NEXUS INSTITUTE

Nexus Conference 2023

Nietzsche and Van Gogh
discuss
The Future of Western Civilization

Saturday 17 June | 10.00 — 16.00 uur

National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

Laurence des Cars — Katherine Fleming — Emilie Gordenker
Béla Tarr — Andrey A. Tarkovsky — László Nemes — Brian Greene
Robbert Dijkgraaf — Antonio Scurati — Lisa Appignanesi — Tomáš Halík
Georges Didi-Huberman — Leon Wieseltier — Stephen Farthing
Valentina Vapaux — Humberto Beck

Programme Nexus Conference

Saturday 17 June 2023
National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

10.00 AM Welcome *Rob Riemen*

10.15 AM **WESTERN CIVILIZATION: A SENSE OF REALITY**
Roundtable conversation with *Humberto Beck*, *Laurence des Cars*, *Stephen Farthing*, *Brian Greene*, *László Nemes*, *Antonio Scurati*, *Valentina Vapaux*, *Leon Wieseltier*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*

12.45 PM Lunch with complimentary refreshments

1.30 PM **WESTERN CIVILIZATION: A SENSE OF POSSIBILITY**
Roundtable conversation with *Lisa Appignanesi*, *Georges Didi-Huberman*, *Robbert Dijkgraaf*, *Katherine E. Fleming*, *Emilie Gordenker*, *Tomáš Halík*, *Andrey A. Tarkovsky*, *Béla Tarr*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*

4.00 PM Book signing

The conference will be held in English.

The programme may be subject to change. For the latest information on the conference and its speakers and for terms and conditions, please see our website www.nexus-institute.com.

Nexus Conference 2023

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Van Gogh Museum

Nietzsche and Van Gogh discuss The Future of Western Civilization

No one familiar with the compassion of the Supreme Being will be taken aback to learn that even the heavenly kingdom has an insane asylum. When all is said and done, even the fellow humans we regard as mentally ill — as long as they are in possession of a good heart and have never done anyone any harm — have the right not only to be admitted to heaven but to dwell there in a place where, surrounded by their companions in fate, they feel at ease.

Anyone who is rather less familiar with the Supreme Being will perhaps be surprised by the fact that this insane asylum in the heavenly realm has been rechristened a 'Rest Home for Restless Souls'. Those who truly know the Supreme Being, when informed of this change of name, will not be at all surprised that he also wants to move with the times and give preference to a more inclusive, non-stigmatizing name for this particular abode in his kingdom.

But who among us would not be amazed to discover that in this Rest Home for Restless Souls, two guests (the Supreme Being is insistent that the stigmatizing concept 'patient' should not be used any longer either) that these two guests, then, who admittedly have both become world famous since they began their stay in the Kingdom of Heaven but in every other respect are each other's complete opposites, have become friends: Vincent van Gogh and Friedrich Nietzsche!?

Van Gogh, a painter with a great passion for literature but little knowledge of philosophy, a deeply religious man with an immense capacity for empathy who would like nothing better than to offer hope and solace with his art, especially to vulnerable fellow humans.

Nietzsche, the erudite philosopher with the hammer who proclaimed the arrival of the Übermensch and announced the coming of the era of nihilism, an antireligious man for whom Christianity is nothing other than a decadent slave morality driven by resentment, full of hatred towards the dynamic, instinctive life of the man who strives for power.

So these two men are friends? Indeed. And no, the coaching in 'living together in harmony' offered in the Kingdom of Heaven had no part at all to play in the formation of this remarkable friendship. The instinctive aversion to every form of coaching, psychotherapy and relationship therapy is considerable in both Nietzsche and Van Gogh. In Nietzsche because he regards himself as the greatest psychologist of his day and therefore has no need of meddlesome advice from others, and Van Gogh because he has quite some bad memories of the therapists he met during his stay in the insane asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.

Now that we are fortunate enough to have the precise details of how their friendship arose, however, it turns out that we need not be surprised at all. The simple explanation is that, despite the great contrast between their outlooks on life, they discovered a certain spiritual affinity. Such a relationship, both Van Gogh and Nietzsche realized, is the only basis for true friendship. A basis that no coaching or therapy could bring about.

It was Van Gogh who made the first overtures after having read, with his insatiable hunger for reading and fascinated by the title in French translation (because he did not read German), Nietzsche's *Humain, trop humain*. The work caused greater confusion than ever in his restless soul. On the one hand it was a feast of recognition. He enthusiastically underlined almost the whole of the 99th fragment in part two of the book with a pencil. It is where Nietzsche calls the poet (for Van Gogh, the artist) the 'signpost to the future', the person who will 'imaginatively develop a fair image of man' and so 'help to create the future'. The passage that follows was even closer to Van Gogh's heart:

> Strength, goodness, mildness, purity and an involuntary inborn moderation in the characters and their actions: a level ground which it is repose and joy to the feet to walk upon: countenances and events mirroring a luminous sky: knowledge and art blended to a new unity […] all this would make up the general and all-embracing golden ground upon which alone the tender *distinctions* between the different embodied ideals would then constitute the actual *painting* — that of the ever increasing elevation of man.

No wonder Van Gogh saw in this fragment a description of his own ideal, that which he was intending to achieve with his painting. But earlier he had found it confusing to read in the 220th fragment of part one that great artists like Dante, Raphael and Michelangelo (three men Van Gogh revered as his true teachers) were nothing other than 'the glorifiers of the religious and philosophical errors of mankind, and they could not have been so without believing the absolute truth of these errors'. Their absolute truth was also Van Gogh's absolute truth — so was that an error? If so, what could constitute the 'ever increasing elevation of man' if not the highest moral and spiritual values that we derive from religion?

But then Van Gogh read with approval the following observations by Nietzsche in the 169th fragment of part two: 'The people no doubt possesses something that might be called an artistic need, but it is small and cheap to satisfy. The refuse of art is at bottom all that is required: we should honestly admit that to ourselves. […] Whoever talks of a profound need for art, of an unfulfilled desire for art, on the part of the people *as it is*, is either raving or lying.' Some time before, in the book of literary criticism *Mes Haines* by his favourite author Émile Zola, Van Gogh had read a similar remark that, as he told his brother, 'is certainly true'. There Zola wrote: 'Note that what pleases the public is always what's most banal, what we're accustomed to seeing every year; we're used to insipidities of that kind, to such pretty lies, that we reject powerful truths with all our might.'

To put a stop to the confusion in his head by gaining a better understanding of what the philosopher really thought about art, faith and truth, Van Gogh decided it was time to get to know him better, rather than being deterred by the sombre black aura he believed he could see around Nietzsche every time that, like now, he saw him sitting writing at the small table that had been provided for him in the Rest Home's rose garden. With his copy of *Humain, trop humain* in his hand, he walked over to him and addressed him affably with the words: '*Monsieur Nietzsche, je suis désolé de vous déranger, mais votre livre…*'

An irritated look from Nietzsche, disturbed in his melancholy contemplation, was the first reaction Van Gogh received. The philosopher's expression soon brightened, however, when he saw that the broad-shouldered man with the bright red hair, a halved ear and a kindly look in his eyes, had a copy of his book in his hand. In earthly life Nietzsche had been lonely; in the Kingdom of Heaven his loneliness had only increased. Because even though the Supreme Being's faithful souls were not allowed to call a man like Nietzsche a 'lunatic' or a 'patient', he remained in the eyes of Christian believers the 'madman' who had called their Christ a 'political criminal' and regarded their church as 'the greatest of all imaginable corruptions'. They believed that the best way of 'living harmoniously' with him was to avoid him as far as possible.

So Nietzsche was intrigued to know whether the man with the book in his hand who had just spoken to him, might be sincerely interested in his ideas.

'*Monsieur, s'il vous plaît, asseyez-vous*', was Nietzsche's friendly response. He was glad simply to be able to converse in French again at last. Then, ever the true *honnête homme*, he started by introducing himself before asking who *monsieur le peintre* was and why he had read his book *Humain, trop humain*. Soon the philosopher and the artist were telling each other their life stories, and when it quickly transpired that they had much in common, the conversation became increasingly animated. The '*vous*' form of address was soon replaced by the familiar '*tu*'. Nietzsche could sometimes be heard to exclaim happily '*mon cher ami Vincent!*' and Van Gogh would remark, laughing: '*Cher Frédéric, crois-le ou non, mais moi aussi!*' to tell his new friend that *he too*…

Because that was the astonishing thing through which they discovered in each other a kindred spirit: the number of experiences they had in common.

'My father was a clergyman', Nietzsche began, and Van Gogh reacted immediately with '*Mon père aussi!*' 'He died just before I turned five, so I don't have any memory of him', Nietzsche added. To which Van Gogh responded: 'My father died when I was 32, but unfortunately I have few good memories of him. We argued too often; he didn't understand me.' 'I briefly studied theology, but that was a mistake', Nietzsche went on. 'I made the same mistake', exclaimed Van Gogh. 'It was terrible! All that scholarly knowledge, what does it have to do with the Gospel?' Nietzsche briefly gave him an inquiring look, which escaped Van Gogh's notice, and then calmly continued his life story. 'I studied philology, too, and even became a professor for a while, but the academic world is horrendous. No independent thinker can breathe in it. It's a place for brain-dead souls. Everything I know of philosophy — *et crois-moi, c'est beaucoup* — I taught myself. I once tried to set up a school for likeminded souls in Naples, a *Schule der Erzieher, un université libre*, but unfortunately I didn't succeed.' 'You won't believe this, *mon cher Frédéric*,' said Van Gogh, 'but it's no different with me! I was at the art academy for a while. That was interesting only in that it showed me that everything taught there is flat, dry and dead. You learn rules there, but they have nothing to do with art. I taught myself to paint by looking, by looking and looking, by learning to look. With a friend, Gauguin, I tried to start a painters' commune in Arles, but that did not end happily. I wasn't well in my head at the time…' 'I know just what you mean, *mon ami*', said Nietzsche understandingly. 'I know just what you mean, and I'm still glad that I chose to live my own life, never to conform, to remain true to my own ideas. But it comes at a price…' 'I made the same choice as you', Van Gogh replied. 'And my paintings would never have become what they've become if I'd conformed. But the price, I know that too: incomprehension, the life of an outsider, poverty. Fortunately I had my brother, but I don't believe he managed to sell more than one of my paintings during my life.'

'One painting,' Nietzsche scoffed. 'That's not many. I did better. While I was alive, 421 copies of my work were sold… No, you couldn't call us successful. At least not in the time we were on planet earth. For both the masses and the snobs you and I were too unsuited to our times, too non-conformist, too much free spirits, dear Vincent.'

Van Gogh nodded vehemently and, his voice trembling with emotion, said: 'And that's why we're now friends, Frédéric.'

The dark, sombre aura that Van Gogh had initially noticed around Nietzsche had given way to a look of radiance. To seal their friendship, Nietzsche gave his new friend a firm handshake, saying: '*Bien sûr, mon ami!* We are friends. Not only that, down there on earth, both of us are world famous, too. By Zarathustra! Who could ever have imagined that?'

Van Gogh had no idea who this Zarathustra might be, but it seemed to him inappropriate to ask. Instead he inquired of Nietzsche: 'Do you perhaps know the work of Gavarni? The brilliant illustrator of the work of Balzac and the Goncourt brothers, among others?'

'*Naturellement, mais pourquoi?*'

'One of the books I had', explained Van Gogh, 'was a beautiful edition of *La Mascarade Humaine* bound in red leather, with a hundred delightful illustrations by Gavarni. In his introduction to the book, Ludovic Halévy wrote one sentence I've never forgotten. I believe it is profoundly true: *Ce qui ne passe dans ce qui passe*. We can find the eternal within the ephemeral! The work of Rembrandt, Delacroix, Millet and Michelangelo will remain in existence for ever. I never doubted that at least some of my canvases would continue to exist, but that all over the world countless people now admire my work? No, I could never have imagined that. I don't know what to think about the fact that someone paid more than a hundred million dollars for one of my paintings. If they'd paid it to me, I'd have become utterly miserable. What is a person supposed to do with that amount of money? And the whole idea that my work, my art, with which I wanted to do nothing other than express the essence of life, is now above all a "product with a high market value", that's terrible, isn't it?!'

'It doesn't surprise me, Vincent,' said Nietzsche resignedly. 'Everything that is good and pure is exploited by barbarians. I know all about that myself.'

Van Gogh, always afraid of offending people, observed shyly: 'I understand that your books, Frédéric, are not only popular but controversial…'

Nietzsche looked at him with a smile and said: 'Controversial! *Mon cher, j'étais une fatalité!* I've become the true fate of Europe because my name will always be associated with decline, with the end of that so-called European civilization. Why? Because I predicted it! The decadence, the dominion of nihilism. But just like yours, my work is exploited by the idiots who have made a saint of me. Believe me, I'd rather be a clown than a saint. Those stupid antisemites, those nationalist fanatics, all those idiots have misappropriated my

work and slandered my name. It started with that ghastly sister of mine. The bitch! She never understood anything about my work. My primary goal, as it's always been, was to create mental clarity, to cultivate an uncompromising, critical free spirit, to unmask a culture of lies and fight against the foolish *Bildungsphilisters*. And yes, to fight against Christianity too. But what do my dear sister and her accomplices do? They turn me and my work into a cult! It's the perfect character assassination. What could I do about it? Nothing and nobody is immune to exploitation. Take your beloved painter Rembrandt. In 1890 Herr Julius Langbehn, a true *raté*, a twit, published his book *Rembrandt als Erzieher* and sold almost a hundred thousand copies of it within two years! Everything in that book is wrong. He misappropriated the title of my essay *Schopenhauer als Erzieher*, he misappropriates my ideas as if I'm an antisemite like he is, and he misappropriates your favourite painter by presenting him to the stupid German people as if Rembrandt is the personification of the antisemitic German national spirit that hates scholarship and knowledge. The essence of German culture — like Rembrandt in Langbehn's twisted mind — Art, Genius, Power, is supposedly anti-Jewish!'

'Hasn't the man ever taken a proper look at a painting by Rembrandt!?' Van Gogh remarked with profound indignation. 'What terrible nonsense. You know, Frédéric, I still remember clearly how some time in the autumn of 1885 I travelled from Nuenen to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam with my friend Kerssemakers to see Rembrandt's paintings again. As I was standing looking at *The Jewish Bride*, I said to my friends, and it came from the depths of my heart: "Would you believe I'd give ten years of my life to be able to sit in front of this painting for two weeks with only a crust of dry bread to eat." For me, Rembrandt is the greatest ever painter. That painting expresses such a melancholy tenderness, such a superhuman infinitude that reveals itself for an instant and then seems utterly natural. Rembrandt goes so deep into the mystery of existence that he says things for which there are no words in any language. He's a creator, he gives life. Rembrandt shows us a beauty, a truth that is absolute and eternal. All his work is to me a portrait of the human soul. The way he paints Jesus is precisely the way I feel him to be. But you do need to look; *saper vedere* — learn to look, Leonardo Da Vinci said, otherwise you won't see all of this. Anyone who thinks they can see a political message in Rembrandt's paintings such as the dominion you mentioned is seeing above all themselves, *not* what Rembrandt painted!'

'Ah, Vincent', Nietzsche responded to his friend's impassioned outburst. 'Believe me, down there on earth are only a few people, if any, who can still look, still read a painting, the way you can. And masterpieces? Works with a soul, works of eternal beauty? Art that, unaffected by the all-consuming ravages of time, remains in existence like the work of the Rembrandt you so revere? Who could create that now? *Mon ami, cette ère est fini!* It's over, if only because the people are no longer interested in it. Listen!'

Nietzsche got up out of his chair, pushed aside the table at which he had sat writing, pulled his big black coat straight as if he was back in a lecture hall at the University of Basel where he had lectured for ten years on Latin and Greek literature, and started to teach again, this time with just one student.

'I have no idea whether you heard it at the time, but in the summer of 1871 a rumour went round that the Louvre was on fire. Set ablaze by the mob in Paris. The greatest artworks of our civilization, destroyed in one day. Intentionally. Lost for ever. Something came over me that I called a *Kultur-Herbst-Gefühl*. European culture in decline. Dead. Or rather, discarded! The people don't want it these days. And not just the people, even the students, the elite in training. When those young people asked me whether I would give talks about the future of education, I told them that "the school of civilization", an expression that ought to be synonymous with the concept of a university, no longer existed. The *Bildung* that any true university must give to the young generation was no longer on offer there. All of education will be reduced to that which is "useful", a specialism to serve the interests of the state and the economy. And those children think that's just fine because ultimately their only real interest is in money — in earning as much of it as possible.

'The more I thought about the fate of European culture, the more I became aware that a complete eradication is taking place. Amid all the haste and commotion, contemplation and simplicity are disappearing, and for *Bildung* there is no time left at all. Religion is vanishing. The sciences are subverting everything that has ever been believed in. The elites are interested only in money. It's obvious where the students got their obsession with "a course of study that's useful for earning a lot of money". They conform to power, just as they conform to every prevailing fashion. Herd animals in a herd society. Everything is dominated by the coming barbarity. Love and goodness, where are they?

'*Enfin*. I wrote about all this in my young days when I'd just been made a professor, in a long essay about my great teacher Schopenhauer. At least, he wasn't my teacher yet. Like him, I still believed in Art. Art with a capital 'A', that is. Only Art could still save humankind from total self-destruction. I even wrote poems and composed music — not without merit, my music, I believe — but above all I revered Richard Wagner. In Bayreuth he built his temple to Art. To *his* Art. I was there at the opening. I left as quickly as I could. Sick. It made me sick. The temple to *his* art turned out to be a citadel, no, a robbers' den for a pack of nationalists, antisemites, money-grubbers, snobs and vindictive intellectual windbags. His operas were the musical decor to the celebration of the ultimate decadence, a new religion of *Richard Wagner der Erlöser*. Everything was fake. And I, once Wagner's greatest admirer and herald, became his worst enemy.

'Nothing has caused me more pain. I heard the Overture to *Parsifal*. Wagner was already dead. It is the most sublime music, but I can't forgive him his genuflection to Christianity. I had to fight Wagner because I could see what he was trying to hide… There is no God! I repeat: there is no God. Is this great news? No! As early as the second century you had the brave Roman Celsus who fought against Christianity. He knew it. Voltaire knew it too. But my fate was to become the fate of Europe, because I was the first to know what the consequences would be. God is dead.'

Nietzsche noticed that Van Gogh was looking surprised and wanted to say something but was distracted by the unexpected arrival of a man unknown to him, who walked into the rose garden and seemed about to take a seat on a bench at the back. Nietzsche saw at once that the middle-aged man, with his black hair and black moustache, dressed in a leather coat, must be from a different era of earthly existence from that in which he and Van Gogh had lived. The unknown figure, aware that he had interrupted Nietzsche's line of thought, said in friendly and fluent French, although in an accent Nietzsche could not place: 'Professor Nietzsche, I heard you speaking. Allow me to listen to what you have to say.'

Flattered by the fact that he could now deliver his lecture to two men, Nietzsche gestured that the newcomer should sit down and then turned back to Van Gogh with the words: 'You look surprised, Vincent. I'll try to explain. God is dead. As a result, the entire edifice of spiritual values has collapsed. They no longer exist. There is no Truth, because everything can be true in a different way for everyone. There is no Goodness, because everything can be good in a different way for everyone. Human life has no special value now. Humans are merely sick animals. The slave morality of the Jews with its "reverence for all life", its "compassion for the weak and those deprived of all rights", a life from which all our instincts and desires have been driven out — this life for religious slaves, this morality, will be replaced by the right of the strongest and their desire for power! A revaluation of all values is coming. Quality is a spiritual value, so it will disappear and make way for the value of quantity, of numbers. And what has the greatest power? The greatest number! Whoever commands the biggest number has the most power.

'The world will cease to focus on that Christ, instead people will strive to be God themselves. The place of the God-man is being taken by the man-God. I announced the coming of the *Übermensch*, who is strong enough to lead an entirely meaningless existence. The mob, by contrast, that bunch of weak and diseased creatures, will continue to search for surrogates for their dead God. Such people cannot live in a spiritual vacuum. That spiritual vacuum needs to be filled mainly in order to prevent life from being difficult. Because to the question of why — Why this fate, this suffering, this pain? — no answer any longer comes. So the Muses are forced to make way for amusement. I foresaw that new political religions would arise, in which you have only to

obey, not to think for yourself, and for which millions of blinded believers would want to fight wars.

'Resentment will rule. Without metaphysical values, without a spiritual ideal from which humankind derives its dignity, all that's left is a material world in which everyone is equal but not everyone has an equal amount. So there will be more and more resentment of those who have more and at the same time a fear of those who have less, who want to take from you that which you have. This resentment is the lowest, most twisted form of "care for your fellow humans", it's the perverted surrogate for what was once love of others. This resentment will only grow as bureaucracy increases. Because in a world in which trust and responsibility cannot exist, rules will take power. And for rules you need bureaucrats. You know who I mean, those people who with rules and checks on compliance with the rules make any creative and constructive work impossible. Bureaucrats will themselves slowly but surely turn into robots in human form, soulless beings whose only emotion is the fear of losing their meaningless jobs.

'Welcome to the era of nihilism, my good friend. I predicted it would last for two hundred years, and on earth only a hundred years of the nihilistic era have gone by. Nihilism: the reign of a spiritual emptiness filled by surrogates.

'Its most apt symbol is the death of the cathedrals. They have become museums, tourist attractions where nobody any longer can read the meaning of the statues, paintings and forms. Just as they are blind to what your Rembrandt shows them with his paintings.

'I have been accused of all kinds of things, I've been hated for all kinds of things, but there's one thing nobody has ever been able to reproach me for and that's lying. I've never lied, only told the truth. My truth, naturally, but see how that truth has become reality: humankind, a wandering herd that, as compensation for an existence that is meaningless, mindless, compassionless, comfortless and lifeless, seeks salvation in the worship of the new idols: Amusement, Money and Violence! That, my friend, is the future of Western civilization in Europe and the far-off America in the era of nihilism.'

After this long tirade, Nietzsche sat down once more in his chair, exhausted and mumbling: 'I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is.'

Van Gogh didn't react. He'd sat listening attentively, occasionally nodding in agreement, but for the last few minutes mainly shaking his head. Staring ahead sombrely, he remained silent. Nietzsche looked at him with worry and asked: 'Vincent, are you angry? Have I offended you?'

'No, Frédéric, I'm not angry, nor am I offended. I am shocked. If everything you're telling me is true, then I hope now, more even than when I was painting, that in all the devastation you depict, my canvases will retain their calm, that my work will not only offer comfort to those who see it but persuade them to live a different life and bring about a world different from the one you see before you.'

'You're a philosopher', Van Gogh went on. 'I'm not. You're in a good position to analyse social developments and describe what their consequences will be. I can't do that. But when you say to me: "That's just the way it is", then as an artist I ask: "Why? Couldn't it be different?" As an artist, as a painter, I have always lived from and for the power of the *imagination*; there's more than just reality as it is now. Anyone who doesn't have enough imagination to see that is no artist. And yes, like you, I too became insane. That's why we're now sitting together in what they call here the Rest Home for Restless Souls. Restless… if only it was no more than that. There were panic attacks of madness in which I ate dirt from the ground, tried to poison myself with paint, cut off half my ear, became paranoid, psychotic, determined to put an end to my life. But because I was a madman, insane, mentally disturbed, I saw the world differently from upright citizens. Mind you, I wasn't the only one. In my day, many other artists too were pronounced mad and locked up. Perhaps it was because we were artists that we went crazy.'

Nietzsche could not resist observing with some sarcasm: 'Of course you went crazy. I went crazy myself. Any right-thinking person would be driven insane if they were to begin contemplating what kind of world we live in.'

Van Gogh continued calmly: 'You spoke, and forgive me if I'm wrong, with some disdain about the ordinary people with simple minds who still want to believe in God and in the difference between good and evil. It seemed as if you were almost glorifying an *Übermensch* — was that the word? — a supposedly strong person who stives for power. Why? The ordinary folk, *les misérables* as Victor Hugo calls them, the ordinary people, dear Frédéric, I know them well. Those are the people with whom I feel the greatest affinity. That's why I love all the novels of Hugo, Zola, Balzac, Dickens and Eliot so much. They painted that raw life in words, that struggle for existence. The miners, the weavers, the peasant families — I lived among such people for years. All of them poverty-stricken. Potato eaters; those potatoes were all they had. Their life in bars with drink and in loneliness was such a large part of my own life too. I painted it, in *The Night Café*, as a place where you can destroy yourself, go mad, commit crimes. I made it into one of my ugliest paintings to give expression, in an atmosphere of a hellish oven with a pale sulphurous colour, to all those powers of darkness, all those terrible human passions that plagued me all my life and gave me panic attacks. In the years of my youth, amid all those mineworkers, before I dared to become a painter, I was an evangelist and cared for the sick and for victims of accidents. Like an artist and a madman, an evangelist also believes in a different, better world. Perhaps that means there's not much difference between the artist, the madman and the evangelist. However that may be, I'm all three in one. Because even when I was an evangelist, the clergy I worked for found me too extreme, because I imitated Christ in everything. They wanted to have me locked away in an asylum, you know. In the eyes of the clergy, Christ

must have been a madman too. Later, when I really did become insane, I had myself committed to an institution of my own free will. It was in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. I can tell you that among the madmen in that asylum there are plenty who shout and rave all day, but to my great joy I saw many true friendships there too. They, the insane, thought it was important to teach me that you must tolerate others so that people who are not themselves mad tolerate us. Among ourselves we understood each other. I could talk to someone who answered only with incoherent noises, for example, because he wasn't afraid of me. If anyone had an attack, the other madmen would look after him to ensure he didn't hurt himself. Fortunately I could paint. To the extent that I was able to heal, I attribute it to painting, to the use of my creative powers, not to the psychiatrist who did the rounds there.

Paupers, madmen and artists — that's the human world I lived in. But believe me, in all those people I found more truth, more humanity, than among the expensive gentlemen who in paintings see only a market value. There's a lot wrong with that which calls itself civilization and progress. It's one big deception. All the poverty, the injustice, the rejection of the weak in our world… As long as that exists, there is no civilization. I say this not because I want to complain about my own life, even though I was always a lonely, misunderstood, poor wretch. A hunk of bread, some wine and tobacco — that was all I had. And all I needed. I did often feel guilty, though. It was a burden to me to keep having to ask my brother Theo, who was already doing so much for me and whom I loved more than anyone, for expensive paint because I had no money to buy it. But complain? No. I've always seen the solution to the problem of life in being able to suffer without complaining. I believe that was the lesson I needed to be taught. The lesson I needed to learn. Now I also had the good fortune of at least doing work that I lived for, heart and soul, that gave inspiration and meaning to my life. It made me feel rich, and how many of those people with lots of money could say the same?'

'My dear man', said Nietzsche. 'There's not the slightest difference of opinion between us about all this. It's a mystery to me, though, what you still want with that God of yours.'

'I've thought a lot about God, just as you have, Frédéric. All my life, in fact, I've thought about nothing else. The big questions. What does it mean to be human? Why are we here on earth? Why all this suffering? Where is God? You say God is dead. The God of the clergy is certainly dead as a doornail. I've had a great deal of trouble from that religion and it's caused me many attacks. It was also because of that God of the clergy that I and the girl next door, Margo, were not allowed to marry, which drove the poor dear girl to suicide. She'd taken poison. Fortunately I was able to save her just in time. Do you know the novel *Joie de vivre* by Émile Zola? That book is a kind of gospel to me, it harbours the truth of life, that you can be good

and do good without having to believe in the God of my father with his fat Bible. Is God dead? I don't know. But I do know that we mustn't judge God based on the world, because that's a project of his that has not succeeded, even though he did his best. Nature, by contrast, is rather different. For a long time I felt so inept compared to the ineffable perfection of nature. When I lived in Arles, I admired the firmament innumerable times. There, in that yellow house that I shared with my brother in art, Paul Gauguin, I eventually dared to paint it. The beauty of creation has never let go of me. On my walk through the Alpilles at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence I saw the olive groves, the cornfields, the cypresses and yet more fields of sunflowers as if they were one great symphony composed by God. I painted it all. In my portraits and self-portraits I gave expression in all colours to vulnerability, melancholy, pain, loneliness, but also to the joy of human lives. At the end of my life, when I felt a huge storm of unease rising in my whole body, I painted, in shades of dark blue, a stormy sky with black crows above the cornfield as a farewell to my own life. In all those years that I walked the earth, I wanted to paint nothing other than the whole of life, the whole of creation, to express the soul of life, to show people something lofty, a glimpse of eternity.

'In Arles I painted *The Sower* inspired by a pastel sketch of that figure I had seen made by Jean-François Millet, the painter I have admired most. On a ploughed field, rendered in a pronounced violet, a sower walks against the background of the bright sun of Provence that colours the whole sky chrome yellow. Giving life. Birth and rebirth. That is the sower. That is the artist. As an evangelist I failed. As a madman I couldn't do anything. But as an artist I succeeded, I made my canvases show life, provide comfort, give new life! That's why I painted not just the sower but *The Reaper.* Through the bars of my room in the insane asylum I could see him mowing the fields. The reaper: that's *death*. But there's nothing sorrowful in my painting. It's death on the verge of a smile, played out in a field full of light.'

Nietzsche shook his head, and with a hint of irritation in his voice he exclaimed: 'This is romanticism, Vincent! This is nothing other than pure romanticism.'

'Maybe', said Van Gogh. 'But that doesn't necessarily make it any less true. See, art is for me the essence of life because it gives life. That's why I regard Christ as the greatest artist of all. The Bible, that's the God of the clergy. But Christ is greater than all other artists because, spurning marble and clay, he works with living flesh and so creates living people by declaring the insignificance of death to be the most important of all certainties. In a long letter to my young friend, the promising painter Émile Bernard, I wrote how sublime it was of Christ to remark, like a grand seigneur without a trace of doubt: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." It's the most sublime expression of art as pure creative power, the art of creating life, the art of being immortally alive. That's the Art of

Rembrandt, Delacroix, Millet, Monticelli, the Art I strive for. It is, and of this I'm profoundly convinced, the art that will always continue to exist as *ce qui ne passe dans ce qui passe*.

'I wouldn't venture to say that about the official art of the mouldering tradition that's taught at the art academy. That was characterless and capable of nothing. Which is why we, new painters, were needed, and why artists will always be needed who look further, artists who investigate our being human, think ahead, find new forms to show the true face of humankind and the world.

'Ah, Frédéric, perhaps you'll think all this is nonsense, not true or no longer true, but please listen for a little while yet, because there's one more thing I want to tell you. It's an ancient legend and I don't even know which people it comes from, but to me it's the symbol of many, as it probably is for you too. It's a story that claims the human species is descended from two brothers. They had to choose what they wanted out of all the things in the world. One chose gold and the other chose the book. All went well for the first of them, the one who had chosen the gold, but not for the second. The legend — without explaining exactly why — tells how the man with the book was banished to a cold and miserable country and isolated there. In his misery, however, he started reading the book and learned from it. He managed thereby to make life more bearable and to discover various things to save him from his difficulties, so that in the end he gained a certain power, although always through work and as if in battle. When later, just when the book was making him stronger, the first brother weakened and so, with all his gold, lived just long enough to feel that gold is not the axis around which everything turns…

'Of course this is only a legend, but to me there's something in it that I find true. "The book" is not only all the books of literature but conscience too, and reason, and art. "The gold" is not only gold but an image of a whole lot of other things as well.

'For me this legend confirms that who you are and what you do with your life depends entirely on a choice you must make for yourself. My parents would have preferred to see me take a secure job in the art trade with my uncle, and so have a good life. But despite the poverty that, as I knew, would be part of my life, I made my decision: I'll become a painter; I want to remain human. That is not an easy life, and the world was never an easy place. But instead of giving in to despair I opted in my life for active melancholy, to the extent that I was capable of being active. So I have chosen the melancholy of hope, which strives and seeks, rather than the melancholy of despair that leads only to sorrow and paralysis.

'Well, my good Frédéric, that choice for a life as the Brother with the Book is one that everyone can make. Will the future of our culture not look a lot more hopeful then than the culture of despair as you see it before you now?'

Van Gogh, who had expected Nietzsche to react to all this with anger or at least irritation, since what he had said was the opposite of everything of which his philosophical friend was convinced, was surprised when he reacted by smiling and by saying: 'Oh Vincent, you're a good person, nobody can have any doubt about that. You're also an old-fashioned romantic. That has its charm, were it not that you're terribly naive at the same time. That world, that culture of your Brother with his Book — it ceased to exist long ago! Perhaps it's time that with your sharp painter's eye you took another look at the earth. Then you'll immediately see that nobody reads nowadays! Not books, not the literature and philosophy that you and I have read. Look a bit further and you'll see that reason and truth have departed too. Look further still and you'll see that art, the world of the Muses, has now definitively given way to a-muse-ment. Exactly the way your friend Zola predicted, and as I predicted too. The fact is, dear friend, that my main prediction has come true: the dominion of nihilism. With that, everything to which you attach so much value — your literature, masterpieces, art with "a glimpse of eternity", truth, reason, faith, your sower and the happy reaper — has utterly lost its relevance. Where it still exists it will be locked away, as you once were, in an insane asylum. Or a museum, much the same thing. I know, your own work, so misunderstood when you were still on earth, has now become a major cult. You're more popular than Christ, believe me. But don't be misled by that, Vincent, because vanity will not be a stranger even to you. Your canvasses, like those of your revered teacher in Amsterdam, Rembrandt, have become nothing more than a tourist attraction to be admired in a museum, a tomb, a mausoleum in secular form. Because your art too is dead. It no longer has any influence on society, on culture. Were it otherwise, then not my prediction but instead your imagination would have come to power. It has not. European civilization will degenerate into a world in which the desire for power, money and violence conquers all because there can be no moral values any longer, a world in which people are wandering souls, alienated from themselves and from nature, a world populated by masses that are fearful, insecure and lonely and therefore full of longing for a Redeemer. But I really do have to go now. I can feel another migraine attack coming on. Yet more evidence that God does not exist. If he did, he could have cured me long ago from this accursed pain with just one word.'

Van Gogh wanted to remark: 'But then you'd have to believe in God, dear friend', He resisted because he could tell how much pain Nietzsche was in and didn't want to torment him.

As Nietzsche left the rose garden, his face contorted with pain, the unknown man who had sat listening to their conversation at the back of the garden unexpectedly walked up to Van Gogh. He addressed the painter politely. '*Maître*, allow me to shake your hand. You don't know me, but I know you, or at least your work, of which I am a boundless admirer! I'm

a painter myself, but with a technique of moving images that belongs to a time after your own, and I've always felt inspired by your work. I hope you'll forgive me, but I followed almost the entire conversation between you and Professor Nietzsche. It was pure chance that I walked in here and, fascinated by what the famous philosopher had to say, I stayed to listen. Only ninety years after your death I was taken up into this Kingdom of Heaven and yes, I have to admit to you that in the century that separates you from Professor Nietzsche, very many of his predictions indeed came true. At the same time, *maître*, I agree with you completely that because of your choice for the 'melancholy of hope' — a beautiful expression! — a different culture and a different world are possible than result from Nietzsche's worldview. Humankind is still free to choose. Perhaps you still remember the Palais du Trocadéro from your years in Paris. A lot has happened to that building too; it's become a museum with lines by a poet, Paul Valéry, displayed on it, lines that will speak to you:

Il dépend de celui qui passe
Que je sois tombe ou trésor
Que je parle ou me taise
Ceci ne tient qu'à toi
Ami n'entre pas sans désir.

It depends on those who pass
Whether I am a tomb or treasure
Whether I speak or am silent
The choice is yours alone.
Friend, do not enter without desire.

In Amsterdam a beautiful museum is dedicated to your work. It's not at all true that a museum of your work must be a tomb. It's still possible for it to be a treasure house that can enrich humankind with another culture, with a true ideal of civilization. You and I cannot do much more now. We have done our work and left it to humankind. It's up to people on earth to make our work be the content of a tomb or a treasure house. But I will go, I've taken up too much of your time already. Ah, but before I forget, I'll just introduce myself. My name is Andrey Arsenyevich Tarkovsky. My greetings to you!'

And gone was the 'painter of moving images', whom we know as the Russian filmmaker who left us seven films in the second half of the twentieth century. Films that are indeed related to the ideas of Van Gogh but have never managed to reach his audience of millions. Nonetheless his work meets the criterion of art that has remained in existence: *ce qui ne passe dans ce qui passe*.

For us too it is time to leave this Rest Home for Restless Souls in the Kingdom of Heaven and to reflect further, on planet earth, on the meaning

of the exchange of ideas between philosopher Nietzsche and artist Van Gogh about the future of our civilization, the future of *our* world, of *our* culture, which is to say: *our lives*.

Fifty years ago, in 1973, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam was opened, to preserve the painter's work for the future and so pass it on to future generations. Thirty years ago the Nexus Instituut was founded with a similar aim. Hence its motto, borrowed from Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien*: 'Each man fortunate enough to benefit to some degree from this legacy of culture seemed to me responsible for protecting it and holding it in trust for the human race.'

Now anniversaries of important cultural institutions are not only suitable moments to celebrate their existence, they are also moments in which to look in the mirror and ask critical questions: Does this institution still have a right to exist? Because times change and one thing that Nietzsche's cultural criticism teaches us is that the ideal of civilization, the image of humankind and the world as expressed in the work of Van Gogh, is anything but self-evident, because it is no longer of our own time. The same applies to the culture, the collection of values, work and education, of European humanism, which the Nexus Instituut has made it its task to preserve and pass on.

So, bearing in mind Paul Valéry's metaphor, the following fundamental question needs to be asked: Are the Van Gogh Museum and the Nexus Instituut engaged above all in the stewardship of the cultural possessions of a tomb (nice to see but without any relevance for society), or is a treasury of cultural heritage held there, for the benefit of humankind in the near future?

Van Gogh, Valéry and Tarkovsky were convinced that humankind can still choose for itself. Writer Robert Musil would agree with them. In his life's work, the novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*), which he worked on until his death in 1942, he concludes that 'If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility.'

The conversation between Nietzsche and Van Gogh about the future of Western civilization is a discussion about reality as Nietzsche saw it before him, and the possibility in which Van Gogh wanted to continue believing.

Anyone who can accept for what they are the reality of our contemporary culture, the values we now cherish and the civilization we shape as a result has no need to worry about the possibility of a different culture, with different values, for a different view of humankind and the world. Anyone, however, who is worried about the reality of the culture of our era, the notion that a different culture, a different ideal of civilization must be possible is encouraging. But how should we imagine that possible culture? Is it a realistic, reactionary or utopian idea? And under what conditions might it perhaps become a reality?

Before the answer to these questions can be explored, it is first necessary to look at what our reality is, why we live in the world we live in, and what the consequences of that will be for the future.

Not without reason did Thomas Mann characterize Nietzsche in 1947 as the philosopher who signalled the arrival of the era we live in like 'a sensitive stylus'. When Nietzsche died in 1900, a period began in the West in which many of his predictions came true.

God is dead, or as he writes in the famous 125th fragment of *The Gay Science*, humans have killed God and thereby brought an end to a worldview and an image of man that have persisted for thousands of years. A metaphysical edifice of spiritual and moral values, bound together and subordinate to the Absolute, collapses, and all values fall apart.

In 1928 the German Jewish philosopher Max Scheler succinctly expressed the most important consequences of this, because the most far-reaching, in the last essay he published, just a few weeks before his premature death: *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (*The Human Place in the Cosmos*). For all thinkers and artists who came after him, the question regarding the place of human beings in the cosmos was to become the biggest question of all. As Scheler remarks at the start of his essay: 'In no historical era has the human being become so much of a problem to himself as in ours.'

In a centuries-old tradition, from Plato to Goethe, Western culture was shaped by the existence of three absolute values, which as a trinity formed a single whole: the True, the Good and the Beautiful. In the words of Kant, these three values form the moral law within me, and with the knowledge of Reason, or for believers through their faith in God, these are the values for which humans must strive in order to be worthy of life and make truth, justice and beauty at home in this world.

But God is dead, Nietzsche concluded, and so nothing remains that is absolute, above time, because there is no transcendence. The only reality is the transient, material world where everything is as makeable as it is breakable. People in the West are suddenly confronted with the fact that all the great questions of life need to be asked again. Who am I? What is humankind? Why am I on earth? What is the meaning of my existence? How can I make my life meaningful? What is truth? What is goodness? What is beauty, and what is its purpose now?

These are the big questions that shape every life, which nobody will ever be able to escape. Precisely at our most difficult, precarious moments, these are the questions that relentlessly plague and exhaust us like buzzing, threatening mosquitoes in a sleepless night, until we have found something resembling an answer. But where to look?

Like the rubble of the collapsed metaphysical edifice, the classic religious and philosophical answers have lost their credibility. That is the case at any rate for the majority of people in the West. What Nietzsche has to offer is no less problematic. As far as he is concerned, we would do better to stop

searching and accept that there are no longer any real answers to our most profound questions about life. Because everything is transient, everything is equally true and thus meaningless. Hence the nihilism he proclaimed. But if our lives are indeed completely meaningless and absurd, as Albert Camus among others was aware, then there is only one way out, namely a self-inflicted death.

Nevertheless, we are still here. Which proves that Spinoza was right when he wrote in his *Ethics* (1677) that everything that lives strives to go on living. Every human being is equipped with a life instinct. But how to live? Because those big questions of life are still there. What answers do our contemporary culture and the reality in which we live have to offer?

Let us first investigate what art, as a mirror of our time, has to teach us.

In 1897, seven years after the death of Vincent van Gogh, several young artists came together in Vienna who, like Van Gogh, were opposed to a traditionalism from which all creative power had disappeared. They called themselves the Secession, and on the building that housed the *Ver Sacrum* magazine, they erected the motto *Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Die Kunst ihre Freiheit*. If art was to remain meaningful in the new era, then it would have to be free.

Two decades later, after the end of the First World War, the expressionist painter Max Ernst spoke for many of his generation when he remarked in an interview: 'We had experienced the collapse into ridicule and shame of everything represented to us as just, true and beautiful. My works of that period were not meant to attract but to make people scream.'

The avant-garde of dadaism and expressionism articulates the despair of an absurd world. Kandinsky, by contrast, wanted his paintings to express a desire for the mystical, and artists including Malevich and Mondrian wanted to offer humankind hope again by revealing the absolute and eternal with their abstract art. But there is also the futurism of Filippo Marinetti, which promises the coming of the *uomo nuovo*, the new man, and so became a source of inspiration for the fascism of Mussolini. As Marinetti writes in his *Manifesto of Futurism* of 1909: 'We will glorify war — the world's only hygiene — militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.'

Between the wars, with his clowns, acrobats and other circus artists, Picasso gave expression to the fact that nothing is any longer certain, there is no solid ground, no order left. All certainty and established values have dissolved. Behind the smile of the clown, Picasso shows his pain and sorrow when faced with an audience that just goes on happily laughing, because it does not see the painful truths that the clown is showing it.

In literature, Proust, with his *À la recherche du temps perdu*, took leave of the belle époque with all its decadence and aestheticism in a way quite unmatched, and in the work of Kafka and Rilke we find two seekers after God in a world that God has abandoned.

After the Second World War, in his novel of art *Doktor Faustus*, Thomas Mann put into words the loss of the faith that art can help humankind with its big questions about life, by pointing among other things to the proximity of aestheticism to barbarity, and the fact that great intellect and moral emptiness can easily go together. Beauty, as a result, can no longer be allowed to exist. In the face of all the barbarity and evil perpetrated by human beings, beauty has become a lie. Mann's bitter judgement is that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the most sublime musical expression of the good and the noble, 'should be withdrawn. I want to take it back.'

At the end of the twentieth century, philosopher of art Arthur Danto, who had made a close study of Nietzsche's work, came to the unavoidable conclusion that there was no relationship left between art and beauty. When at the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists Marcel Duchamp presented a urinal under a false signature and with the title *Fountain* as a work of art, it created a scandal. Now ready-made objects and installations without any claim to beauty, are a not to be ignored part of the art world. The loss of the connection between art and beauty is according to Danto not something to be lamented, because it creates far more freedom for the artist. Art can still be 'beautiful', but it can also take the form of an accusation, of criticism, of pure self-expression, and be deliberately ugly. The lines by John Keats, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know', those lines, written at the start of the nineteenth century, are now the reflection of an old-fashioned idea that can be interred in a tomb at a museum.

A look in this mirror of the arts confirms the extent to which our reality has become a fragmented view of the world and of humankind, one that so far has raised more questions than it has answered. Because what is art now? If everything can be art, how are we to recognize that it is art? What is now the function, the meaning, of art in society? What determines the value of art? Is it the market value (which is to say, what 'crazy people' will give for it) or is its value determined by something else? And what knowledge would we need to be able to recognize the value and meaning of an artwork? If, through a lack of art education for example, we no longer know that value and meaning, what are the consequences? Is it still important, and can we strive any longer for 'eternal beauty', or is all contemporary beauty nothing more than a form of make-up: attractive, but not meant to last? Aside from all this, how much value are we to attach to art these days, now that the creative powers are manifesting themselves so strongly in new technology?

Vincent van Gogh was a voracious reader. In the 37 years of his life he mentions 800 books in his correspondence, by 150 authors and in four different languages. But the reading culture that shaped Van Gogh has ceased to exist. This will also be the reason why during the lockdowns of the covid pandemic in the Netherlands, liquor stores were allowed to stay open as an

essential service while bookshops were not. Literature and art have always been at the heart of the ideal of *Bildung*, the forming of a young person's character. Now that *Bildung* of that sort is a thing of the past, what will be the effect on the character formation of young people? What is it that shapes their characters now? Television? Social media? What is the contemporary ideal of knowledge and what answer does it give to the questions posed by poet T.S. Eliot?

> Where is the Life we have lost in living?
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

With the loss of the *Bildung* ideal of a bygone age, knowledge of traditions has become less important, giving way to a broader knowledge of new developments and matters that are perhaps more useful and practical. It is almost inevitable that in the process historical knowledge too will be lost. But what does this mean for the function of museums that preserve art collections from the past, sometimes the distant past?

In conjunction with the loss of tradition, we can also see what Nietzsche called the 'death of the cathedral'. It should not surprise us that Nietzsche believed that with the death of God, architecture would lose its function as a source of the experience of a transcendent reality, but it is perhaps surprising that in 1904, in *Le Figaro*, the great Marcel Proust published an article on the same subject with the title '*La mort des cathédrales*'. In it he expresses his concern about the consequences for European culture if the cathedral, with all its statues, paintings and objects, loses its religious function and becomes merely a tourist attraction.

Five decades later, André Malraux began his great work about visual art, *Les Voix du silence* (*The Voices of Silence*), with the remark that a crucifix is first of all an object of faith and not an artwork. Marcel Proust would have agreed with him. Indiana Jones, however, would not. In the episode in which this famous archaeologist goes in search of the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus drank from at the Last Supper, we see him first save a valuable sixteenth-century crucifix from the hands of a robber with the words: 'This belongs in a museum!' But what does it mean for a culture if its religious objects end up in museums? Can items in a museum be the object of religious veneration? Might that be an explanation of the worldwide popularity of Van Gogh, who in his youth undoubtedly wanted to walk in the footsteps of his Christ? Can art replace religion in a secular society? That was certainly the intention of Richard Wagner, a composer Van Gogh admired, but we know what kind of politics made grateful use of Wagner's art.

So what can science do? It is an undeniable fact that scientific scholarship has shone a light in the darkness and liberated humankind from a great deal

of the superstition, ignorance, prejudice and fear that religion poured over it. In Western society there is no ideal of knowledge that has determined our reality, our view of the world and of the human species, to a greater extent than science. But can it give an answer to the big questions of life in a secular world that has banished tradition and *Bildung*?

Enlightenment, the great philosophers decided, must come from Reason. When Reason rules, even Kant's 'eternal peace' will not be far away. But what is this Reason? Is it the Logos of the Greek philosophers, or purely and simply our rationality? And if Reason does not rule us, or less so than necessary, and neither does God, what does rule us then? Is it the pursuit of Power, as Nietzsche thought, or is it the Brother who chose Gold, as in Van Gogh's legend? Whether it is power or money or both, what influence do they have on contemporary culture? Because although the desire for power and money is as old as humanity, the craving for those two idols is now manifesting itself in an era of technological pragmatism that has no room for morality founded on religion. So on what is our moral sense founded today? Is increasing 'legislation and regulation' enough?

The falling away of the metaphysical edifice and its absolute values has at any rate given us more freedom. Never in the history of our species have freedom and the ability to shape our own existence been so great. In a sense Dostoyevsky's prophecy has been fulfilled: the God-man has given way to the man-God. For Dostoyevsky this idea represented a dystopia, but without going along with his pessimism, we might well ask what the political consequences are of a society that is becoming more and more individualistic and fragmented. What does that mean for democracy? Can a democracy continue to exist if society lacks coherence and a shared moral sense? And if democracy falls into disrepair, what then? In 1919 the Irish poet W.B. Yeats predicted as follows the consequences of the falling away of an ideal of civilization that everyone recognized.

> Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned:
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

Half a century earlier, the Austrian poet Franz Grillparzer saw the course of history after the loss of the ideals of the Enlightenment as '*Von den Humanität, durch Nationalität, zur Bestialität*'. If neither God nor Reason rule, the result, as both poets knew, was the dehumanization of our civilization, the decline of moral values, alienation from nature and the lack of an answer to our fundamental questions.

In 1947 Thomas Mann characterized Nietzsche as 'a sensitive stylus', because 'Nietzsche, like a sensitive stylus, signalled the arrival of the fascist era, the era we live in and which, despite the military victory, we will continue to live in for some time.' Finally, in view of all the political developments in the West, we need to ask whether Nietzsche after all has the last word on our social reality. If so, then the museum is indeed no more than a tourist attraction that doubles as a tomb for a cultural heritage, and the Nexus conferences are at best a suitable requiem.

II. WESTERN CIVILIZATION: A SENSE OF POSSIBILITY

Is there nothing other than the reality that we are confronted with now? Do we simply have to accept the facts as they are?

'No!' said Van Gogh. We can side with the Brother who chose the Book rather than the Brother who chose Gold.

'No!' said Robert Musil. If there is such a thing as a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility.

'No!' said Paul Valéry and Andrey Tarkovsky. It's up to us whether a museum and our cultural heritage are a tomb or a treasure house.

It's no accident that it is the artists who are convinced that through the power of the imagination, other realities can always be brought into being, realities that do justice to our dreams and ideals. It is they above all who have the capacity that Goethe put into words so aptly: '*In der Idee leben heißt das Unmögliche behandeln als wenn es möglich wäre* — To live in a great idea means to treat the impossible as though it were possible'.

A cry for change, for the imagining of a different culture as rapidly as possible, was expressed in 1932 by the eminent German literary historian Ernst Robert Curtius in his book *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr*. Four years after Max Scheler asked his 'biggest question of all' — What is the human place in the cosmos? — Curtius perceived all over Germany an increasing hatred of culture, a resentment and a race hatred, a crisis in education, the decline of parliamentary democracy and the rise of noisy, often violent antidemocratic movements. In the final chapter of the book he proposes to his readers the following thought experiment:

> Imagine that social and scientific progress reaches a pinnacle. Let's imagine that in our society there is no more war or class struggle, nor any concern about survival. The social question has been answered. There are no painful diseases, no prisons, not even any borders, because the world has become one. The economic production process continues without difficulty. The fear of death belongs to the past, because of a well-organized euthanasia programme. In such a society socialism no longer

> has any function, and neither does pacifism. There is no longer any place for nationalism and imperialism, as they have become superfluous. Of course in this society people will still be born; people will live and die. Fortunately all technical problems have been solved too. One problem remains unsolved, however, because no answer has been found: What is the point of my existence? How should I live? How should I love? How should I die? Even this utopian human species, living in the best of all possible worlds, will continue to ask itself, tormented and fearful: Who am I? What is humankind? How can human life find its deeper significance and most beautiful form?

We find ourselves back at the big questions of life for which, according to Nietzsche, after the death of God and the collapse of the metaphysical edifice, we now have to find an honest answer ourselves. Those questions, and with them their answers, are the most important to us because our culture, which is to say the way we live, our civilization and whether or not we live together, will be determined by them.

However, if even the best of worlds, with a faith in technological and scientific progress and material wealth that is familiar to us, offers no answer to the most fundamental questions of our existence, what does?

This is what President John F. Kennedy said on the subject on 14 January 1963 in his State of the Union speech: 'This country cannot afford to be materially rich and spiritually poor.' We do not know what plans Kennedy had for ensuring that America would not be spiritually poor, because he was murdered ten months later.

What we do know is that in the late 1970s, filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky, whom we came upon earlier in the Kingdom of Heaven but who was then still living in exile in the West, passed judgement on the state of Western culture. In his essay collection *Sculpting in Time* he notes:

> I think that one of the saddest aspects of our time is the total destruction in people's awareness of all that goes with a conscious sense of the beautiful. Modern mass culture, aimed at the "consumer", the civilisation of prosthetics, is crippling people's souls, setting up barriers between man and the crucial question of his existence, his consciousness of himself as a spiritual being.

Tarkovsky's vision here is almost identical to that of Vincent van Gogh when, in December 1882, he wrote in a letter to Theo of his exasperation and disappointment at the fact that a magazine that specialized in illustrations, a magazine he used to admire, called *The Graphic*, is becoming increasingly commercial:

> The publishers and dealers. […] How hard-hearted they are, how mistaken, though, if they think they can fool everyone into believing that material greatness is of equal weight as moral greatness, and that without the latter anything good can be done. As with *The Graphic*, so with more, many more things in the sphere of art. Moral greatness diminishes, material greatness comes in its place. […] I begin to see ever more clearly that the illustrated magazines go along with the superficial stream, and I believe that they aren't concerned with being as good as their duty dictates. No, filling the magazines with things that neither cost much nor take much trouble, now and again putting in something good, but produced in a cheap, mechanized way, apart from that filling their pockets with as much money as possible. […] In the meantime, people have wormed their way in as employees who wouldn't have appeared in the difficult but noble time. What Zola calls the triumph of mediocrity takes place: scoundrels, nobodies, replace workers, thinkers, artists, and no one even notices. […] You see, Theo, old chap, it truly grieves me, the whole thing is going wrong. […] And now, everything's gone — again the material in place of the moral.

That great worry of Van Gogh and Tarkovsky and JFK as to what the fate of a society will be if it is focused purely and simply on material riches, and so loses spiritual wealth and moral values, was shared by philosopher, physicist and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, who published the *Principia Mathematica* along with his friend Bertrand Russel. A hundred years ago, in his *The Aims of Education*, Whitehead comes to the following conclusion:

> You cannot, without loss, ignore in the life of the spirit so great a factor as art. Our aesthetic emotions provide us with vivid apprehensions of value. If you maim these, you weaken the force of the whole system of spiritual apprehensions. […] History shows us that an efflorescence of art is the first activity of nations on the road to civilization. Yet, in the face of this plain fact, we practically shut out art from the masses of the population. Can we wonder that such an education, evoking and defeating cravings, leads to failure and discontent? […] Shakespeare wrote his plays for English people reared in the beauty of the country, amid the pageant of life as the Middle Age merged into the Renaissance, and with a new world across the ocean to make vivid the call of romance. Today we deal with herded town populations, reared in a scientific age. I have no doubt that unless we can meet the new age with new methods, to sustain for our populations the life of the spirit, sooner or later, amid some savage outbreak of defeated longings, the fate of Russia will be the fate of England. Historians will write as her epitaph that her fall issued from the spiritual blindness of her governing classes, from their dull materialism, and from their Pharisaic attachment to petty formulae of statesmanship.

Although Whitehead wrote that last sentence in 1922, a century later it remains surprisingly relevant. That in today's world we are confronted with crises of all kinds (political, economic, social, in our relationship with nature) is partly a result of the demonstrable disfunction of an almost powerless ruling class. One thing that counts not as a justification but as an explanation of this disfunction is the fact that the ruling class is no more than an exponent of a worldview that we have come to believe in as a society but that has become a dead end. Hence the crises. And as an exponent of a worldview that suggests that in 'the best of all possible worlds' all crises will ultimately be overcome through better scientific insights, technological progress and material riches, it is doubtful whether the ruling classes will ever heed the call to renew culture through the power of the imagination and make an ideal of civilization a reality.

The history of the twenty-first century also teaches us that this call can come not only from the Muses but from the Sirens, as a lure.

In the years when Whitehead was writing about the importance of art and the need for cultural renewal, in order that Western society would not fall into decline, in Munich lived an artist not without merit, a painter, who was also convinced of the need for cultural renewal and the restoration of moral values. This artist attached great value to the importance of art for the people and was himself infatuated with the music of Wagner, Beethoven, Bruckner and Puccini. He owned paintings by his beloved masters Rembrandt and Vermeer. He wanted to do all he could to prevent Europe from falling prey to decadence, decline and the abominable influence of 'degenerate art'. He found an ally in a novelist not without merit, who in contrast to the artist he admired, felt great love for the work of Edvard Munch. These two found a third ally in an architect not without merit, who along with the painter developed grandiose plans for buildings that would last for ever… The three-some would go down in history under the names Adolf Hitler, Dr. Joseph Goebbels and Albert Speer.

Fascism is a cultural renewal movement, but one driven by a conservative revolution whose view of the world and of humankind, and therefore the answers it gives to the big questions of life, are diametrically opposed to the idea of humankind and of the world as portrayed in the ancient legend by the Brother who chose the Book, the idea that also Van Gogh would choose.

If in imitation of Curtius we engage in the following thought experiment and imagine as a possibility a society that does not side with the Brother with the Gold but with the Brother with the Book, what kind of society would it be? What does that choice mean for our lives and for the other choices we need to make? And what are the consequences for the issues and challenges with which we will then be confronted?

'The book', that's also 'literature', says Van Gogh. So let's first get our bearings in the world of literature, where we come upon the novel *Das*

Glasperlenspiel (*The Glass Bead Game*) by Hermann Hesse. It is this novel we have to thank for the wise warning that we need to be aware that the possible world can never be brought into being from an ivory tower by intellectuals who are estranged from the world as it is. The fate of humankind really will not be improved by another sect in a world that is already to a great degree sectarian rather than united. At the same time we would be wise to allow ourselves to be led by the advice of Schiller in his *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man*), where he writes: 'Live with your century, but do not be its creature; render to your contemporaries what they need, not what they praise.'

With that attitude, with the image of the Brother with the Book before our eyes and, given the reality in which we live, armed with Van Gogh's 'melancholy of hope', let us now attempt to answer the following questions with which we are confronted.

First of all, *where* do we look for answers to the great questions of life: Who am I? What is the point of my existence? And how do we deal with the most unavoidable thing of all, death?

The Brother with the Book will undoubtedly point us towards 'the sources of civilization'. But when we arrive at those religious and philosophical sources, what do we find there? Are they still there at all, or have they shrivelled away? And to what extent has the water that springs from them been contaminated by history until it is corrupted? Moreover, how do we get to those sources? 'Through tradition and the classics', is the age-old answer. But is there a single religious or philosophical tradition that has not been stained with blood? Anyhow, those old books known as 'the classics' — from where do they derive their value? What are we to do with works that all too often clash with the social conventions we adhere to now? Where do we find that knowledge? In the cloud? Or do we have to turn to the libraries? And how can we learn to read, now that we barely have the concentration required for it, or the knowledge to enable us truly to understand what we are reading. And does it have to be books? Is there not another medium that is accessible to us? What have we yet to learn from those things that are 'foreign' to us, from the traditions of other civilizations? After all, Van Gogh was inspired and influenced by Japanese art, Tarkovsky by Asian art, Picasso by African art, Gauguin by Polynesian art and so on. Why always look to the past? Is it not precisely the future that can offer us an answer to the question of who we are, as a result of the possibilities that we make a reality?

Let us stay in the past for a while but take our bearings in culture more broadly. In 1794 the first issue appeared of a monthly cultural magazine called *Die Horen*. It was the brainchild of Friedrich Schiller, who published it. With his choice of title, Schiller was referring to the three goddesses of Greek mythology who, according to Hesiod, are the poets of Righteousness. They are Eunomia (Good Order), Dike (Justice) and Eirene (Peace). In his

'Announcement', Schiller writes that he decided to publish his cultural magazine because he is living in a time when 'the approaching rumble of a war in the country alarms us and the battle of political opinions and interests reiterates this war in almost every circle'. Precisely now that politics has run aground and political parties can no longer communicate with each other, Schiller believes it is necessary to make society aware of the universal problems that exist. With his magazine he wants to unite a politically divided world once more under the flag of Truth and Beauty, which only culture can offer. History will be interrogated about what the past has to teach us, and philosophy about what we need to know for the future. Schiller hopes that by means of the classics and the arts that people will find in his magazine, culture will make a contribution to the urgently necessary new edifice of better ideas, purer principles, a nobler ethics, which an ultimately better world cannot exist without as its building blocks. 'Decency and order, justice and peace will be the spirit and precepts of this magazine, and it will be ruled over by the three sisterly goddesses Eunomia, Dike and Eirene.'

For Vincent van Gogh, the Brother with the Book was the symbol of the essence and necessity of culture, as Schiller articulates it so splendidly, but he confronts us — companions in fate of the Nietzschean era — with questions unknown to Schiller and Van Gogh. After the twentieth century — with all its wars, the era of death — we know that the arts and the classics do not have a humanizing effect. We therefore need to ask, as Hölderlin did: '*Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?* — What is the use of poets in such a barren age?' In 1959 the German poet Ingeborg Bachmann still ventured to claim that '*Die Wahrheit ist dem Menschen zumutbar* — People can know the truth.' But what is truth? And why is it that seekers after the truth like Van Gogh, but also poets like Rimbaud and Verlaine or philosophers like Socrates, are all too often regarded as outcasts and madmen, driven to suicide or killed by us? And what is beauty and what is the use of it? What is art and how can we distinguish it from kitsch? Why is Nietzsche's *Kultur-Herbst-Gefühl* still with us? No, fortunately the Louvre was not set ablaze as Nietzsche feared, but the destruction of art is and remains a widespread phenomenon, whether or not in the form of 'cancel culture'. Where does the continual urge to destroy art, most recently by climate activists, come from? In 1945 Hermann Broch published his magnum opus *Der Tod des Vergil* (*The Death of Virgil*), a novel in which the Muses say farewell to our world because beauty and art are no longer allowed to exist in it, but in which Broch is at the same time asking: *What are our fundamental values now that make possible a civilization in which no destructive forces reign but instead life forces?* And what is the relationship between art and politics? How could the truth and beauty that Schiller and Van Gogh believed they knew unite our own politically divided world? Why not sooner, or to a greater extent, a world united by amusement instead of the Muses, and by shared economic interests rather than spiritual values? Can art truly

give us an answer to our most important questions in life? Would we not do better to turn to a psychotherapist for that, or if necessary a psychiatrist?

But now that we have sided with the Brother with the Book, and in accordance with the convictions of Schiller and Van Gogh, let it be the Muses, literature, the arts and philosophy that enable us to know Truth and Beauty. Then the question that becomes urgent concerns why the bearers of cultural heritage have to prove their right to exist again and again based on a supposed usefulness. Schiller complained about this at the end of the eighteenth century when in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* he wondered why 'Utility is the great idol of the age, to which all powers must do service and all talents swear allegiance. In these clumsy scales the spiritual service of Art has no weight; deprived of all encouragement, she flees from the noisy mart of our century.' In Vincent van Gogh we come upon the same lament: 'You see, Theo, old chap, it truly grieves me, the whole thing is going wrong. […] Again the material in place of the moral.'

In two centuries nothing has changed. No, that's not true. In society today the demand that the cultural world must demonstrably serve an economic or social need has only grown. When Pluto reigns, the Muses need to conform or perish. Culture will have to be useful — and demonstrate its usefulness with numerical data — or it will cease to be. It is here that the Brother with the Book as an Abel comes upon his Brother with the Gold, a real Cain. To ensure that Abel is not killed again, what is needed if we are to achieve an economy that will serve culture rather than the other way round? An economy in which wellbeing prevails over profit. And what kind of politics is required if it is to be one that cherishes spiritual wellbeing just as much as material wellbeing? As a justification for the demand of 'usefulness', we often hear that art and culture must not be 'elitist' in a democracy, that a museum is 'the echo chamber of society'. But is not precisely the opposite true? Does a democracy that wants to avoid deteriorating into a mass democracy, with countless fascist phenomena as a result, not need precisely the culture Schiller advocates, a culture that attempts to elevate humankind with better ideas, purer principles, a nobler ethics? A culture that is 'difficult' because it wants to teach people something rather than simply amusing them? A culture that will teach people to look and read as Van Gogh could look and read, and so make a cultural legacy their own? Would *Bildung* therefore not again become the heart of university education, instead of the current one-dimensional focus on 'useful specialisms'? Because why would the governing elites in a democracy deprive young people of such a spiritual education?

In 1935, when the dark and destructive forces predicted by Nietzsche were manifesting themselves more and more forcefully, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga published his book *In de schaduwen van morgen* (*In the Shadow of Tomorrow*). It begins with the lines:

> We are living in a demented world. And we know it. It would not come as a surprise to anyone if tomorrow the madness gave way to a frenzy which would leave our poor Europe in a state of distracted stupor, with engines still turning and flags streaming in the breeze, but with the spirit gone. […] How to avoid the recognition that almost all things which once seemed sacred and immutable have now become unsettled, truth and humanity, justice and reason?

For the sake of the future of humanity, Huizinga investigates, as a historian, the lessons of the past. Just as Van Gogh found a teacher in Rembrandt, so Huizinga chose Erasmus, and partly as a result of the insights of Erasmus, Huizinga comes to the following fundamental conclusion: the madness can be stopped, no frenzy needs to break out and a politically divided world can unite again if humankind once more makes a culture its own that is worthy of the name. 'Culture must have its ultimate aim in the metaphysical or it will cease to be culture.' This is the culture that offers humankind an understanding of the truth that is elevated above reality, an awareness of what is eternal, absolute, holy, because it is not instrumental and malleable in human hands. It is the culture to which both Schiller and Van Gogh dedicated their art. The question, however, is whether we can still make this culture our own. For both men it presumed the metaphysics of the Absolute, of a God. But God is dead, according to Nietzsche. He announced the arrival of the man-God, who in absolute freedom and with all available power and technology will decide for himself what is beautiful or good for him, and for whom everything is malleable and transient. Van Gogh, by contrast, knew that 'the God of the clergy is certainly dead as a doornail', but he had a firm belief in the existence of the God-man who is eternal and who, as a true artist, gives eternal life — *ce qui ne passe dans ce qui passe*… Will the future of our civilization be that of the man-God or that of the God-man?

So we come to the final, decisive question about the future of Western culture. It is the question that Van Gogh's kindred spirit Andrey Tarkovsky poses when he writes:

> It is obvious to everyone that man's material aggrandisement has not been synchronous with spiritual progress. The point has been reached where we seem to have a fatal incapacity for mastering our material achievements in order to use them for our own good. We have created a civilization which threatens to annihilate mankind. In the face of disaster on that global scale, the one issue that has to be raised, it seems to me, is the question of a man's personal responsibility, and his willingness for sacrifice, without which he ceases to be a spiritual being in any real sense.

★★★

If we now walk into the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, we too will be asked what choice we want to make, what responsibility we want to take upon ourselves. Are we stepping into a tomb of tourist attractions or into the treasure house of an artist who desires of us too that we, with the melancholy of hope, be sowers of the civilization that gives life?

Rob Riemen
Founder & President Nexus Institute

Speakers

First roundtable

HUMBERTO BECK (Mexico, 1980) is a Mexican historian, essayist and editor, and a professor at the Center of International Studies at El Colegio de México, in Mexico City. His main interests are intellectual history and global current affairs, on which he has written essays for *The New York Times*, *Dissent*, *America's Quarterly*, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, and *El País*. His latest book publications include an analysis of the thought of historian and social critic Ivan Illich (*Otra modernidad es posible. El pensamiento de Iván Illich*, 2017), the co-edition of a collective volume on policy proposals for Mexico (*El futuro es hoy. Ideas radicales para México*, 2018), and an intellectual history of the concepts of instantaneous temporality, rupture and crisis (*The Moment of Rupture. Historical Consciousness in Interwar German Thought*, 2019). He is currently working on an intellectual history of Latin American ideas, as well as on a history of the notion of limits in twentieth-century social and political European thought. In 2020, Beck contributed to *Nexus* 84.

LAURENCE DES CARS (France, 1966) is president and director of the Louvre Museum. After studying art history at the Sorbonne and the prestigious École du Louvre, Des Cars started her career in 1994 as curator of paintings for the Musée d'Orsay. In the following decades she was successively appointed scientific director of France Muséums, director of the Musée de l'Orangerie and president of the Établissement Public du Musée d'Orsay et du Musée de l'Orangerie. She became the first female president and director of the Louvre in 2021. Des Cars curated successful exhibitions on Édouard Vuillard, Gustave Courbet and Guillaume Apollinaire among others, and has additionally written or contributed to multiple books on nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, such as *The Pre-Raphaelites. Romance and Realism* (2000). In 2019 she was responsible for a widely acclaimed exhibition on the representation of black figures in modern and early modern art: *Black Models. From Géricault to Matisse*. She is a Knight of the French Legion of Honour, a Knight of the French Order of Merit and a Commander of Arts and Letters.

STEPHEN FARTHING (UK, 1950) is an artist and art historian, whose work has been exhibited all around the world. He is an elected member of the Royal Academy of Arts in London and Emeritus Fellow of St Edmund Hall at the University of Oxford, where he taught at the Ruskin School of Art between 1989 and 2000. In 2000, Farthing became the executive director of The New York Academy of Art in Manhattan, until he returned to the UK in 2004 to be a researcher at the London University of the Arts. Farthing has an enduring interest in the early history of painting and drawing, modernism and the relationship between the drawn and the written — which also plays a central role in his own recent paintings. He has published several books about art and how to look at art, such as *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Art* (2000), *1001 Paintings You Must See Before You Die* (2006), *On Colour* (2018) and *Leonardo da Vinci: Under the Skin* (2018).

BRIAN GREENE (USA, 1963) is a scientist, world-renowned for his groundbreaking discoveries in the field of superstring theory, that attempts to capture all theories of existence in one consistent narrative. He became publicly known through his bestsellers *The Elegant Universe* (1999) and *The Fabric of the Cosmos* (2003), with which he strives to explain complex theoretical concepts to a general audience. *The Washington Post* called him 'the single best explainer of abstruse concepts in the world today'. Greene has hosted two mini-series based on his books, including the award-winning *The Elegant Universe with Brian Greene*. His most recent publication, *Until the End of Time. Mind, Matter and our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe,* appeared in 2020. In another attempt to make science more publicly accessible, Greene co-founded the World Science Festival together with Tracy Day in 2008. He is currently professor of physics and mathematics at Columbia University and the director of Columbia's Center for Theoretical Physics.

LÁSZLÓ NEMES (Hungary, 1977) is a Hungarian-Jewish film director and screenwriter, who in 2015 won an Oscar with *Son of Saul*: a film that like no other approaches the horrific experiences of a prisoner in Auschwitz. After moving to France with his mother at an early age, Nemes studied history, international relations, and political science, and took classes in cinema at the Sorbonne. Back in Hungary he became an assistant to director Béla Tarr on *Visions of Europe* (2004) and *The Man from London* (2007). With *Son of Saul,* his feature film debut, Nemes won not only an Oscar but also a Golden Globe and the Grand Prix in Cannes. In 2018, his film *Sunset*, set in Budapest in 1913, premiered at the Venice International Film Festival.

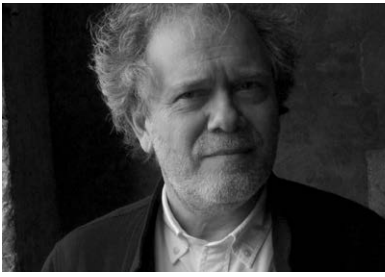
ANTONIO SCURATI (Italy, 1969) is a best-selling Italian novelist, world-famous for his series of novels on Mussolini. Scurati studied philosophy in Milan and Paris. He taught and coordinated a center for studying the languages of war and violence at the university of Bergamo. Currently, he is professor of Comparative Literature and Creative Writing at the IULM University in Milan, and a columnist for *Corriere della Sera*. Scurati published various novels, essays and articles, and a biography of the famous Italian anti-fascist Leone Ginzburg: *Il tempo migliore della nostra vita* (*The Best Time of Our Life)*. Scurati also made a film documentary about director Pier Paolo Pasolini. His novel *M: Son of the Century* (2018), the first part of his tetralogy on Mussolini and the rise of fascism, sold more than 600.000 copies, was translated into forty languages and won him the prestigious Strega Prize.

VALENTINA VAPAUX (Germany, 2001) is a German-Mexican writer and content creator in her twenties. She is a bright example of her generation, of which she draws a picture in her bestselling collection of essays *Generation Z* (2021). Vapaux has thousands of followers on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, where she's been frequently sharing videos on literature, lifestyle, fashion, identity, love and her own life since around 2017. After finishing highschool in 2019, Vapaux started a political podcast for teenagers in cooperation with the German public broadcasting network ARD: *Pancake Politik*. Around the same time, she followed a summer school on French literature at the Sorbonne and was selected for a learning program at The School of The New York Times. After having studied Comparative Literature and Political Sciences at the Freie Universität Berlin for some time, Vapaux now studies Creative Writing at the university of Hildesheim. She's currently working on her second book.

LEON WIESELTIER (USA, 1952) is an American-Jewish public intellectual and editor-in-chief of *Liberties*, a new journal of culture and politics. He advocates liberalism as essential for the survival of a free democracy and society. Wieseltier was educated at the universities of Columbia, Oxford and Harvard where he was selected to the Society of Fellows. From 1983 to 2014 he served as the renowned literary editor of *The New Republic*. He is the author of *Against Identity* (1996) and *Kaddish* (1998), which was translated into many languages and has become a classic about love, death, the accursed questions and the quest for wisdom. His essays on culture, religion, and history have been published in many international journals and magazines. In addition, he has published many translations of Hebrew poetry into English. In 2013 he won the prestigious Dan David Prize for outstanding achievement in the humanities. Since 2001, Wieseltier has been a regular contributor to the publications and events of the Nexus Institute.

Second roundtable

LISA APPIGNANESI (Poland) is a British-Canadian author and historian who has written extensively about Freud, the history of madness and the human psyche. She obtained her PhD in 1973 with her work *Femininity and the Creative Imagination. A Study of Henry James, Robert Musil and Marcel Proust* and in 1992 published, together with her husband John Forrester, the classic *Freud's Women*. Her books *Mad, Bad and Sad* (2009), *All About Love* (2011) and *Trials of Passion* (2016) were international bestsellers. She has also written fiction and memoir. Appignanesi was deputy director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London through the eighties, chair of the Freud Museum, president of the English PEN and chair of the Royal Society of Literature until 2021. She is Visiting Professor in Literature and Medical Humanities at King's College London. Her most recent book, *Everyday Madness. On Grief, Anger, Loss and Love*, appeared in 2018. She has written for many papers and journals, including the *New York Review of Books*. Appignanesi was decorated as Knight of the French Order of Arts and Letters for her contribution to literature and named OBE in 2013.



GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN (France, 1953) is a renowned French art historian, philosopher and intellectual. His research spans the visual arts, the historiography of art, psychoanalysis, the human sciences, and philosophy. Didi-Huberman studied art history and philosophy at the Université de Lyon and received his doctoral degree at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris in 1981 under the supervision of Louis Marin. He is at home in the intellectual world of Sigmund Freud, Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin among others. Didi-Huberman wrote various books on art and artists, including Fra Angelico, Alberto Giacometti, Georges Bataille and James Turrell, and in 2009, inspired by Dante and Pier Paolo Pasolini, his timely reflection *Survivance des lucioles* (*Survival of the Fireflies*). In 2015, Didi-Huberman received the prestigious Adorno Award for outstanding achievement in philosophy, theatre, music and film from the city of Frankfurt.

ROBBERT DIJKGRAAF (the Netherlands, 1960) is the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science. He began his career as a theoretical physicist, obtaining a PhD with honours under Nobel Prize laureate Gerard 't Hooft in 1989, and receiving the Spinoza Prize for his work on string theory in 2003. From 2012 to 2022, Dijkgraaf was director of and Leon Levy Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, the academic home of Albert Einstein, J. Robert Oppenheimer and George Steiner among many others. Dijkgraaf was President of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences from 2008 to 2012. He strives to bridge the gap between science, art, politics and education. Dijkgraaf participated in the Nexus Conference 2013, 'The Triumph of Science', and he contributed to *Nexus* 51 and *Nexus* 66.

KATHERINE E. FLEMING (USA, 1965), a historian, is President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, the world's wealthiest art institution, which is dedicated to advancing the visual arts. Fleming oversees its endowment and employees, and is responsible for strategy across its four programs. She studied theology, religion and history, focusing on the modern history of Greece and the broader Mediterranean. From 2016 until 2022, Fleming was the provost of New York University (NYU), and from 2012 until 2016, she was President of the Board of the University of Piraeus, Greece. An historian and the author of several works on Greece, she holds the Alexander S. Onassis Chair at NYU. Fleming's book publications include *The Muslim Bonaparte* (1999) and *Greece: A Jewish History* (2008), for which she received numerous awards. She is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a Knight of the French Legion of Honour, and holds the Silver Cross in the Greek Order of Beneficence.

EMILIE GORDENKER (USA, 1965) is a US-Dutch art historian and has been general director of the Van Gogh Museum since 2020. Gordenker studied Russian and East European studies at Yale, and obtained a PhD in the history of art, specialising in seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art, at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. She worked as a freelance art historian and in new media, before becoming senior curator of Early Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish Art at the National Gallery of Scotland. From 2008 until 2020, Gordenker was director of the Mauritshuis in The Hague, where among other things she completed the major expansion of the museum. Gordenker is a member of the Advisory Board of the Nexus Institute.

TOMÁŠ HALÍK (Czechoslovakia, 1948) is a priest, professor, author and one of today's most influential Catholic thinkers. Halík was a student of Jan Patočka and a friend of Václav Havel. During the Communist period, he was banned from university teaching and persecuted by the secret police as 'an enemy of the regime'. Clandestinely ordained a priest in Erfurt in 1978, he worked in the 'underground Church' and he closely cooperated with the country's future president, Havel. Pope John Paul II appointed him advisor to the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-Believers (1990); Benedict XVI named him Honorary Pontifical Prelate (2008). His many books, including *Night of the Confessor* (2005), *Is God absent?* (2017) and *Touch the Wounds* (2023), have been published in twenty languages and won international awards.

ANDREY A. TARKOVSKY (Russia, 1970) is the son of the world-famous Russian cineast Andrey Tarkovsky, whose films — such as *Andrei Rublov* (1966), *Stalker* (1979) and *The Sacrifice* (1986) — became timeless classics for their exploration of the spiritual through captivating shots and enchanting imagery. Tarkovsky Jr devoted his life and career to the preservation and promotion of his father's work. He is president of the Andrey Tarkovsky International Institute, edited and published *Sculpting in Time. Reflections on Cinema* (1985), a collection of his father's essays and a must-read for anyone trying to understand the world of cinema, and made his own documentary film debut in 1996, with the tv documentary *Andrey Tarkovsky. The Reminiscence.* He has also made documentary portraits of several other artists and directed musical performances. In 2006, he won the first prize at the festival of short films in Sabaudia with *Bastignano* (2006). His documentary *Andrey Tarkovsky. A Cinema Prayer* (2019), was presented at the 76th International Venice Film Festival in 2019 and received numerous prizes and worldwide acclaim.

BÉLA TARR (Hungary, 1955) is one of the great artists of our time, recognised in the whole world as today's most influential master of cinema. He is famous for his slow-moving, socially critical black-and-white films that thematize the human condition in enchantingly long, atmospheric shots. He started making films and documentaries at the age of sixteen, and debuted in 1977 with *Family Nest*. In 1984, Tarr began collaborating with prizewinning Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai — who participated in the Nexus Conference 2022. Tarr experienced his international breakthrough in 1988, with the release of their first co-written movie *Damnation*, which marked a new cinematic style. Together, Tarr and Krasznahorkai made three more widely celebrated movies, of which the seven-hour *Sátántangó* (1994) became most famous. In 2011, Tarr announced that he would stop making movies. In 2013, he founded his own film school in Sarajevo, with which he wanted to counterbalance the rule-based ways of teaching in traditional film academies.

Tickets

Please order your tickets on our website **www.nexus-institute.com**

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Under 35	€ 30,–
Friend*	2 free tickets as part of the Friend membership

Live stream

As a Nexus member (Reader, Companion or Friend), you can also watch this conference live (or afterwards) for free by logging into your account. You can find the live stream on June 17 between 10.00 AM and 4.00 PM on the Nexus website, and the recordings early July in the Nexus Treasury.

* *To purchase tickets with member discount, first log in to your member account on the website. You will then automatically be shown entrance tickets matching your membership. If you are not a member yet, please order a membership first and purchase your entrance tickets in a subsequent order.*

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