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**International exhibition sheds new light on Jasper John’s
embrace of the art of Edvard Munch**

At a crossroads in the middle of his career, Jasper Johns (1930) found his way forward in part by looking to the work of Edvard Munch (1863–1944). Now a ground-breaking exhibition entitled *Jasper Johns and Edvard Munch: Love, Loss, and the Cycle of Life* examines how Johns, one of America’s preeminent artists, mined the work of the Norwegian Expressionist in the late 1970s and early 1980s as he moved away from a decade of abstract painting towards a more open expression of love, sex, loss and death.

Organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in partnership with the Munch Museum, *Jasper Johns and Edvard Munch* opens in Oslo on Saturday, June 18, 2016, and in Richmond on Saturday, November 19, 2016 (remaining on view in Richmond through February 20, 2017). The showing at VMFA is the sole U.S. venue.

“The depth of the relationship between Johns and Munch has never been explored as systematically, nor illustrated as stunningly, as it will be in this international exchange,” says VMFA Director Alex Nyerges. Including more than 120 paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs, the exhibition has been conceived and organized by John B. Ravenal, Executive Director of deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum and former Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at VMFA.

Ravenal calls the two artists “strange bedfellows” in the accompanying volume, *Jasper Johns and Edvard Munch: Inspiration and Transformation*, co-published by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Yale University Press, in partnership with the Munch Museum. By the turn of the last century, Munch had worked his way towards a figurative style shaped by the emotions that preoccupied him—-anxiety, loneliness, jealousy, fear, and grief. Johns, on the other hand, has been quoted as saying “I didn’t want my work to be an exposure of my feelings,” when describing why he turned his back on Abstract Expressionism to paint familiar, even neutral, images like flags, targets, and numbers.

The Exhibition

Jasper Johns and Edvard Munch assembles many important paintings, drawings, and prints in once-in-a-lifetime combinations to trace the route Johns traveled to find what he needed in Munch’s work. The journey was shaped in part by chance: a quarter century after having first encountered Munch’s art at MoMA, for instance, Johns received a postcard of Munch’s *Self-Portrait between the Clock and the Bed*, 1940-43, from a friend who had noticed similarities between the bedspread in the painting and Johns’s crosshatch motif. While the resemblance was coincidental, Johns went on to make a least 12 more works with overt references to Munch’s art.

In the exhibition, for the first time in 20 years, the three monumental *Between the Clock and the Bed* paintings Johns created in the 1980s will be shown side-by-side. For the first time ever, they will be exhibited alongside their namesake, Munch's *Self-Portrait between the Clock and the Bed*, 1940-43, as well as the actual bedspread from Munch's home that is pictured in the painting.

The exhibition begins by exploring how Johns single-mindedly pursued abstraction during the 1970s by creating variation after variation of the crosshatch motif—and how crosshatching provided a starting point for him to rediscover Munch. These early sections feature *Corpse and Mirror II*, 1975-76, and the Whitney Museum exhibition print *Savarin*, 1977. These works are paired with the iconic *The Scream*, 1895, *Angst*, 1896, and *The Kiss*, 1902, among other works by Munch on loan from the Munch Museum, and together show how Johns transformed a simple can filled with brushes into a surrogate self-portrait that suggests an emerging awareness of Munch's experimental woodcuts and lithographs.

Johns's work showed a mounting tension between formalism and strong emotion in the late 1970s, and he began to subvert abstraction by inserting overt references to sex and death into many of his most ambitious paintings. Major loans show the evolution of this change: *Dancers on a Plane*, 1981; both the oil and watercolor versions of *Cicada*, 1979; and *Tantric Detail*, 1980. From the Munch Museum come several versions of Munch's haunting *Madonna*, and the large-scale *The Dance of Life*, 1925, among other works.

Representing the moment in Johns's career when he abandoned the crosshatch motif altogether and returned to recognizable imagery, *In the Studio*, 1982 and *Perilous Night*, 1982, are juxtaposed with paintings and prints by Munch that reflect the Norwegian artist's anxieties about aging, illness, loss, and mortality. An exploration of Johns's 1982 *Savarin* monotypes shows how Johns used the print medium to drill down further into motifs related to Munch, including crosshatching, woodgrain, handprints and armprints, and even sperm.

The last section in the exhibition proposes several important new ideas about the Johns/Munch connection involving shadows and ghosts. Here, all four of Johns's *Seasons* paintings (1985-86) and a large selection of *Seasons* drawings and prints, including a number from Johns's own collection, are paired with Munch's *Self-Portrait in Hell*, 1903; *Starry Night*, 1922-24; *Self-Portrait at Quarter Past Two in the Morning*, 1940-44, and numerous other self-portrait paintings, drawings, and prints. A dozen experimental photographs by Munch are here as well. Cumulatively, these bodies of work suggest that Munch's fascination with the shadow as an alter ego capable of expressing feelings about life and death came to be shared by Johns.

While showing how Johns used Munch's motifs to open up his own work to greater expressiveness, the exhibition also demonstrates a circularity between influence, interpretation, and appropriation. "The way that Johns internalized and processed Munch's images shows that Munch's work is still evolving in how it is received by artists and others," says Ravenal.

"This exhibition is a case study for the complex and unexpected ways that artists draw inspiration from the art of the past," says Alex Nyerges, Director of VMFA. "It's also a reminder that however methods and technologies change, today, as ever, the real basis for the value of a comprehensive art museum like VMFA is its imaginative capacity to make new connections and expand the knowledge of the works of art in its permanent collections."

The Munch Museum

When *Johns+Munch* opens in Oslo on June 18, it will be the first comprehensive presentation of the art of Jasper Johns in Scandinavia and the latest offering in the Munch Museum's six-part series +*Munch*. Other artists compared to Munch in this series are Vincent van Gogh, Gustav Vigeland, Asger Jorn, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Bjarne Melgaard.

Since its opening in 1963, the Munch Museum has devoted its exhibitions and programming to preserving and furthering the legacy of its namesake. The museum launched with a donation from the artist's estate of 1,150 paintings, close to 18,000 prints depicting more than 700 different motifs, 7,700 drawings and watercolors, and 13 sculptures. In addition, there were nearly 500 printing plates, 2,240 books, notebooks, documents, photographs, art tools, accessories and pieces of furniture. Further works of art by Munch as well as his extensive collection of letters were bequeathed to the City of Oslo by his sister Inger Munch, and were added to the Munch collection when she died in 1952. Today the Munch Museum houses more than half of Edvard Munch's paintings and most of his prints.

Sponsorship

Jasper Johns and Edvard Munch: Love, Loss, and the Cycle of Life at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is presented by Altria Group. Its international tour is supported through a generous grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art, which seeks to foster cross-cultural conversations about American art through innovative exhibitions, research, and educational programs. Major support for this project has also been provided by the Henry Luce Foundation, in recognition of its contribution to the study of American art, and the National Endowment for the Arts. The exhibition program at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is supported by The Julia Louise Reynolds Fund.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

VMFA's permanent collection encompasses more than 33,000 works of art spanning 5,000 years of world history. Its collections of Art Nouveau and Art Deco, English silver, Fabergé, and the art of South Asia are among the finest in the world. With acclaimed holdings in American, British Sporting, Impressionist and Post-Impressionist, and Modern and Contemporary art – and additional strengths in African, Ancient, East Asian, and European – VMFA ranks as one of the top comprehensive art museums in the United States. Programs include educational activities and studio classes for all ages, plus lively after-hours events. VMFA's statewide program includes traveling exhibitions, artist and teacher workshops, and lectures across the Commonwealth. VMFA, a certified Virginia Green attraction, is open 365 days a year and general admission is always free. For additional information, telephone 804-340-1400 or visit www.vmfa.museum.

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Press Contact:

Allan Altholz, allan.altholz@vmfa.museum, 804.204.2721
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 200 N. Boulevard, Richmond VA 23220-4007