



Large
Print

Francis Bacon

Man and Beast

Galleries 1-9

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Francis Bacon: Man and Beast

Main Galleries

29 January – 17 April 2022

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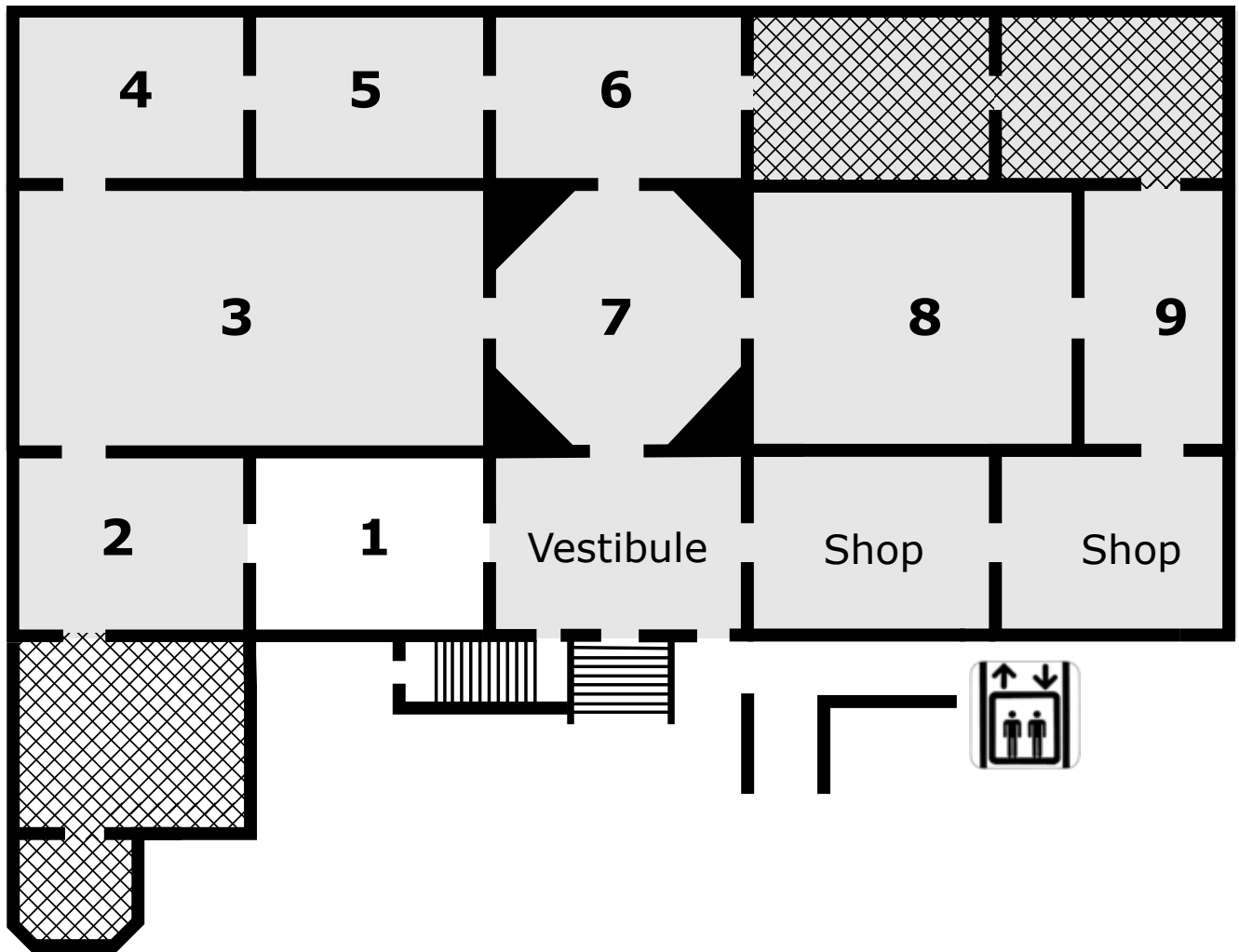
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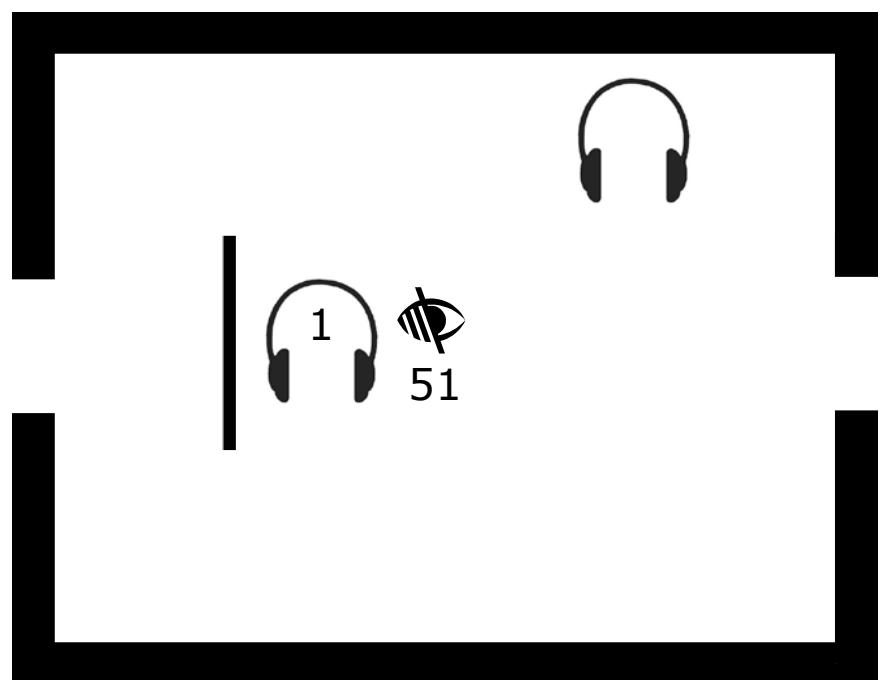
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You are in Gallery 1



Audio tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



Introduction



51 - Head I

Gallery 1

Introduction to the exhibition



Francis Bacon's paintings are traditionally perceived as studies of the human figure caught alone and vulnerable in claustrophobic interiors. Another barely explored perspective in Bacon's work, however, is his obsessive interest in animals, and what the close observation of them could reveal about the true nature of mankind.

Bacon was convinced that he could see and analyse human nature more directly and tellingly by watching the way animals behave.

Although the artist later personified metropolitan man, with his circle of close friends and lovers at the bohemian heart of London, he was brought up on a stud farm in Ireland where hunting and horse breeding dominated everyday life.

What Bacon learned about existence as a child came from what he learned about animals: how they fought, how they mated, how they died.

Bacon's early encounters with animals affected his art deeply. At the core of his vision is a clinical observation of human instinct based on the uninhibited behaviour he had watched in animals.

Wildlife remained Bacon's touchstone for portraying both male and female figures: he not only amassed photographs of animals in motion but saw big game up close on trips to South Africa.

Bacon's half-human, half-beast forms first appeared in his breakthrough paintings of the 1940s, and they continued to mutate throughout his artistic development.

Thus Bacon's 'man' frequently comes across as barely human while, disquietingly, his 'beasts' come to resemble humans in our most extreme, unguarded moments.

'Francis Bacon: Man and Beast' sets out to explore this fundamental yet little examined aspect of one of the great masters of twentieth century art.

The exhibition has taken shape in extraordinary times. As we follow Bacon's search for the truth about human nature, we grow aware of one other mark of his genius: to have sensed how closely man and animal would interact, whether caged or uncaged, to the point where each depends on the other to survive.

In our current predicament, his paintings seem more prescient than ever.

Michael Peppiatt, Curator

List of works

Head I



1948

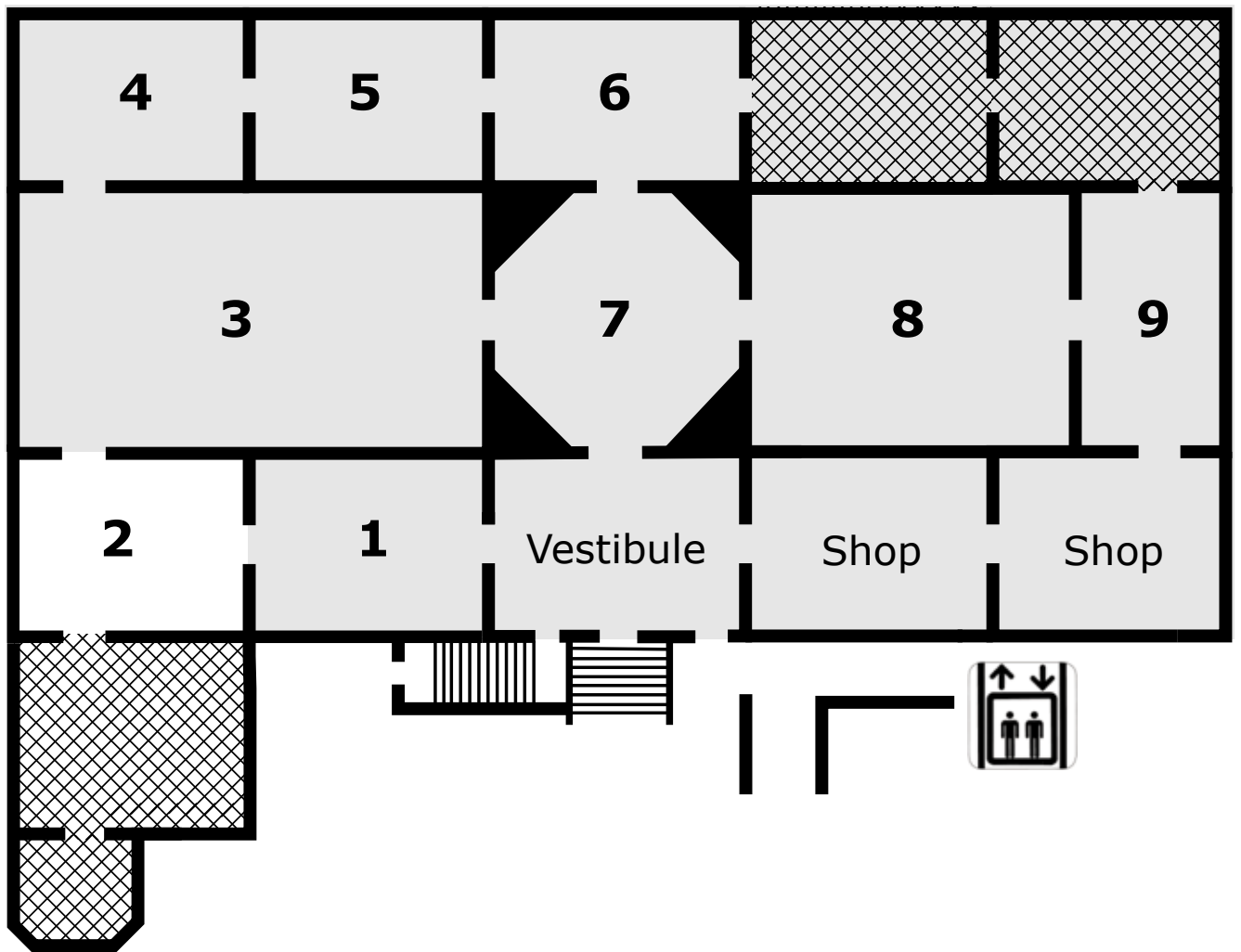
Oil and tempera on board

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

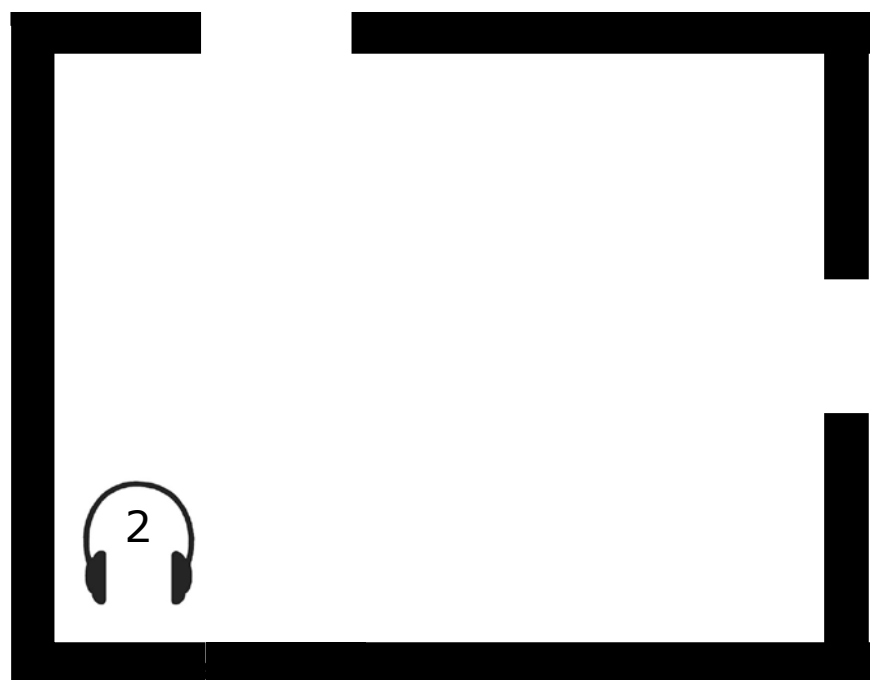
Bequest of Richard S. Zeisler, 2007

An unnervingly realistic ear is the only clue that identifies this amorphous form as human. Its fanged mouth originated in a photograph of a chimpanzee.

This is one of six 'Heads' which were exhibited together in 1949. That year, Bacon gave an interview with Time magazine, expressing his desire 'to paint like Velázquez but with the texture of hippopotamus skin'.



You are in Gallery 2



Audio tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



Fury, c.1944

Introduction to Gallery 2

Flesh, Skin and Bone

Bacon's early life and career occurred in parallel with the deadly wars that shaped the first half of the twentieth century. The human capacity for extreme violence on a terrifying scale, both individually and collectively, was all too evident.

Having worked as a furniture and interior designer, Bacon produced his first acclaimed painting, 'Crucifixion', in 1933. The theme dominated his early works, yet Bacon held no religious beliefs. He viewed the crucifixion as 'just an act of man's behaviour'.

Hanging in a dark void, this ghostly, skeletal body introduces the underpinnings of Bacon's art: that human beings are fundamentally animals made of flesh, skin and bone. In Bacon's words, 'we are meat, we are all potential carcasses'.

From 1944, Bacon's work gave birth to strange hybrid creatures: curious, silvery bodies stretching out, crouching down, or letting out primal screams. Taking inspiration from Pablo Picasso, these biomorphs explore what Bacon called 'organic form that relates to the human image but is a complete distortion of it'.

Animal features – canine teeth; quadrupedal gaits; swooping necks – create that distortion, while a human ear or mop of hair lend familiarity.

The disquieting effect of these figures is amplified by Bacon's inclusion of hats, umbrellas and cut flowers, locating these extreme expressions within the polite customs of everyday life.

List of works (in order of hang - clockwise)

Crucifixion

1933

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Figure Study I

1945–46

Oil on canvas

National Galleries of Scotland. Accepted by HM Government in lieu of Inheritance Tax and allocated to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, 1998

An unseen body lurks beneath a herringbone-weave coat. In 'Figure Study II' (hanging nearby) the body protrudes from the same garment, like a snake shedding its skin.

At the time they were made, Bacon described these paintings in a letter as 'studies for the Magdalene' – the grieving figure sometimes present as a witness to the crucifixion in historic Christian paintings – but later denied this association.

Figure Study II

1945–46

Oil on canvas

National Galleries of Scotland. Lent by Huddersfield Art Gallery, Kirklees Council (Presented by the Contemporary Art Society to Bagshaw Museum, Batley)


contemporary
art society

'Fury'



c. 1944

Oil and pastel on fibreboard

Private collection

Conceived in the context of the crucifixion theme (it recalls the right-hand panel of 'Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion', 1944, on permanent display at Tate Britain), this biomorph is also associated with the 'furies' or Eumenides.

These creatures of vengeance appear in the 'Oresteia', a trilogy of plays by the Ancient Greek writer Aeschylus, a text that proved an ongoing source of inspiration for Bacon.

Study for a Figure

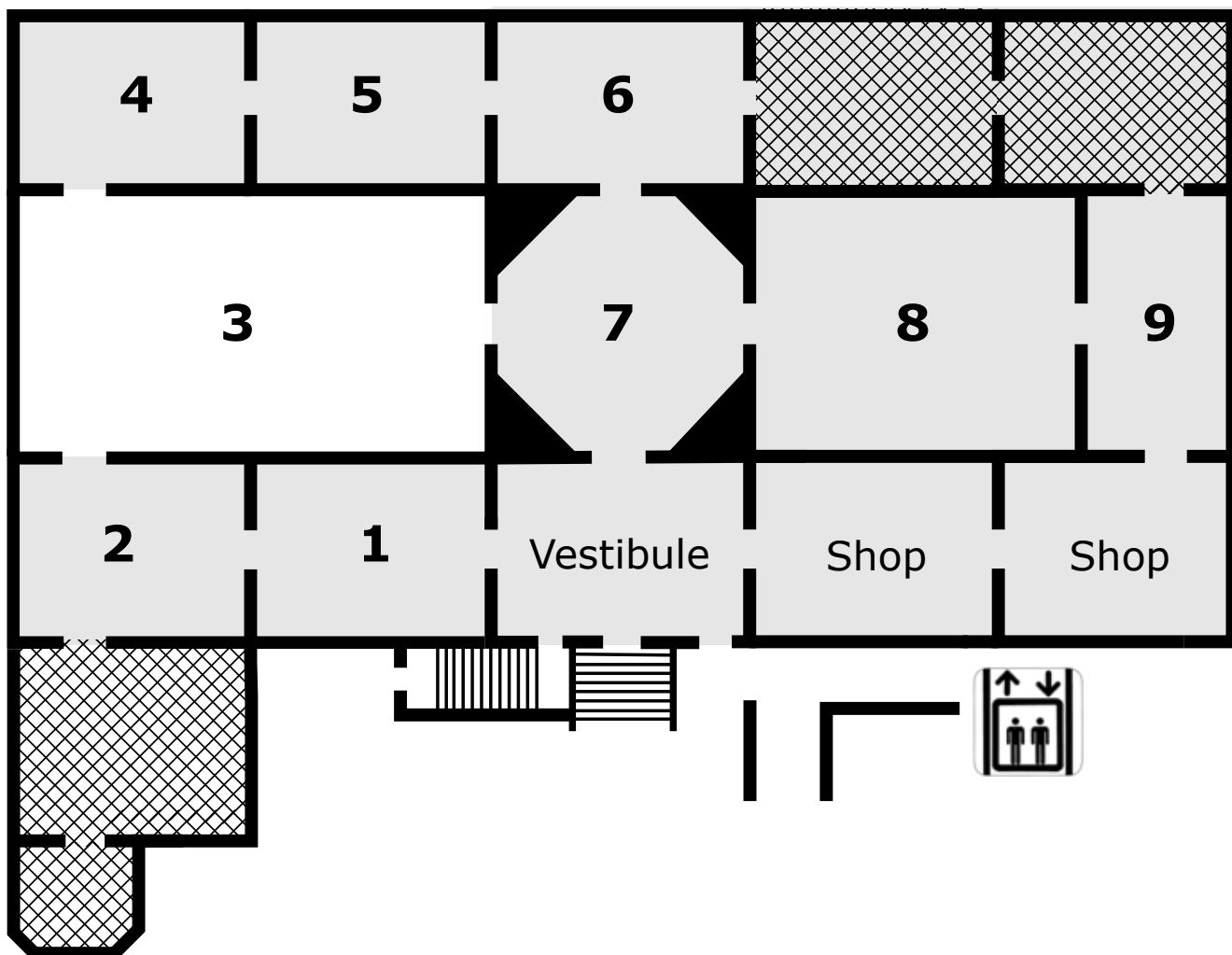
c. 1945

Oil on canvas

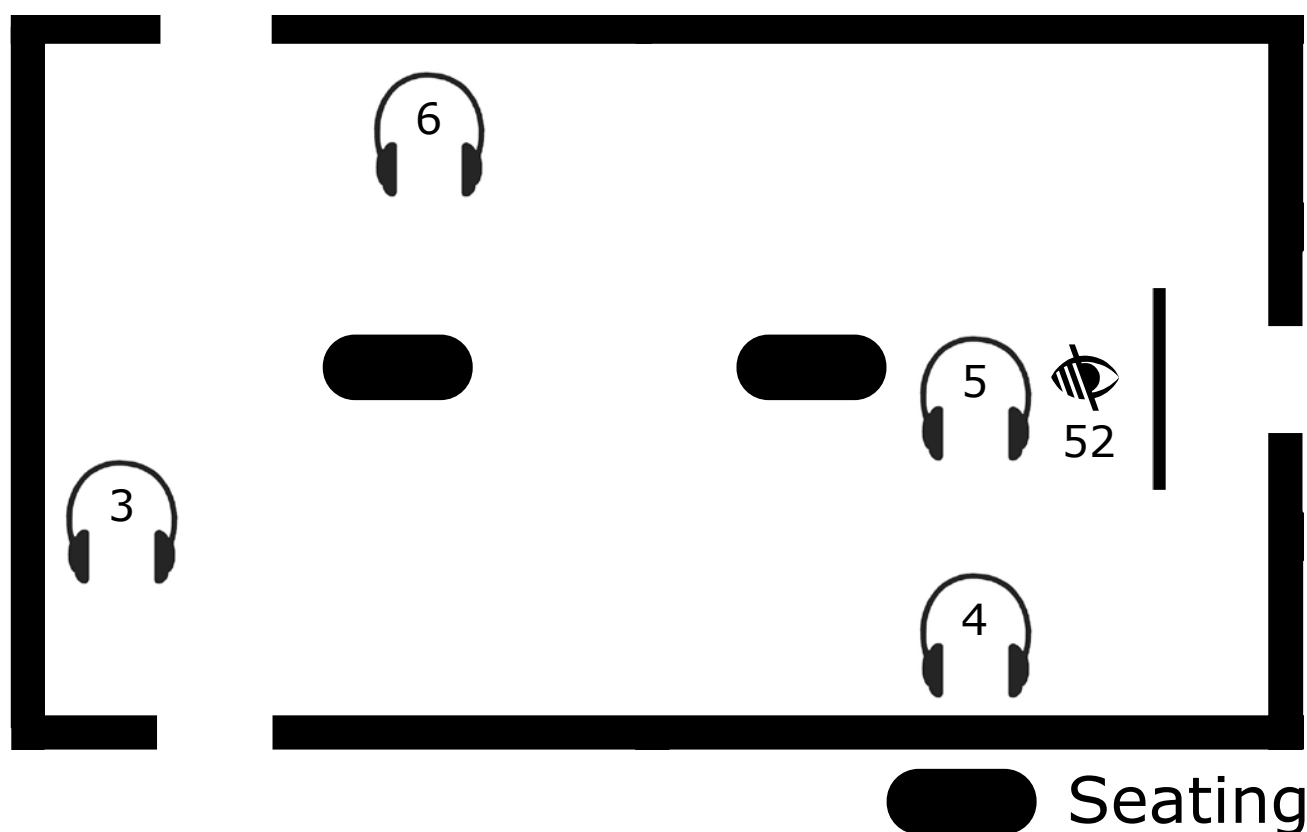
Peter Simon Family Collection

Bacon collected a wide array of sources. He gathered everything from press photographs of Hitler's speeches to books about forensic pathology, often drawn to images concerned with power, the body and the boundary between the visible and unseen.

The head here is quoted from 'The Phenomena of Materialisation', a record of seances held during 1909-1913 that purport to show ectoplasm emerging from the body of a medium.



You are in Gallery 3



Audio tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



Chimpanzee, 1955



Dog, 1952



52 - Fragment of a Crucifixion, 1950



Man Kneeling in Grass, 1952

Introduction to Gallery 3

Wildlife

By the 1950s, Bacon was an established artist. During this decade he painted various animals including the dogs, owls and chimpanzees in this gallery. Often the composition centres on a single animal in the manner of a portrait, underlining its 'human' qualities.

The howl of the caged 'Chimpanzee' registers emotional, even existential pain, while the empathetic 'Study for Chimpanzee' – with its bold pink background – unmistakably captures a thinking, feeling being.

Notably absent are the horses that surrounded Bacon during his childhood in rural County Kildare, Ireland (his English father, a retired army major, bred racehorses and the family's social life revolved around regular hunts).

Dogs and horses were among the triggers for Bacon's asthma – his relationship with animals was detached, yet they fascinated him.

Bacon built a library of wildlife books and magazines as part of the vast stock of images amassed in his studio. He also took opportunities to observe live animals. In the early 1950s he made trips to southern Africa (where his mother and sisters moved following the death of his father in 1940).

He described being 'mesmerised' by wild animals moving through the long grass. A series of paintings followed that placed naked human figures crouching in, or crawling through, grasslands.

These 'landscapes' are charged with the adrenalin of the stalk and the power dynamics of the chase and final tussle, often with strong sexual overtones.

List of works (in order of hang - anti-clockwise)

Study for Chimpanzee

1957

Oil and pastel on canvas

Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

Chimpanzee



1955

Oil on canvas

Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, transfer of the Ministry of Science and Culture, Baden-Württemberg 1964

The fanged mouth that Bacon applied to 'Head I' in the first gallery is reprised here.

By the mid-1950s, the motif of the cuboid 'cage' – both metaphorical and physical – was ubiquitous in Bacon's work, enclosing humans and animals alike. Here, a faint recessive horizon is screened by a diagonal pattern.

(continued over)

Swift, economic brush-strokes conjure frenetic motion as the chimpanzee flings out its arm to swing a white tassel – an enigmatic detail that Bacon repeated in several paintings.

Head IV (Man with a Monkey)

1949

Oil on canvas

Private collection courtesy Eykyn Maclean

A suited man peers into the abyss while the monkey's solemn face gazes out. A curtain of streaked paint separates them, yet they appear simultaneously to merge.

Bacon visited London Zoo around this time, where he saw monkeys in captivity. He was also collecting animal imagery from books and magazines, tearing out pages and pinning them to his easel to look at whilst painting.

Study for Portrait of P. L. No. 1

1957

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Bacon began a passionate, violent relationship with Peter Lacy in 1952. Bacon attributed his own sadomasochism to the beatings he received in childhood either by, or upon instructions from, his father. In stark contrast to the strong physical power that Lacy often wielded over Bacon, here his naked, vulnerable body is curled up on the sofa like a domestic pet, his hand covering his face, perhaps in pain or remorse.

Man with Dog

1953

Oil on canvas

Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.
Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1955

Owls

1956

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Bacon's copy of Eric Hosking and Cyril
Newberry, *Birds in Action*, 1949

Collection & image © Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin
(Reg. No. RM98F114:79, pp. 78–79)

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DACS 2022

Dog

1952

Oil on canvas

Tate: Presented by Eric Hall 1952

Bacon painted dogs more than any other
animal, often adapted from photographs of
a mastiff walking, taken by the nineteenth
century photographer, Eadweard Muybridge.



The setting was probably based on a postcard of the manicured formal gardens of the seafront at Monte Carlo, where Bacon lived from 1946-1950, spending much time in the casinos. With its hunched back and panting tongue, the dog seems exhausted, isolated in the bare enclosure of a red hexagon, the passing traffic oblivious to its suffering.

Fragment of a Crucifixion



1950

Oil and cotton wool on canvas

Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

Here, Bacon aligns the crucifixion theme with the animal instinct for survival. Above, a dog or cat-like creature with a wounded head stalks a winged body, based on a photograph of an owl in the 1949 book 'Birds in Action' (a human mouth replaces the vole in the owl's beak).

Bacon spoke of 'the whole horror of life, of one thing living off another', but was not an advocate for animal rights; his was a nihilistic outlook.

Landscape near Malabata, Tangier

1963

Oil on canvas

Private collection

A centrifugal rush recalls the speed of a greyhound track, although the foreground shape may relate to a photo Bacon kept of two animals in mortal combat, captioned: 'while the owl tries to reach the snake's head, its legs become completely encoiled'.

Malabata, on the coast of Morocco, is the final resting place of Peter Lacy, Bacon's partner during the 1950s.

The pair spent time together in Tangier – a city that attracted many artists and writers. Bacon learned of Lacy's death (a result of alcoholism) by telegram just before his 1962 Tate retrospective opened.

Figures in a Landscape

1956–57

Oil on canvas

Lent by Birmingham Museums Trust on behalf of
Birmingham City Council

Two Figures in the Grass

1954

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Bacon was openly gay at a time when homosexuality was illegal.

Two women lodged a complaint with the police about this painting when it was first exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1955.

It would be another twelve years before the first step towards the legalisation of homosexuality in the UK. The Sexual Offences Act of 1967 permitted homosexual acts in privacy between two consenting adults over the age of twenty-one in England and Wales.

Man Kneeling in Grass

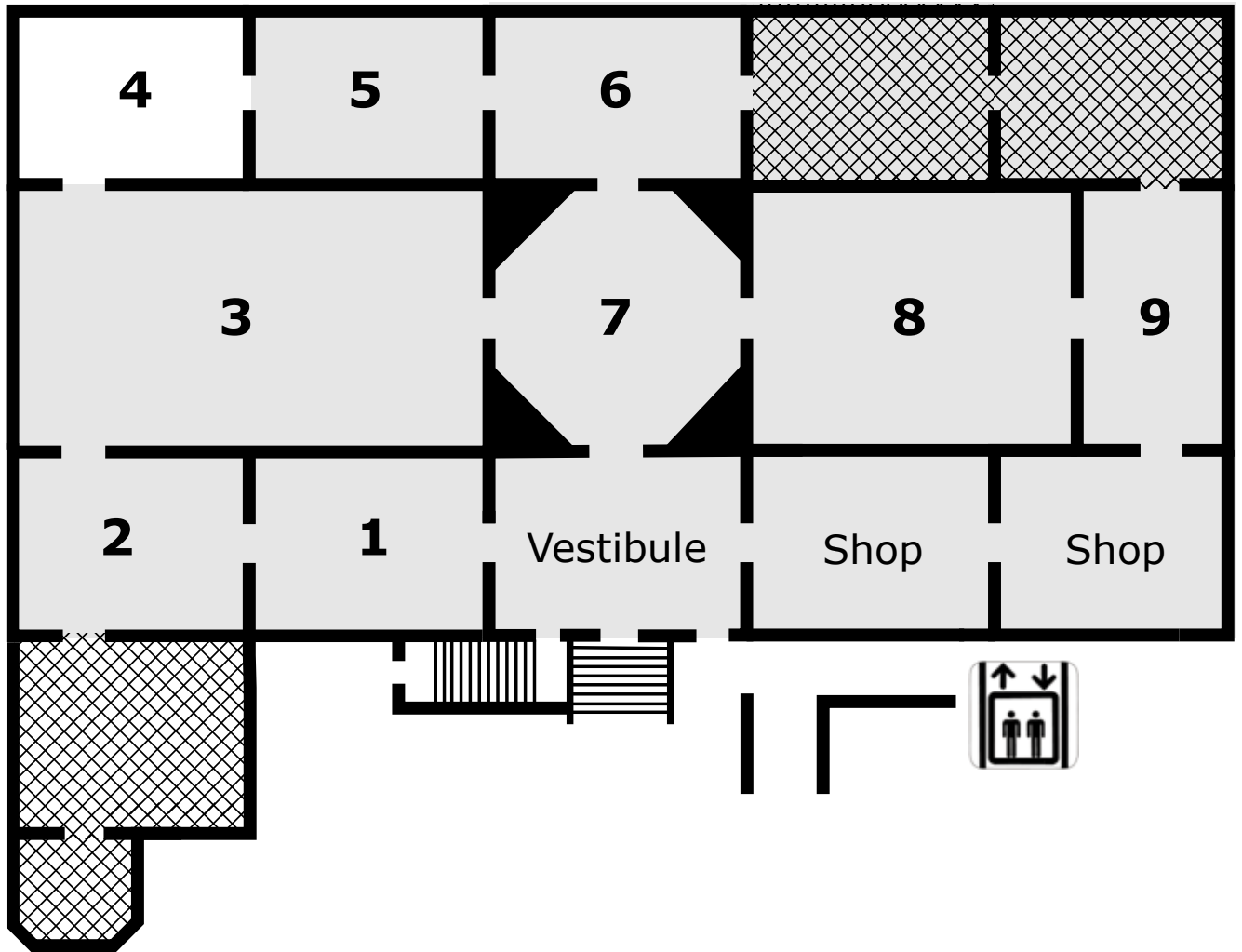


1952

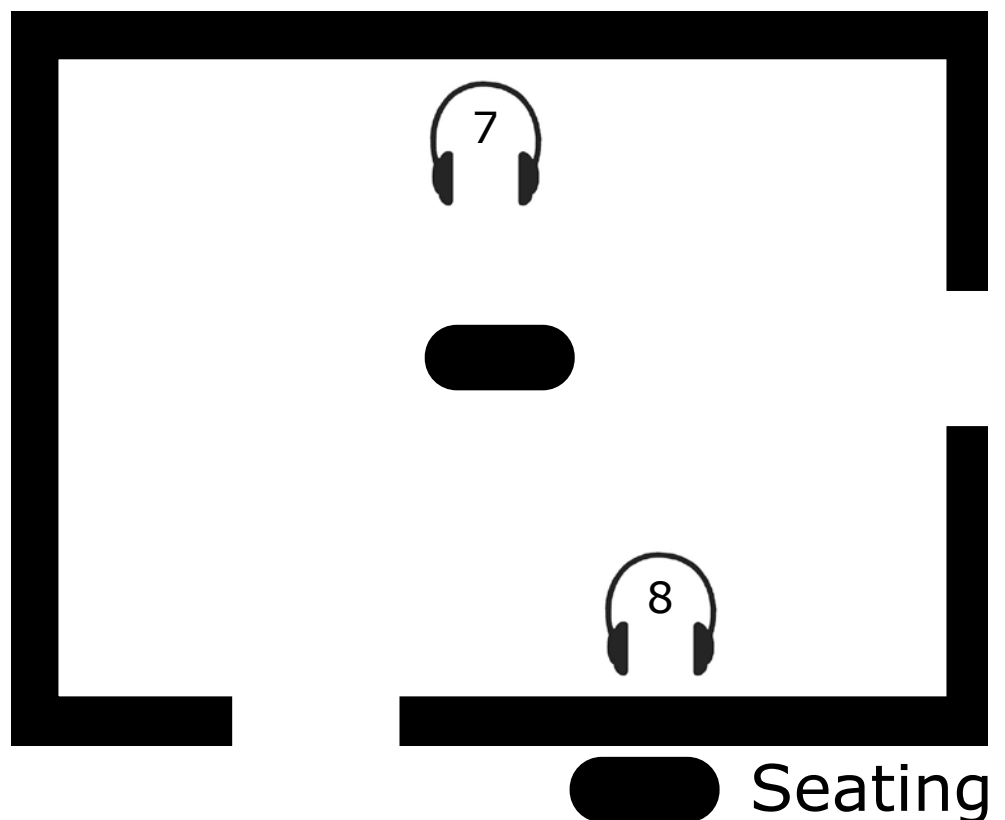
Oil on canvas

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich –
Pinakothek der Moderne. Dauerleihgabe Sammlung Olcese

Crawling on all fours, the central, muscular body is human, but the pose may have partly derived from a photograph of a rhino in Marius Maxwell's 'Stalking Big Game with a Camera in Equatorial Africa' (1924). A ghostly presence in the background suggests a lurking predator, echoing our position as voyeur.



You are in Gallery 4



Audio tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



Head VI, 1949



Study for a Portrait, 1953

Introduction to Gallery 4

The Animal Within

Portraiture was central to Bacon's exploration of the human form. The disparate characters gathered in this gallery underline Bacon's broad definition of the genre.

Some reveal Bacon's love of Old Master painting, such as those derived from his obsessive interest in images of 'Portrait of Pope Innocent X', 1650 by the Spanish court artist Diego Velázquez.

Others capture friends and lovers, bestowing them with distorted, simian features, or represent types such as businessmen. Rather than wielding power, these suited, white-collared men resemble marionettes, their faces peering out from striations of paint that look like the bars of a cage.

In contrast to its conventional use as celebration of a person's prestige, or a record of an accurate likeness, Bacon employs portraiture to scrutinise animality as a human trait. The composure of his 'sitters' is shattered by the escape of a cry, gasp, grimace – or even uncontrolled laughter.

The silent paintings evoke audible expressions in our mind's ear. Bacon's 'portraits' strip away the pretensions of even the highest stations in society, with the implication that status or success – the trappings of civilisation – are merely a thin, fragile veneer distinguishing us from our non-human counterparts.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

'Pope and Chimpanzee'

c. 1960

Oil on canvas

Private collection. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth Collection
Services

In this work, the paint forming the deep-browed face was probably pressed with a corduroy rag, the ridges resembling a giant fingerprint. A photograph from 'Introducing Monkeys' provided the source for the chimpanzee. Bacon's note in the book reads: 'Concentrate entirely on studies of human figure [...] Situate figure in attitudes of apes.'

On the surface the outline of a figure recalls illustrations of Darwin's theory of evolution.

Study for Portrait of P. L. No. 2

1957

Oil on canvas

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich

Study from 'Portrait of Pope Innocent X'

1965

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Head VI



1949

Oil on canvas

Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

'Head VI' is the earliest surviving example of the almost 50 variants of Velázquez's 'Portrait of Pope Innocent X' that Bacon painted, and the final in his series of 'Heads'.

(continued over)


The Pope's vestments are suggested with cursory strokes of paint, while a black curtain seems to carry away the top of the head, transforming Velázquez's Pope from an intelligent, ageing man into a howling figure who elicits pity as much as fear.

Pope I

1951

Oil on canvas

Aberdeen City Council (Aberdeen Archives, Gallery & Museums). Presented by the Contemporary Art Society, 1956


contemporary
art society

Study of the Human Head

1953

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne

1966

Oil on canvas

Tate: Purchased 1966

Isabel Rawsthorne was one of Bacon's closest female friends. A successful artist and stage designer, she shared Bacon's interest in animals, depicting them in works such as 'Baboon and Child', c. 1964 (Tate).

The sense of metamorphosis in Bacon's painting – amid which fragments of the sitter's distinctive features emerge – achieves what Bacon described as 'a sort of moment of magic to coagulate colour and form so that it gets the equivalent of appearance'.

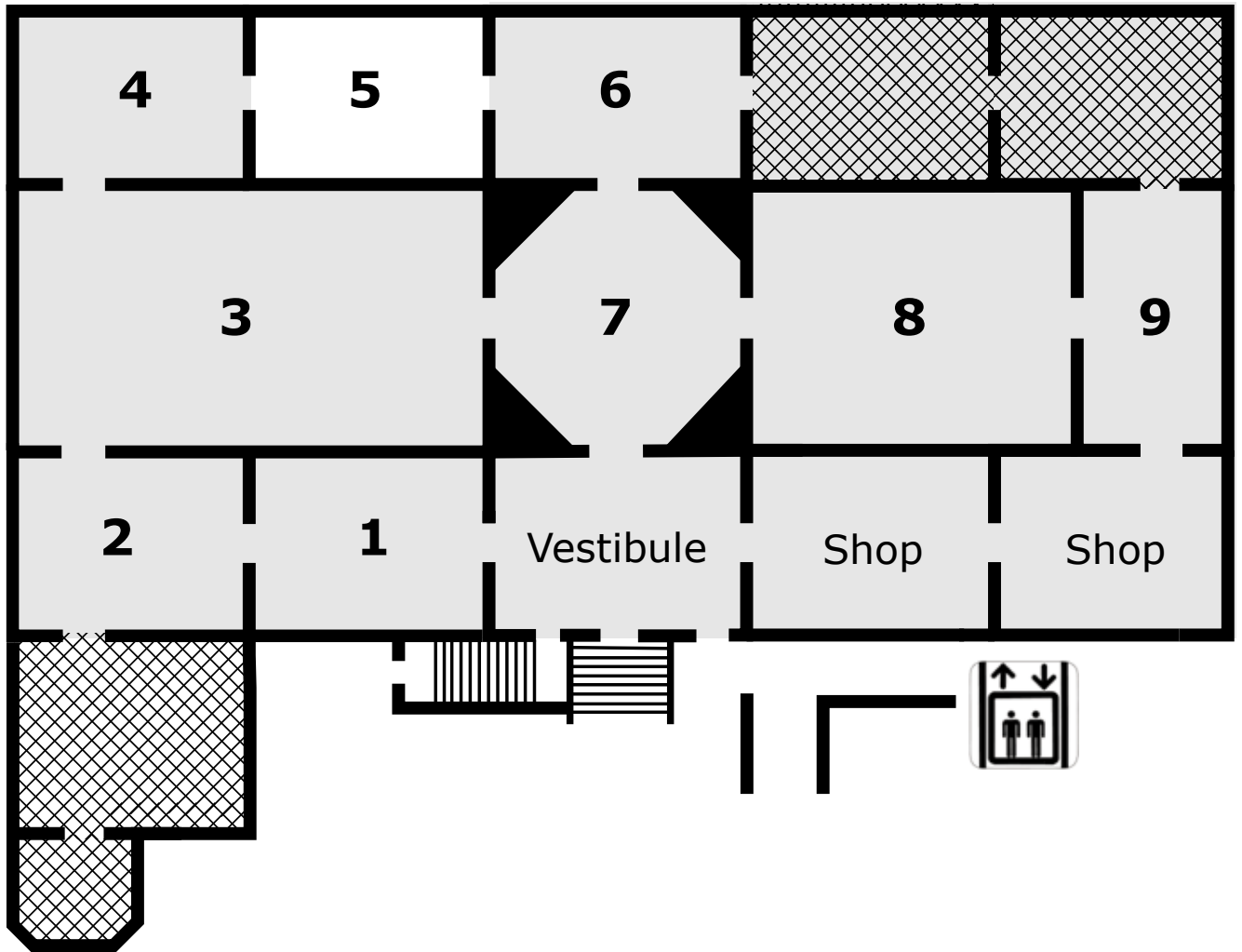
Study for a Portrait



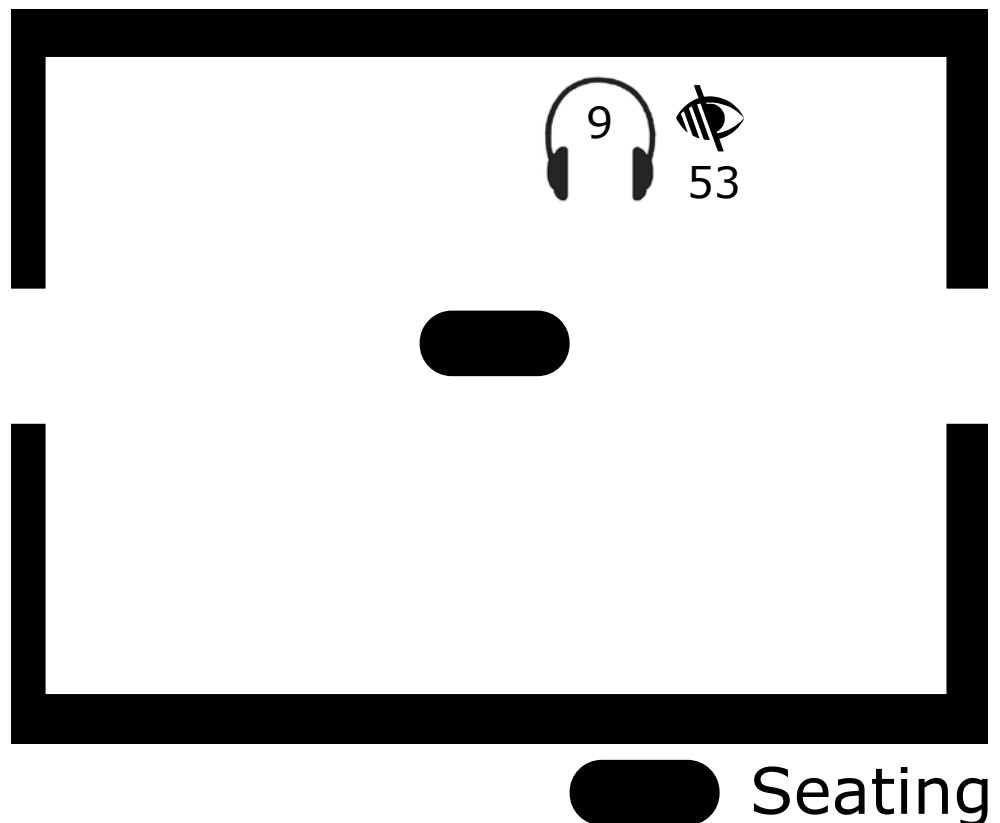
1953

Oil on canvas

Hamburger Kunsthalle, acquired 1966



You are in Gallery 5



Audio tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



53 - Two Figures, 1953

Introduction to Gallery 5

Bodies in Motion

Bacon was fascinated by the translation of movement into static imagery. The discovery of the time-lapse photographs by Eadweard Muybridge had a profound impact on his art. Bacon kept numerous reproductions of Muybridge's 'Human and Animal Locomotion' (first published in 1887) in his studio.

Unlike a single shot that suspends movement, the grids of consecutive frames produce a sense of animation, as well as revealing forms unseen by the human eye.

The myriad subjects recorded by Muybridge acted as a visual dictionary of motifs, which Bacon would fuse with other stimuli. Bacon might take a position from a Muybridge figure, and then refer to sculptures by Michelangelo for the 'ampleness, the grandeur of form', or distort the pose by amalgamating it with a photo from a wildlife magazine.

As he stated: '[I] look at animal photographs all the time. Because animal movement and human movement are continually linked in my imagery of human movement'.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Study of a Nude

1952–53

Oil on canvas

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich

Painting

1950

Oil on canvas

Bought by the Leeds Art Fund, 1951.

Leeds Museums and Galleries

Two Figures



1953

Oil on canvas

Private collection

As this well-thumbed page reveals, Bacon returned repeatedly to particular images. Muybridge's studies of men wrestling provided the foundation for numerous compositions, and a legitimate context in which Bacon could paint erotic subjects prior to the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967.

Paralytic Child Walking on all Fours (from Muybridge)

1961

Oil on canvas

Kunstmuseum Den Haag, donation private collection in 1964

This figure is derived from a late nineteenth-century sequential photograph by Eadweard Muybridge of a disabled child. Muybridge compared different bodies also walking on all fours, photographing a toddler, a young woman and a baboon carrying out the same movements.

Muybridge's experiments were regarded by his contemporaries as objective science, yet the resulting images support hierarchies and taxonomies of bodies that are unacceptable today.

Bacon was drawn to the visual power of bodies in motion. In this ambiguous and unsettling painting, Bacon merges multiple Muybridge frames and distorts the face.

Study for the Nurse in the Film 'Battleship Potemkin'

1957

Oil on canvas

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main

Bacon may have first seen Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film 'Battleship Potemkin' when living in Berlin in 1927, before he became an artist. He spoke of being 'deeply impressed' by the image of a woman screaming as a pram tumbles down a flight of steps.

A still from this scene became one of the main sources for Bacon's own depictions of the human cry, which he reinterpreted in many paintings.

Two Studies from the Human Body

1974–1975

Oil and dry transfer lettering on canvas

Private collection

Muybridge's photographs sometimes reprised well-known classical subjects.

The ape-like gait of the left-hand figure derives its low, swinging arm from the 'discobolus' or discus thrower, poised before the whirling motion of the throw. The body in the background, squatting on its haunches on a structure suggestive of a swing, was partly based on a photograph of a cormorant.

Three Figures and Portrait

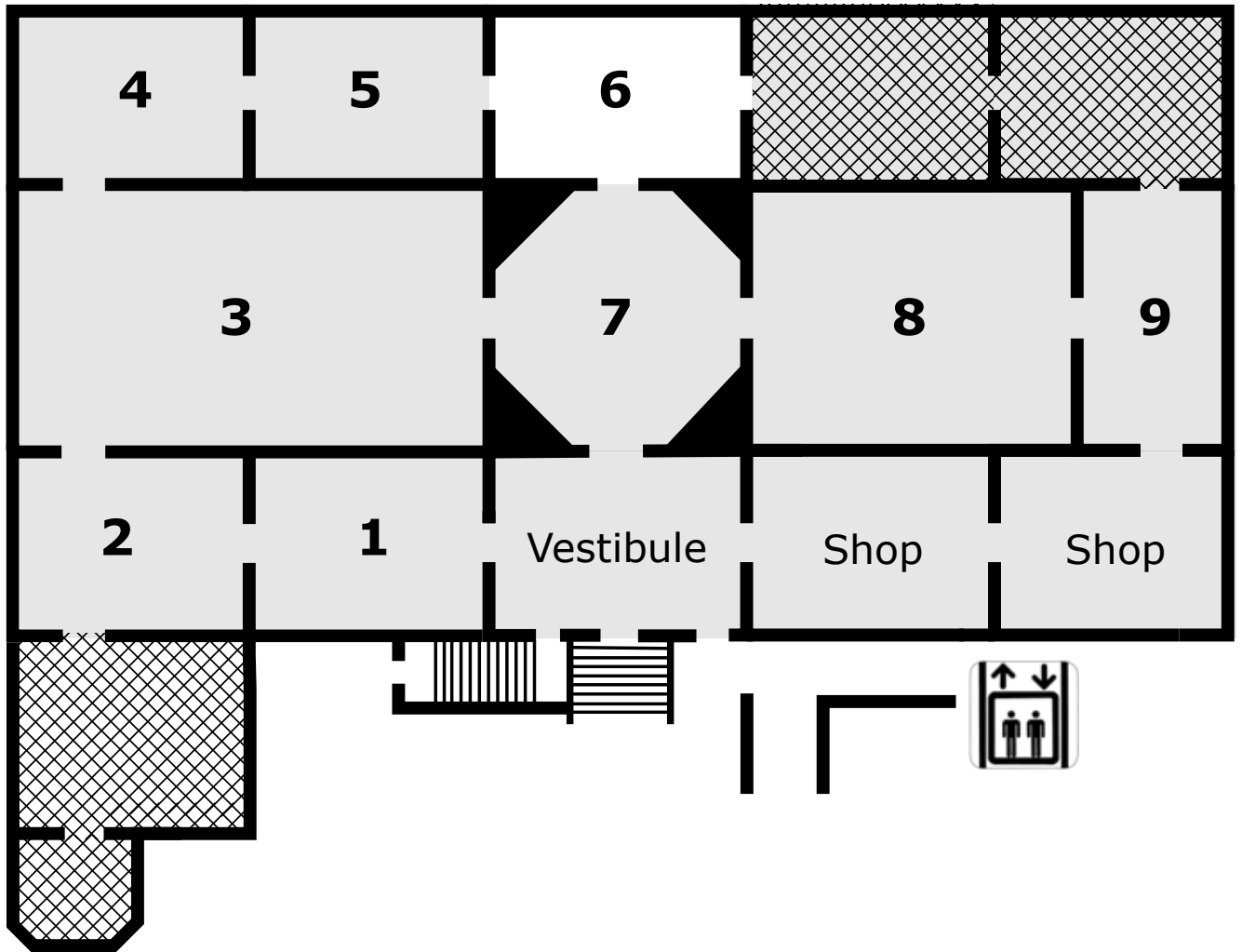
1975

Oil and pastel on canvas

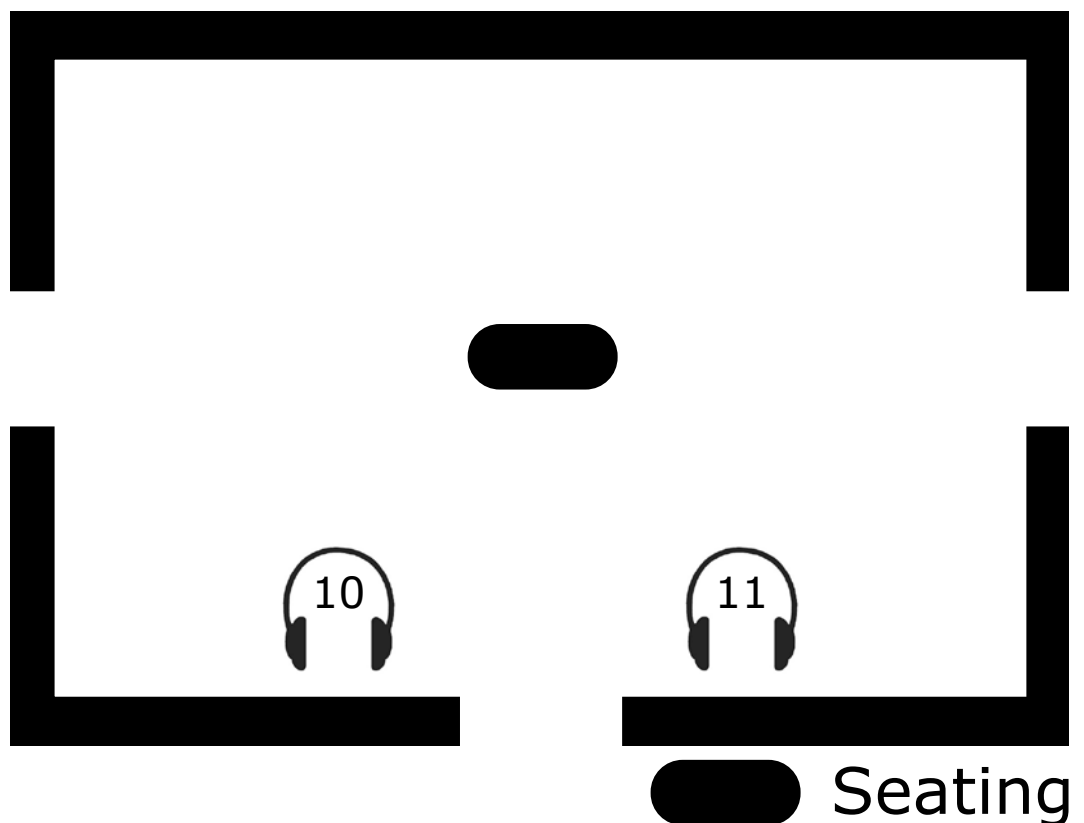
Tate: Purchased 1977

Bacon set himself the challenge of painting multiple figures in a single composition, whilst avoiding a 'story-telling aspect'. The fragmented, human-animal figures that swoop in perpetual motion are observed by a portrait whose features are also in flux.

The circles that bring areas into and out of focus are derived from 'Positioning in Radiography', 1939 which contained photographic instructions on posing patients to enable diagnoses, together with x-rays overlaid with geometric diagrams.



You are in Gallery 6



Audio tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



Portrait of Henrietta Moraes on a Blue Couch, 1965



Henrietta Moraes, 1966

Introduction to Gallery 6

The Animalistic Nude

Bacon's pursuit of the figurative was against the grain. In the wake of movements including Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, painting was predominantly abstract. Bacon dismissed this as purely aesthetic – nor was he interested in realistic 'illustration'.

Instead, Bacon wanted his paintings to have an immediacy that activated the senses ahead of conscious understanding: 'to unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently.'

Bacon's nudes cast aside the tradition of idealisation and desire. Gender is often ambiguous. Unlike the figures of the 1950s, obscure in darkened voids, these bodies burst forth against bright backgrounds; adopting contorted poses; or sprawling across beds.

In the 1970s, Bacon developed ideas for sculptures, but never realised them. His thoughts about plasticity and spatial relationships instead emerged in his paintings. For models, Bacon relied on friends and lovers, such as Henrietta Moraes and George Dyer. Bacon met Dyer, an East End petty criminal, in 1963, and for eight years they negotiated a turbulent, affectionate relationship.

Instead of working from life, Bacon often commissioned photographs from his friend, the photographer John Deakin, that offered a starting point for experimental painting. The distortions enacted on the face or through the capture of movement now convulsed the body, inside and out, into maelstroms of flesh.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Triptych – Studies of the Human Body

1970

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Three ostensibly female figures clamber on a curved white beam as though they were acrobats or contortionists, perhaps inspired by performances Bacon saw in the 1930s.

The rightmost – based on a painting of Narcissus – bears Bacon's own profile. Bacon used round or rail-like structures in single panels and triptychs to suggest a never-ending cycle and here, to underline the interminable nature of carnal appetite.

Portrait of George Dyer Crouching

1966

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Henrietta Moraes



1966

Oil on canvas

Private collection

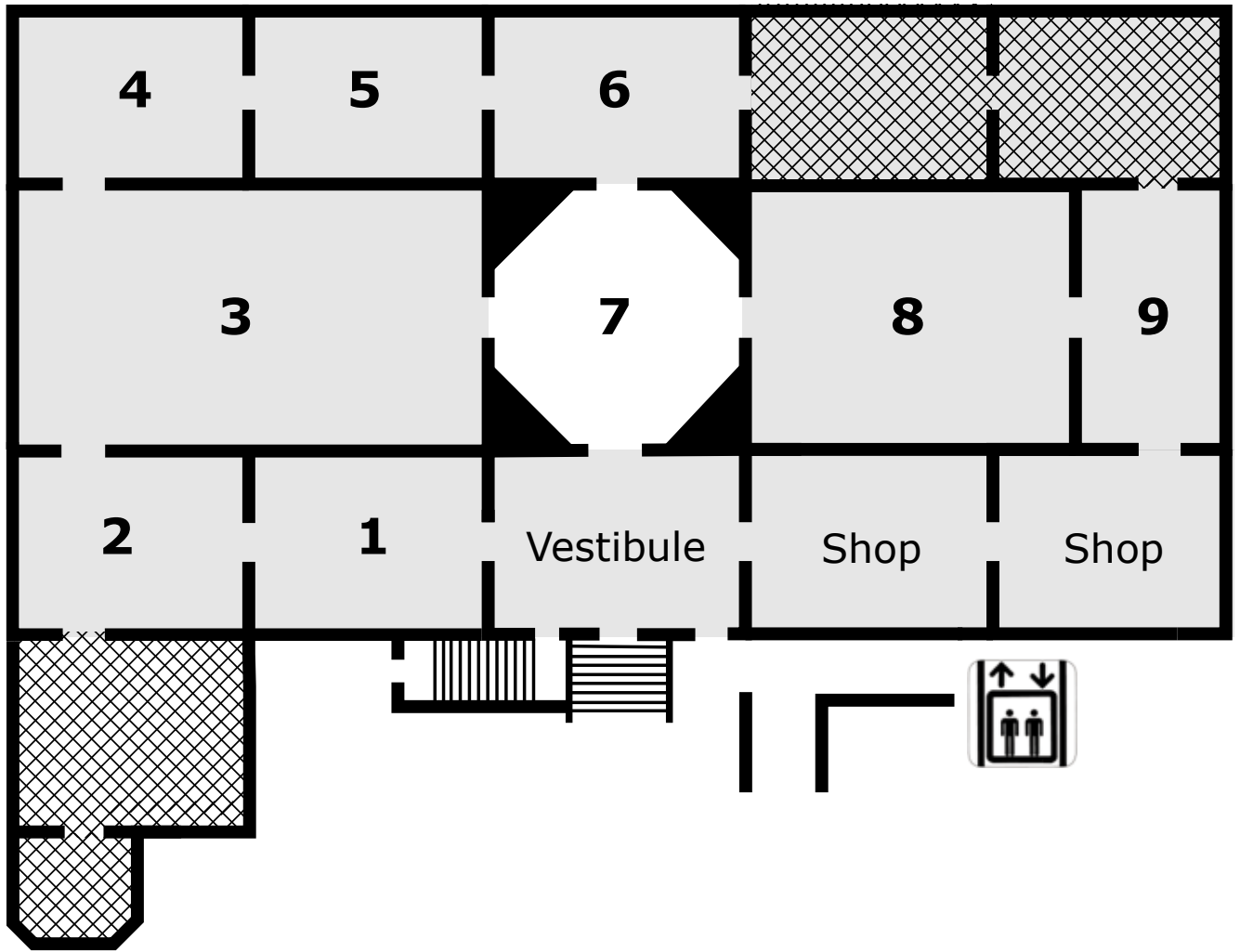
Portrait of Henrietta Moraes on a Blue Couch



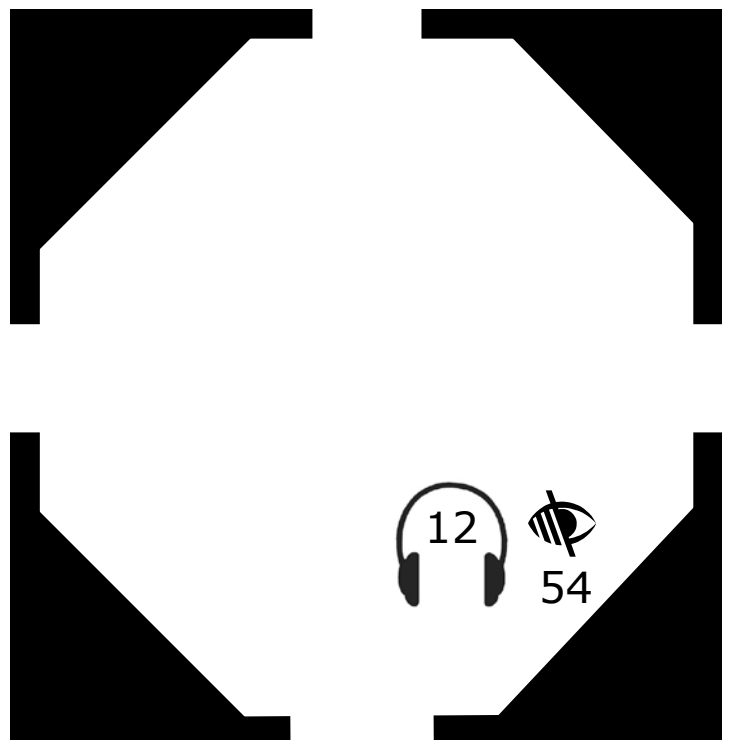
1965

Oil on canvas

Manchester Art Gallery. Purchased with the assistance of the Wilfrid R. Wood Bequest Fund and the Victoria & Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund



You are in Gallery 7



Audio tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



54 - Study for Bullfight No.2, 1969

Introduction to Gallery 7

The Bullfight

'Bullfighting is like boxing – a marvellous aperitif to sex.'

Typical of Bacon's provocative humour, his words sum up the close links between violence, voyeurism and eroticism. Bacon believed that the controversial tradition exposed inconsistent attitudes towards animals: he found it illogical that people who condemned bullfighting as cruel might still wear furs and feathers.

Three versions of this painting exist today, echoing the three 'tercios' or stages of the bullfight. If Bacon initially planned them as a triptych, he completed them as individual works. The pictures were dispersed during his lifetime; their presence here is the first time they have been displayed together.

As well as attending 'a few' bullfights, Bacon owned numerous postcards and books, in which photographs captured the dance-like motion of the fight. Bacon interpreted contours and shapes as gestural sweeps of paint. The swirling mass merges matador, cape and bull, challenging a clear distinction between human and animal.

The dynamism is intensified by a brightly coloured, imagined arena that is artificially small compared to the protagonists.

In two paintings, a strange, concave screen reveals a feverish crowd, who mirror our status as onlookers. Above, a red banner with hints of an eagle recalls the imagery of the Nazi dictatorship.

The paintings raise questions about the disturbing connections between spectacle, excitement, terror and power, and an individual's capacity to become lost in an anonymous mob or herd mentality.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Study for Bullfight No. 2



1969

Oil on canvas

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyons

Study for Bullfight No. 1

1969

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Second Version of Study for Bullfight No. 1

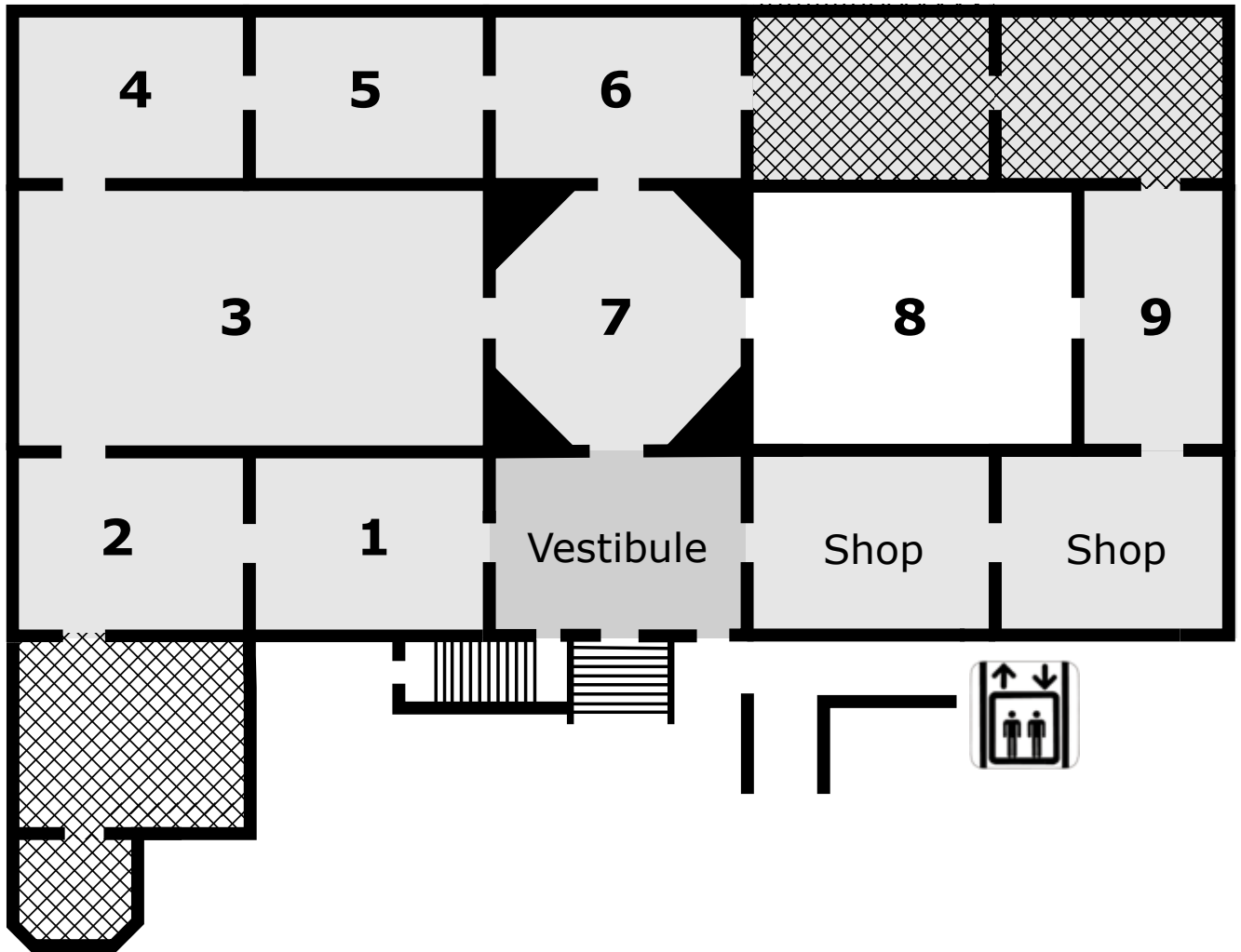
1969

Oil on canvas

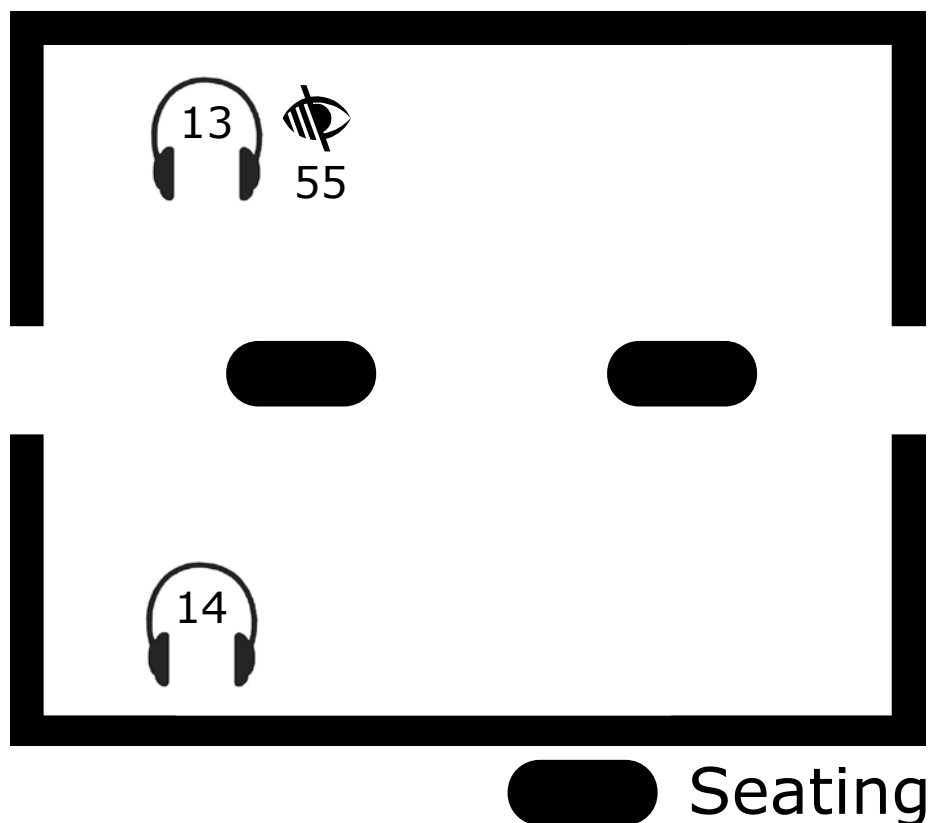
Private collection

Lucien Freud described Bacon's approach as 'calculated recklessness'. Here, a brush loaded with white paint was hurled at the canvas. The spontaneous action leaves a trace that evokes both the spatial whorls of the cape and the ejaculation of sperm.

Later the 'accidental' marks were built up with layers of paint, and a black 'trompe-l'oeil' shadow added. A parallel exists between the performance of the matador and the painter at work – both entail choreography, instinct, and an appetite for risk.



You are in Gallery 8



Audio tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



55 - Triptych Inspired by the
'Oresteia' of Aeschylus, 1981



Triptych August 1972, 1972

Introduction to Gallery 8

Triptychs

Bacon had used the triptych structure as early as 1944, and sometimes made small-format triptych portraits to represent different angles of the same sitter.

From the 1960s the large-scale triptych became increasingly important to Bacon, enabling complex compositions with multiple figures that could address major themes, whilst avoiding a narrative scene that would fall into the trap of 'illustration'.

The title of 'Three Figures in a Room', 1964 points to the temporal ambiguity of the triptych, as each panel depicts the same sitter, with independent, yet linked impressions acting at once. Bacon exploited this simultaneity in order to address his most deep-rooted subjects: mortality and the futility of life.

Speaking to the writer and artist, Peter Beard, whose photographs of animals Bacon kept in his studio, Bacon said: 'Death is the one absolute certainty. Artists know that they can't defeat it, but I think that most artists are very aware of their annihilation – it follows them around like their shadow.'

Bacon's determination to avoid narrative seems at odds with his interest in mythological stories. Yet they played a central role in triggering his imagination and as frameworks 'to make images of the sensations' he felt when reading.

The 'Oresteia', a trilogy of plays by the Ancient Greek writer Aeschylus was a key inspiration. The drama explores themes of guilt and vengeance represented by 'the furies' – female goddesses that appear in Bacon's paintings as hybrid human-animal forms. Bacon was haunted by the line 'the reek of human blood smiles out at me', and the vivid aesthetic qualities of blood are pronounced in many triptychs of the 1980s.

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Triptych Inspired by the 'Oresteia' of Aeschylus



1981

Oil on canvas

Private collection

The 'fury' (a creature of vengeance in the 'Oresteia' story) on the left derives from a photograph of a diving pelican.

The truncated central figure takes the distortion of Bacon's nudes to its most extreme: below a confusion of buttocks and breasts a collapsing spine leads to a head, overlayed on a dark womb-like oval.

Second Version of Triptych 1944

1988

Oil and acrylic on canvas

Tate: Presented by the artist 1991

As the title suggests, this is a reprisal of Bacon's first triptych. Bacon returns to the biomorphic 'furies', increasing the scale and replacing the orange background with a vivid, blood-red hue.

Triptych August 1972

1972

Oil and sand on canvas

Tate: Purchased 1980

In both triptychs on this wall, Bacon's lover George Dyer appears in all three panels. In 1971, on the eve of a major retrospective of Bacon's work in Paris, George Dyer died following an overdose. Bacon regarded his death as suicide.

He attempted to exorcise the tremendous loss and guilt he felt in a series known as the 'black' triptychs, of which this is one. The distortion that previously leant figures a raw, carnal animality gives way to an elegiac disintegration, with the body melting into fleshy, haunting shadows.

Three Figures in a Room

1964

Oil on canvas

Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée national d'art moderne /
Centre de création industrielle

A blank, circular platform becomes a metaphorical 'room' to stage the repetitive cycles of daily existence: ingestion, sex, and excretion are suggested by a spinning figure on a bar stool, a figure on the couch and a seated figure on a toilet. The model is George Dyer, Bacon's lover, rendered with dynamic passages of paint that contrast with the static setting to suggest an acceleration of the passage of time.



Audio tour



Main commentary



Descriptive commentary



Triptych, 1987



56 - Study of a Bull, 1991

Introduction to Gallery 9

After the Bullfight

The bullfight paintings of 1969 encapsulated Bacon's meditations on the blurring of man and beast. Nearly two decades later, he made his only triptych on the subject.

Here, the excitement is over, leaving behind the wounds of the matador, the bowed head and bloodied horns of the bull, with a spectral 'fury' hovering above.

When evoking the aftermath of the bullfight, Bacon may have had in mind Federico García Lorca's 1935 poem 'Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías', with its repeated refrain 'At five in the afternoon', which readers of the poem discover is the time of day that the young bullfighter dies.

Bacon was convinced that there 'is an area of the nervous system to which the texture of paint communicates more violently than anything else'. His fascination with the physicality of our bodies and the unmoderated behaviour of animals were touchstones for his art.

Beginning with the hybrid creatures of the 1940s and animal studies of the 1950s, these interests ultimately found expression in his powerful paintings of the human form, which continue to resonate in new ways as generations pass.

An animal became the subject of Bacon's final painting, 'Study of a Bull'. The use of dust as a medium offers a potent cipher for mortality, although for Bacon it represented permanence too: 'Well, dust seems to be eternal – seems to be the one thing that lasts forever.'

List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Triptych



1987

Oil, pastel and aerosol paint on canvas

Private collection

Study of a Bull



56

1991

Oil, aerosol paint and dust on canvas

Private collection

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