

# ECSTASY

**September 29, 2018–February 24, 2019**

**Ecstasies are as old as humanity itself. Since time immemorial people have deliberately gone beyond physical and mental boundaries enter into other realms of consciousness. It is precisely in this capacity that ecstasy has been of unwavering interest for artists. Featuring some 230 works from antiquity to the present, the exhibition ECSTASY traces the condition of being beside oneself in its art-historical and associated cultural significance. The show presents diverse facets of ecstasy, such as the Cult of Dionysus, religious rapture, the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, shamanism, sports, dance and music ecstasies, amorous ecstasies, youth culture, or drug-induced ecstasy.**

The Kunstmuseum Stuttgart is pursuing the thesis that the yearning for mind-expanding experiences is an elemental human striving and thus a phenomenon of global society. Over the centuries, ecstatic experiences have been subjected to various definitions and valuations, although there are connections among them. Ecstasy has invariably been interpreted as an ambivalent phenomenon, because the state of being beside oneself is linked to not only exuberant feelings of happiness but also inherent dangers resulting from the loss of control. An individual or collective deviating from the norm represents a threat in societies characterized by such capitalistic ideals as profit optimization, maximum efficiency, and constant growth.

With the aid of works on loan from international institutions, the exhibition demonstrates, for the first time, why it is precisely the arts that deal with ecstatic experiences. It is with artistic means that a confrontation with the unknown, the unnamable, and incomprehensible can be grasped and made palpable. We thus see that throughout the centuries, art has been capable of changing perception and awareness and thereby to facilitate an approach to ecstatic states. Here, ecstasy is linked with such diverse fields as religion, the occult, inspiration, bodily experience, sexuality, drugs, and psychoanalysis and often interwoven with the creative act.

Biochemical processes are fundamental to achieving an ecstatic state of consciousness: brain waves are stimulated, and endorphins released. Ecstasy is bodily induced, although the feelings one experiences leave behind a lasting impression. It is here that the exceptional states of intoxication and ecstasy coincide, because both involve a radical concentration of emotions, whose perception

substantially depends on the willingness of the individual. Intoxication and ecstasy are rarely differentiated from one another in either general or scientific discourse, since they most often merge into one another. The term ecstasy, especially in everyday-life usage, is subject to a definitional fuzziness in which intoxication, trance, and ecstasy enter into a collective semantic field. This also provides a resonance space for the works of art brought together in ECSTASY.

The exhibition offers insight into the evolution of ecstasy from antiquity to the present, illuminating different spiritual, political, psychological, social, sexual, and aesthetic implications of states of euphoria and intoxication, ranging from asceticism to excess. The show also presents examples of how ecstasy is approached in different societies. Here we can discern changing connotations of ecstasy along with boom periods. In the Middle Ages and Baroque era, Christian mysticism invoked the intensity of religious experience; in Romantic-period rapture, states of ecstasy flared up; around 1900 an utter ecstasy fad cropped up in the context of the comprehensive Nietzsche reception; beginning in the mid-1960s, the hippie movement equated the expansion of conscious with freedom; and even today, a striving toward ecstasies of varying intensity and orientation is clearly noticeable. Hence, ecstasies are now commonly seen as a breaking out from a standardized daily routine. In this interpretation, they are longed for or also rejected. After all, ecstatic experience harbors the danger that an individual or even a collective will depart from the norm. Yet this view is not shared at all times nor in all places. Rather, ecstasy is one of the oldest and most astonishing, anthropologically universal phenomena whose valuation continually changes and expands.

The exhibition ECSTASY is structured in nine theme rooms. In the European context, the artistic depictions of the **Cult of Dionysus** and **religious ecstasy** are constitutive of its pictorial tradition and cultural understanding. For centuries, iconography was preoccupied with the range of Bacchanalian motifs, with its dancing and eroticized maenads or bacchantes, the entourage of the god of ecstasy, Dionysus, making music on percussion instruments and drunk on wine. In Christian art, the *unio mystica*—the spiritual union between God and man—became one of the most frequently depicted motifs and in the Renaissance and Baroque era was considered the supreme discipline. During a religious ecstasy, a person's consciousness is either "torn" from the body by a higher power, or else the higher power penetrates into the mind of a person and takes total possession of him or her.

A wealth of connections exists between the thematic rooms. In the **amorous ecstasy** room, for instance, viewers encounter conventionalized forms of depicting orgiastic experience that in the ecstatic poses of the bacchantes appear just as contemporary as in the visualization of the divine rapture of saints or the devout. This is quite similar in the thematic field of **dance ecstasy**: the typical twisted bodily postures of the maenads dancing to the point of exhaustion and the state of being outside oneself recur in the motifs selected by the artists to render ecstatic dance experiences from modern Expressionist dance to the club culture of today.

The room designed by the Brazilian artist and **Candomblé** devotee Ayrson Heráclito references Non-European ecstasy phenomena. Attention is also devoted to works dealing with **shamanism and Santería**, two of many numerous religions and religious practices in which ecstatic experiences are of central importance.

The term ecstasy is undeniably associated with the consumption of **drugs**. This is culturally and historically motivated because in many rituals, intoxicating substances serve to induce an enhanced experience. In terms of the ingestion of mind-expanding substances, two diametrically opposed theses are pervasive in both the scientific and the social estimation. One concerns warnings against drugs because their uncontrolled use renders consumers uninhibited and not infrequently kills them. In contrast to this is the opinion that drugs liberate one's mind and open up the opportunity to hit upon social changes, away from conventions and norms. In this view, drug consumption is attractive for many artists in light of the creative process, be it in the form of the fashionable beverage absinthe in the nineteenth century, the virtually glorified opium, hashish, and mescaline intoxication of the avant-garde in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or through the ingestion of psychedelic drugs since the 1950s. The works of art clearly reflect the ambivalence of drug-induced ecstasies. They draw just as much attention to the mind-expanding effect as to the destructive consequences.

In addition to drugs, bodily exertion and acoustic stimuli in particular facilitate ecstatic experiences. All three elements play an important role in **youth cultures** and explain, in connection with the curiosity, fearlessness, and impulsiveness of many teenagers, why precisely this group is open and receptive to ecstatic experiences. For them, being beside oneself represents a promising state, because it counters ordinary behavior and that demanded by society. In this, a connection can be drawn to the collective ecstasy found in **sports**. Decisive here, too, is the opportunity for the controlled self to break out and to let oneself go in the frenetic cheering of the mass.

The exhibition ECSTASY also addresses the central importance of **music** for ecstatic experience in several respects. With the sound and light installation *Dream House* (1990) by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, the entire fourth exhibition level of the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart is transformed into an experience arena. The interaction of light, harmonic but also amelodic sounds, and movement in space offers visitors the chance to have a holistic experience far from everyday perception.

On all of its floors, music is an essential part of the exhibition—both directly, in a number of exhibited works, as well as through short musical recordings that lend the experience in the rooms an acoustic component.

For a chronological and in-depth tour through the exhibition, with explanations about the artists and their works, please refer to the accompanying exhibition guide. This is available for download in German and in English at [kunstmuseum-stuttgart.de](http://kunstmuseum-stuttgart.de) (Presse).

To demonstrate the arts' exploration of the ecstasy phenomenon beyond the works in the exhibition, the Kunstmuseum is organizing several events in collaboration with a series of Stuttgart's cultural institutions. Developed specifically for the show and corresponding to its theme, the events offer visitors a comprehensive and diverse approach to the subject. The accompanying program is likewise available at [kunstmuseum-stuttgart.de](http://kunstmuseum-stuttgart.de) (Press).