as frustrating to create as the aforementioned piece was, but it took time and patience. It was just something that needed to come together piece by piece.

To start the piece, I had the women walk in a circle with their hands behind their backs like the men in the painting. To elevate it, I had them walk with tempo and a rhythm. From there I simply asked Actor 3 to do what she felt. She left the circle and sat on a bench with her body hunched over, and to complete the stage picture I had the other two actors sit on the bench on the opposite side of the stage, facing the opposite direction as Actor 3, and sitting straight up. That kind of opposition in a stage picture created the sense that Actor 3 was an outsider, which is exactly what we needed to establish for this piece.

Next, we needed to have her attempt to escape. She likes to climb things, so we had her flip the bench over so that it was standing tall, and then she climbed it and sat at the top, an act of defiance toward the system she was expected to adhere to. Once she broke that system and climbed that bench, there was a sense of freedom that was immediately dashed by the other women pushing her off and trapping her in a cell. The “cell” was created by having Actor 1 sit on the bench with her arms hanging over the top of a large frame and her head underneath the top piece while the other women were standing at either side like guards. The picture was similar to that of a pillory. While trapped in this new setting we see Actor 3 looking through the window of her cell, wishing to go outside and be free:

Through the iron-barred window I can see an enclosed square of wheat above which, in the morning, I watch the sun rise in all its glory. I haven't even been outside. It's embarrassing. No one should be forced to be kept in a cage.

There's also a bit of text after that about the feeling of being in nature and being free, so we created a moment in the physical life where she actually gets to escape and live her fantasy for a minute before she gets pulled right back in and is trapped again:

No one should be forced to be kept in a cage. As humans we need to connect more to our roots and get in nature...It has so many healing properties- even just by feeling the grass between your toes.

I really shouldn't live in such surroundings. The street would be better.

It was actually quite challenging to get this actor to really activate the text and the movement for that bit where she's living that daydream of being free in nature. We tried several different things, we tried having her use Chekhov archetypes, we worked outside, we used Laban qualities, but that little bit was never as connected and free as I would have liked. Once she is trapped once again, the text moves on to be about the garden in the prison, and how the garden is this little slice of nature, a little taste of freedom she can experience, but at the end of the day she's still trapped:

In the garden I see grass, little white flowers, dandelions, and a rose bush...tree trunks. But what really catches my eye is the blue river just past the gates. It's freedom. A river can take you anywhere... but it's just past the gates. I feel trapped. There is no place to be but with these trees and this cobblestone, and I feel trapped.

The way we did this was we had Actor 3 in the garden, center stage, with the other actors as the guards on either side of the stage. When Actor 3 would run in one direction, the guard on the side she was facing away from would take a step in, then she would run the other way, and the other guard would take a step in, and before she knows it they are breathing down her neck

and she is stuck between them, and that ends the piece. It took a while to get all of the pieces of this section together, and there really was no way to do it other than slowly and piece by piece, but the end result was effective.

The next piece that was an incredible struggle was the most long term and most frustrating struggle of the entire process. It was Actor 3's text about the darkness calling to her and consuming her. This text came from letter #800, letter #850, letter #801 and was based on the actor's writing in response to *Almond Blossoms* (1890). It was really interesting to me that this actor had such a dark take on this painting. When I look at this painting (it's my favorite), I feel a sense of simplicity and innocence. I've always felt that way about *Almond Blossoms*, even before I knew Van Gogh's reasoning for painting it. In letter #855, we discover that Van Gogh created this painting upon being informed by his brother, Theo, about his newborn nephew, Vincent Jr. For me, that really shines through in the painting. I feel that the painting has the innocence and bliss of a newborn child, and when I look at it I feel a sense of calm. I feel like everything is going to be okay. However, the bottom right hand corner is a slightly darker shade of blue than the rest, and that is the part of the painting that Actor 3 was drawn to. Where I saw simplicity and purity, Actor 3 saw an intense darkness calling to her. For me, this typified Van Gogh's ambivalence and complexity.

That was one of the first pieces we worked on because it was one of the first pieces of text that was really solid. We started with an idea of playing "the floor is lava," game, which is a game that kids play jumping between couches, chairs, tables, and whatever else they can jump on in the living room because they're imagining that the floor is lava. It's a very straightforward game. This idea came up because the text is about how she knows that she should not be drawn

to the darkness, but rather she should be happy and enjoy the light when it's there. She knows she should be looking at the innocence of the pure white flowers, however, she cannot help but be drawn to that dark blue corner.

The first iteration of the piece was all of the women jumping from one piece of architecture to another, avoiding the floor. At a certain point, Actor 3 would step to the floor, both other actors would react, try to pull her up, but she would keep returning to the floor. This wasn't working for several reasons. The biggest reason was that it wasn't striking enough for actor or audience to see Actor 3 simply step to the floor. It was such a small step and such a small movement that it didn't really *hit* correctly. Another reason it wasn't working is because since the text is about her being drawn to the darkness, she should be looking wherever the darkness is, and if the darkness is down on the floor, that brings her head down so the audience can't see her eyes, her face, and they can't hear her well. It also brings her energy down instead of up and out. It seems like such a small thing, but it really can destroy the text. The "floor is lava," iteration was scrapped very quickly.

As we worked we always always returned to the text itself. Upon looking at the text we found that there really weren't any beat changes inherent in the text. The text is simply about a constant pull to the darkness:

I cannot help but let the blue in. It feels cold. There is a light blue and a dark blue... the light blue is just covering up the dark blue... covering up the sadness. Well, here I am again for a time- thinking about the inevitability of suffering and despair and I am made aware of the precariousness of our existence.

Am I just drawn to the darkness? Am I just a negative person? Am I just sad? Art is deeply rooted in feeling empty, isn't it? I see the light but it doesn't affect me as much as that dark blue. I feel the dark, dark blue is swallowing me whole-at such times I no longer know where I am and my mind wanders.

Like I'm Alice falling down the rabbit hole. Constantly stuck and empty. I surrender my will and love of self and I feel complete acceptance of suffering.

I asked Dave Hugo to come into a rehearsal and just hear the text and how Actor 3 was connecting with it. Dave suggested that, since we already had a lot of pieces with many moving parts and complexities, maybe this was a piece that would be simple. So we went back to work on the piece with the concept of “do less,” and we finally made something that worked. As mentioned earlier, the text had no beat changes. The text was Actor 3 building to a final acceptance. Everything in the text led up to that final acceptance, so the physicality needed to do that as well. We built a structure that was just two stair units, one on top of the other, to create one large stair unit. It was simple: Actor 3 started downstage, slowly walked backwards, sat on the bottom step, slowly scooted up step by step, and when she made it to the top, she slipped behind it as if she were slowly lowering herself off of a ledge. It worked beautifully, and when the soundscape was added, it just became stronger. The sound was relatively simple as well: it was a white noise track that got louder and louder gradually as she made her way to the top ledge. The nothingness of the white noise was consuming her as well as consuming the audience. It was a very powerful piece, and I think it would have been really effective to an audience.

Opening Week

I have referenced it a few times previously, but this show never saw the light of day. It was cancelled the week of opening. It was not my decision, and I still wish more than anything that this work could have been shared. However, the reason for the cancellation actually proves my thesis statement in a way. The performance of *Vincent & Us* was cancelled because the actors couldn't do it anymore. The text was about the struggles that these women share with Vincent Van Gogh, and it dealt with such topics as depression, isolation, loss, and inner demons. There was text that tackled some happier topics as well such as light, color, and nature, all of which are profoundly connected to the human experience. There is light and dark in the human experience just as there is color and grey in Van Gogh's paintings. However, much of the piece was quite dark. After a month or so of rehearsals the actors could not continue to pick at their emotional scars every night, and they certainly couldn't do it in front of an audience. The connection that these women had with Vincent Van Gogh was through their struggles, and using their own struggles in combination with Van Gogh's words just became too much. It is extremely unfortunate but it proves that they did share a profound connection with Vincent Van Gogh through the human experience.

Director's Note/Conclusion

Since the piece was never performed, there was no program. However, I did write a director's note/thesis note for the program that I believe sums everything up very nicely:

When I was a sophomore I visited The Metropolitan Museum of Art. While I was browsing the impressionist paintings, I stumbled upon Vincent Van Gogh's Self Portrait with a Straw Hat. I stopped dead in my tracks and I looked into this man's eyes. In his soft green eyes I felt a pain that cannot be described as well as a sense of wonder and excitement about this world

that I'd never felt from a painting before. Then I felt him call to me. It's as if he was saying "it's me. I'm your thesis." What a beautiful and exciting experience that was.

In the years following, I found myself asking "what is it about this guy? Why do we still feel such a profound connection to this painter who sold one painting in his lifetime and who died hundreds of years ago?"

I started reading the letters he wrote and I started familiarizing myself more closely with his oeuvre, and I found myself saying "YES! I know exactly what feeling he is talking about," and "oh, I understand what he was trying to express here, I've definitely experienced that," or "Vincent, my dude, I FEEL YOU."

Then it dawned on me. He was a human being. A real life person who existed and lived a life. We all are. We're human beings who experience love, loss, doubt, excitement, and everything in between. That is what he is expressing in his paintings and his writing. A profoundly human experience. That is the connection between Vincent and us.

Regardless of what aspect of your human experience you connect to Van Gogh with, it is, as Semir Zeki points out, an important and valid human connection. You may see a painting and feel that it is dark and gloomy while many others find it to be bright and cheerful. In viewing art, we all process it differently based on our personal human experience. It is not what we see in art that connects us, but rather it is that we all have a personal, emotional human experience for our brain to draw on.

Over the summer, I sent my cast envelopes full of paintings. Actor 1 received paintings Van Gogh did while in Paris, Actor 3 received paintings that he did in the Saint-Remy Asylum, and Actor 2 received paintings that he did while in Auvers Sur-Oise. I asked these women to sit

down with these paintings, take them in, and write about them. They wrote about how the paintings made them feel, what they made them think of, what they experienced while looking at them, and so much more. They gave me their writing and from there I started going through looking for common threads between these women and their experiences and Van Gogh and the things he expressed in his writings and paintings. Once I found those common threads, I combined the words of these women with the words of Van Gogh from his letters. I brought all of this text into rehearsal and we made the show you are about to watch.

I couldn't be more proud of this piece. In this piece you will see nine different stories. Nine different nuggets of struggle, emotion, love, loss, and everything in between. These are the stories of three actors, one deviser, one stage manager, and Vincent Van Gogh.

These are also the stories of you. I hope that watching this piece, you experience that same indescribable connection that I felt years ago at The MET.

With a handshake and good wishes,

Isabelle Rutens.

As I reflect on this process, the script, and the beautiful piece of art we created, I cannot help but bring myself back to that November day at the MET. When I looked at *Self Portrait With a Straw Hat (1887)*, I received and experienced the painting on a deeply emotional and embodied level. When I watched the final rehearsals of *Vincent & Us*, I received it in the same way. I see myself in *Vincent & Us* just as I see myself in *Almond Blossoms (1890)*, *Tree Roots (1890)*, and of course *Self Portrait With a Straw Hat (1887)*. Within *Vincent & Us*, I see my own human experience, and that is because it is the human experience that connects Vincent with Us.

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