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*Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York  
and *to: Night. Contemporary Representations of the Night* at The Hunter College  
Art Galleries

By David Carrier

September 21, 2008–January 5, 2009

Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53rd Street

between Fifth and Sixth avenues

212 718 9400

September 25 to December 6, 2008

Hunter College: The Leubsdorf Art Gallery

68th Street and Lexington Avenue, SW corner

212 772 4991

September 25 to November 15, 2008

Hunter College: Times Square Gallery

450 West 41st Street

between 9th and 10th avenues



Vincent van Gogh *The Starry Night* 1889. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36-1/4 inches.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss  
Bequest

Nightfall can inspire fascination with the starry sky, optimistic hopes for fulfilled sexual desire, or at least anticipation of sleep. But it can also cause anxiety if you are lonely, which is why van Gogh described *The Night Café* (1888), at MoMA, as showing a place where “dark forces lurked and

suppressed human passions could suddenly explode.” As Joachim Pissarro, the curator of the MoMA show and co-curator (with Mara Hoberman and Julia Moreno) of the two-part Hunter show explains, the forty-some Hunter artists in effect answer the question: How would van Gogh respond to night were he to have available our sensibility and artistic media?

Van Gogh might enjoy the way that Vija Celmins, Jennifer Coates, Lauren Orchowski, and Pat Stein show the night sky, in their contemporary versions of *The Starry Night* (1889). And he could be fascinated with how such works as Gregory Crewdson’s *Untitled (penitent girl)* (2001-2002), which shows a young woman in her underwear facing someone (her mother perhaps) in a suburban driveway, and Kohei Yoshiyuki’s 1970s photographs showing men watching nighttime sexual activity in Japan’s parks, all extend the social commentary of *The Potato Eaters* (1885). The worker in *The Sower* (1888) deserves comparison with the man in David Hammons’s video *Phat Free* (1994-1999), who is kicking a can through the streets at night and in the gay nightclub in *Love is all Around* (2007), a video by Marc Swanson and Neil Gust. If Laurent Grasso’s *Infinite Light* (2006/2008) mounted on the college’s pedestrian bridges, which repeats the words “night for day” can be associated with the Enlightenment, so too can *Landscape with Wheat Sheaves and Rising Moon* (1889). And Stan Douglas’s *Every Building in 100 West Hastings* (2001), a long narrow image of a street in Vancouver, is a photographic version of *Terrace of a Café at Night (Place du Forum)* (1888).

But none of these van Goghs show a person asleep, like Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963), the film of his lover John Giorno, and no image seems ominous enough to match the title of Claude Lévêque’s neon *La nuit pendant que vous dormez je détruis le monde* (2007). Van Gogh did not depict ecological disaster, like Susan Crile in her *Charred Earth* (1994), an image of the oil wells set on fire by the retreating Iraqis. Nor in his nighttime images does he show such extreme light and darkness as in Grasso’s *L’éclipse* (2006), a video montage of a solar eclipse and sunset. In some ways, then, the ways that night is experienced and represented in visual art have changed dramatically. Vera Lutter uses a camera obscura to create photographic negatives, *30th Street Station, Philadelphia, II: April 17, 2006* (2006) while Thomas Ruff deploys a night-vision enhancer to give an uncannily menacing feeling to the apartment building photographed in *Nacht 2 I* (1992). And yet, we can recognize real continuities between van Gogh’s world and ours, for his *Wood Gatherers in the Snow* (1884) presents a setting not entirely unlike that of Barney Kulok’s digital transparency *Stillman Avenue, Queens, NY* (2004).

Almost inevitably, the representation nighttime invokes political metaphors, as Kant’s seminal essay “What is Enlightenment?” (1784) recognizes. To become enlightened, to move into the well-lit world of reason, he explains, “all that is needed is *freedom* . . . freedom to make *public use* of one’s reason in all matters.” After you walk into David Claerbout’s installation, when your

eyes adjust to the nearly complete darkness, the photograph in *Nightscape Lightbox (second)* (2002-2003) becomes visible. But how do we understand this metaphorical association between reason and light? In his Kantian reading of the origins of modernism, Clement Greenberg associated avant-garde art with our capacity to become self-critically enlightened. Nowadays our post-historical art historians are more likely to appeal to the authority of Hegel and his successor, Marx.

But for Hegel, so Pissarro observes, night is disturbing because we see only the black sky, while by contrast for Kant, in looking at the stars we also find within ourselves an awareness of the sublime moral law, which, Pissarro continues, anticipates the way that night can liberate “pent-up drives . . . . from voyeurism to exhibitionism to the endless peripatetic cruising through bars and clubs of all kinds” that we see exhibited in these pictures. For Hegel, then, the absence of light at night marks absence, the absence of light meaning that the world has become invisible to our sight, but for Kant it is possible to respond to night in a more excited and positive way. In drawing attention to the manifold continuities between van Gogh’s art world and ours, by identifying the ways that we need to think politically about the meaning of representations of night, these exhibitions offer very challenging speculation on our situation, suggesting that Kant has more to offer art writers right now than do Hegel and Marx. Making that journey at nighttime through central Manhattan from MoMA to the Hunter galleries, which are within easy walking distance, inevitably inspires many reflections about the subject of this extraordinary three-part exhibition.

*David Carrier is Champney Family Professor, Case Western Reserve University/Cleveland Institute of Art*