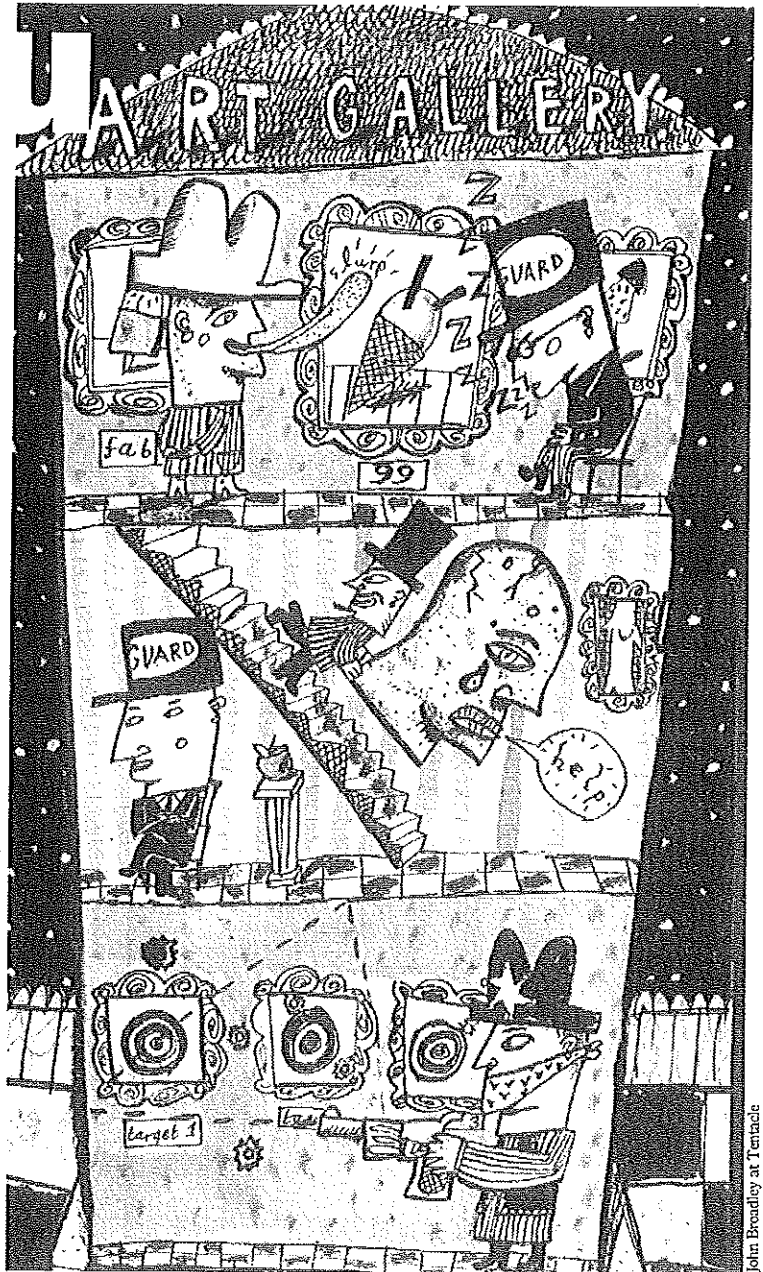


# Can you lick it?

**Standing still amid the streams of passive gazers, art fetishists wait for a private moment. They are patient and practiced in their own art of forbidden appreciation. Neil Crossley reports on an increasingly modern day response to art**



It's late afternoon in Gallery 8 at the Courtauld Institute on the Strand. In the far corner of the room, a young man in a black woollen overcoat is staring at *Te Rerira* by Gauguin. Deaf to the babble of school kids rising above the drone of the humidifiers, he moves closer to the painting, then closer still, until his face is only 12 inches away from the canvas. Then very slowly he leans forward and licks it.

Two hours later, Richard Connelly is pinning another postcard to the wall of his south London craft studio.

"I collect postcards of all the ones

I've licked," he explains. "It all started at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. I managed to get close to *The Judgement of Paris* by Lucas Cranach. At first, I was just examining the brush strokes. Then I thought, I wonder if I can get close enough to touch it? I was really scared because the guard was pacing up and down.

"I just waited for the right moment. But instead of touching it, I licked it. It felt like such a natural thing to do. Something that could connect you to those amazing Old Masters"

The compulsion to lick a great work of art, says Connelly, is based

solely on his admiration for the artist and the painting. While he is all too aware that his actions could be perceived as pretentious, he stresses that his motivation is purely aesthetic.

"I can understand how it could be viewed as a performance art activity in itself," he says. "But that's not why I do it. It's simply a desire to take your appreciation one step further. And for me, touching a great painting with such a sensitive part of your body is the most intimate you can get with the artist and the painting."

Surprisingly, Connelly's escapades have so far escaped the

attentions of gallery warders. But perhaps this has something to do with his choice of venue. "I wouldn't dare try it in the National Gallery or Le Louvre," he says. "Their security's too tight."

Richard's response to viewing art may be eccentric but it is not so unusual. The desire for physical contact with paintings is rife within galleries. Staff happily reel off anecdotes about members of the public who constantly fall foul of gallery protocol. In fact it seems impossible to predict individuals' behaviour when faced by a work of art.

David Parr, a warder at the Tate, claims that people go to enormous lengths to get their hands on a priceless canvas for a few seconds. "You get people who try to suss out your movements. You can see them watching you, working out how much time they've got between you walking around the corner and coming back into view. We just give them a warning. If they do it again, we ask them to leave."

But for some people, touching an exhibit is not enough. They want to take something home with them.

At last year's Turner Prize exhibition at the Tate Gallery, Vong Phaophanit's *Rice Field* made easy pickings for souvenir hunters. Five columns of rice, stretching 49 feet in length, were spread out horizontally along the floor space. Almost every day, someone was apprehended by warders for pilfering a few grains.

Fiona Ferner, exhibitions manager at the Whitechapel Gallery, recalls seeing handfuls of the rice strewn around the Tate Gallery cafe. "It was all over the place," she says, "on the tables, in the ashtrays. I even saw some in the toilet. There'll always be people who want to take something away with them. I remember going to the National Gallery on a school trip. Coming home on the train, my friend produced this tiny yellow fragment she'd wrapped in a tissue. It turned out to be a piece she'd chipped off Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*."

Art galleries are reluctant to publicise such incidents. The colossal insurance required to house priceless works of art and the fear of copy-cat incidents as a result of publicity, have nurtured tight-lipped policies in most gallery press offices.

The greatest fear of any gallery is the destruction of a great work of

art. And there have been many attempts. In 1914, the *Rokeby Venus* by Velasquez was slashed by a suffragette wielding a butcher's knife. More recently, in 1987, an ex-soldier blasted a priceless Leonardo cartoon with a sawn-off shotgun. Barely a year goes by in which someone isn't frog-marched off the premises for attempting to deface a priceless

## **"My friend produced this tiny yellow fragment she'd wrapped in a tissue. It turned out to be a piece she'd chipped off Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*"**

canvas.

If recent events in Italy are to be believed, you may actually face physical danger amid the hangings and sculptures of art galleries.

Research carried out by the Florentine Provincial Government suggests that, when confronted with great works of art, certain people can develop a dramatic range of symptoms.

In the psychiatry ward at the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital in Florence, large numbers of tourists are being treated for an illness known as The Stendhal Syndrome.

The condition takes its name from the French novelist Stendhal, who lived in Italy in the early 19th century. He wrote of palpitations and feeling his life ebbing away, after being overwhelmed by the beauty of the frescoes in Florence's Santa Croce Church.

Dr Gabriella Magherini has been appointed to study the illness. She believes that tourists' confrontation with the beauty of the city's culture can cause panic attacks, loss of identity and intense feelings of abandonment.

For one young tourist, the sight of Michelangelo's Statue of David culminated in a severe anxiety crisis. Another tourist described how she felt "enfeebled by the elusiveness of objects" after viewing the concentric circles inside the Cupola at Florence's landmark cathedral.

The results of Magherini's study show that sentimental Europeans, small-town Americans and Australians are particularly at risk.

"Anyone in fact with a cultural

level that is not very sophisticated," she says. "They are unprepared for the shock of Florence and feel strange and at a loss."

Magherini does not believe that Florence causes the problem. It is the inability of the tourists to cope with change, she says.

"It is the patients who bring their problems with them. Their encounter with works of art can

and piazzas of Florence.

It's all seems a far cry from a Sunday afternoon saunter around the Tate or the National, where a traumatic event for most people is battling their way up the queue to the cafe.

But perhaps it's not so far reached. Sociologist Laurie Taylor believes that art galleries are increasingly a rare category of places where the public can be at peace.

"There aren't many places left where you can mingle without someone trying to flog you something or move you on. Galleries have become special areas."

For those who resist licking, lusting, shooting or fainting their way through the exhibits, galleries still induce a unique response: a state of tranquility amid the chaos of metropolitan life.

"Just to stand there and look at something, even if you don't like it, can be such a rare pleasure. The simple ability to gaze forward for 10 minutes without being interrupted. It's such an unexpected bonus in today's chaotic world."

trigger a dramatic reaction to problems that are already there, plunging them into mental turmoil."

If Magherini's assumptions are to be believed, then culturally disadvantaged people must be dropping like flies in the galleries

# RELEASE

## **The National Drugs and legal Helpline**

**VOLUNTEERS** are needed for daytime work with our new client support project 'Side by Side'. In addition we need volunteers to work evenings, overnight and at weekends on our 24 hour helpline.

Training starts August. For more details and an information pack on the work contact:

Catherine Perez Phillips, Release 388 Old St; London EC1V 9LT ☎ 071 729 9904.



**'The Message Given To Me By Extra-Terrestrials' by Claude Rael** (available from bookshops).

...explains how life on earth is not the result of a random evolution. It is a deliberate creation, using DNA, by an advanced race of loving people who made human beings literally "in their image"

The RAELIAN movement seeks to awaken humanity to the infinite, and

welcomes our fathers from space.

**PUBLIC MEETING: SUNDAY 3RD JULY IN CENTRAL LONDON**

Tel: 071 286 7497 for details.