

VAN GOGH NEVER PAINTED SUNFLOWERS

A STORY BY

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Origins

This sprang to life after speculating on Van Gogh's reaction if he could have seen today's prices for his paintings. Would investors have paid this much if he had painted a bowl of petunias? What would you give to be able to go back in time to buy a masterpiece straight off the artist's easel?

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As readers will know, this magazine has been taking part in the Observer project with several universities and research institutes. The head of the project, famous scientist and theorist Prof. Wonglas, discoverer of the equally famous equation $t=ec^3$ (time equals energy times the speed of light cubed), has announced the temporary closure of the project because of unforeseen accidents.

This magazine was involved in the project because we believed that ordinary people should have the opportunity to be involved in time travel. The project was set up to allow observer historians and sociologists to watch historical events unfold and develop at firsthand. We thought that it would benefit a wider audience if volunteers from our readership could also participate. The fifteen selected were subjected

to psychological and ethical tests designed to ensure that they were both able to survive the shock of seeing events long before they were born, and free from temptation to interfere. Travel to the future was specifically excluded from the Observer project.

The events that led us to withdraw prove that no matter how stringent the tests, there is always a bad apple who can get through. After some debate with project scientists, we decided that it is in the public interest for us to reveal the nature of the accidents. We support fully all moves to regulate and licence this new technology, for the sake of a stable present, preservation of the past, and prevent the exploitation of the future. The thought of national politicians manipulating the past to eliminate rivals, or to ruin unfriendly nations by changing their history, is too horrible

to contemplate.

We had hoped to report participants' first hand experience of the French Revolution, Lindberg's arrival in Paris, the fall of the Berlin Wall, of standing behind Renoir and other great artists while they create great works of art. We had hoped to conduct parties of school children to historical events so they could experience them as part of their education.

Such were the hopes. Perhaps it was the portability of the newer time skippers that proved too much of a temptation for some of our volunteers. It was that very portability that attracted us. The time skippers are carried in a back pack, the light weight of the fusion energy pack effectively limiting their range to two hundred years. We had asked the project team to remove the future/past direction switch and fix it to past only. (You return by pressing the reset switch, the unit always remembers the time it came from.) We found out too late that they had merely removed the external button, the switch was still present inside the unit, a fact discovered by more than one volunteer. We foolishly

allowed volunteers to take units home, without the energy units, to try them for comfort and to get used to wearing them.

We report these accidents without comment, you can judge for yourselves how the stupidity of the few has spoiled a great pleasure for the many. We identify the volunteers with pseudonyms such as NumOne, NumTwo, and so on.

NumOne was deeply unhappy. The major cause being a marriage that had gone wrong and his lack of courage in seeking to end it. He, like the others, found that packs of domestic fusion batteries could power the time skipper. (The design has since been changed to work only from a special unit.) He apparently went back to his wedding day and tried to get into the church to stop the ceremony. Members of the bride's party, thinking him drunk because of his shouting and generally abusive manner, stopped him and a scuffle broke out. Realising that he was outnumbered, he alternately jumped back and forth between the present and the wedding day until there were several versions of himself standing outside the church. The astonished

defenders, seeing several copies of the same man trying to get into the church, assumed that some weird practical joke was in progress and, not having a sense of humour, attacked the multiple versions of the initial drunk until the various copies popped out of existence. He wasn't recognised at the time, not until his thirtieth wedding anniversary when one of his wife's relatives, who hadn't seen the couple since the day of the marriage, recognised him as the man at the church door thirty years before.

His children are now prosecuting him for attempted murder, because if he had succeeded in preventing the marriage they would have popped out of existence. No marriage, no children. Lawyers are contemplating many years of fruitful and lucrative discourse in court over the question of whether causing someone not to have existed in the first place could count as murder. It promises to be as intractable as the euthanasia and clone slave debates.

NumTwo was a whole array of deceits and false premises. He had obviously prepared the ground thoroughly, and bribed one of the members of

the selection committee to ensure his place on the project. He wasn't a plumber at all. He was a commodity broker with a practice on Wall Street. You can see what is coming, of course. True to form he fixed the future/past switch, went forward one year and compiled a record of the day to day movements of every commodity. He had already put together a syndicate of investors to make 'the killing of the century'. The syndicate had hundreds of millions of dollars at its disposal, and armed with NumTwo's commodity prices for the year ahead started its play. Under normal circumstances, the sums involved would have been hidden by daily sales volumes and hence virtually invisible to the market at large. On the day they started their play, the markets were in a particularly nervous state, rocked by sets of bad economic indicators, and waiting for a signal, any signal, to give the direction of the next major movement.

NumTwo's syndicate, greed and invincibility their twin figure heads, needed vast sums of ready money to pile into the commodity markets. The money has to come from somewhere, and most

of it was in stocks and shares. Imagine the shock when major sell orders came simultaneously from several well known investors and investment managers. Although small by comparison to the size of the market as a whole, the orders were seen as the signal the market was waiting for. The quality of the sellers told the market that 'someone knows something'. Dealers involved with the sell orders decided to do their other clients a favour by selling before news got out, and sold their portfolios. Other dealers on the Street, seeing their rivals selling hard and the prices edging down, decided to sell out too. Investors listening to the morning news heard the size of the downturn on the market and also decided to sell out. The rest, as they say, is history. A classic panic ensued. In these days of instant communications, every investor throughout the world was selling at the push of a button everything they had on every exchange in every corner of the globe. NumTwo and several members of his syndicate have since disappeared.

So what went wrong? The future that NumTwo

saw was one that had not been affected by someone selling everything at a nervous and sensitive stage of the market. The future we lived through these last few weeks didn't come into being until they actually issued their sell orders. Which gives a victim of one of our other delinquent volunteers a problem.

NumThree's case is one of plain stupidity. He took the time skipper home, and decided to show his children how it worked. He too found out how to fix the future/past switch, and powered it with batteries he took out of his electric dog walker. He took his children on several short jaunts into both future and past. Next day, his children took the backpack into school, fixed several more batteries to the unit, broke the reset button and somehow persuaded a teacher to try it on. Someone pressed the 'go' button and the teacher hasn't been seen since. No child can remember any of the settings, and the family of the teacher are suing NumThree for negligence, financial support until the teacher returns (if he returns), and all manner of other things thought of by their lawyer. Even if we knew how far into

Van Gogh Never Painted Sunflowers

the future the teacher had been sent, we don't actually know which future, for the incident happened at precisely the time NumTwo's financial schemes were rolling, when an infinity of futures were shuffling into possibility.

NumFour is a tragic case that ended happily. Her paternal grandparents parted after the birth of her father because of some family tragedy. She wanted to go back to heal the split in the family before it happened. She didn't realise it but the batteries she used for her time skipper were almost flat, she undershot the target time, and nothing happened when she pressed reset. She was stranded in a time that did not have sufficiently powerful batteries to power her return.

Our office junior suggested that what she would do in her place would be to place an advertisement in the personal ads section of our magazine asking for rescue. It was such a good idea that we gave her access to all two hundred and thirteen years of back copies of our magazine. After several days she came out with an advert from an issue forty-two years ago. The

advert was unmistakable: "Skipper broke, Lucy Watkins wants to go home." Ambiguous enough not to give any clues that might upset the past, but plain enough to those that knew what it meant. Having the date of the issue, we sent our office junior and a project scientist to rescue the lady with a spare skipper. They waited outside the personal ads office for several days, and met her, after she had placed the advert of course. The lady has learned her lesson and resigned from the project before we decided to cancel it.

NumFive was another case of plain greed and stupidity, but one that has resulted in a unique argument among art historians. NumFive, like all the others, figured that a battery is a battery and any kind would power his skipper. We didn't hear about his escapade until our art correspondent told us of a fascinating fraud that had surfaced. It seems that someone had turned up with a Van Gogh forgery so brilliantly executed that it would easily have been mistaken for the genuine article. It was a painting of sunflowers. It had been brought in for auction and was subjected to the usual tests. It passed on everything. Original

Van Gogh Never Painted Sunflowers

paint materials, original canvas and frame types, stylistically and actually a genuine Van Gogh but for one thing only. It was just a few weeks old. The seller told them it had been in his family all the time and kept clean. Nobody believed him, but the experts were fascinated that a forger could be so thorough and wanted to employ him as a restorer.

NumFive kept insisting that it was the genuine article, so the police were called. They decided that the thing was so obviously a forgery that nobody in their right mind would fall for it, so they let him go. The seller tried touting the thing around other auction houses and galleries. By this time everyone had heard the story, and wanted to see the forgery. One gallery offered to show it in a forthcoming exhibition of famous fakes, but the seller refused, still insisting it was genuine. NumFive asked an authenticator to look over the work. He gave a report that enthused over the painter's attention to detail, but, like the rest, declared it to be an obvious but brilliant fraud.

Word had got to our art correspondent, who went

to see the painting for herself. She was intrigued both by the earnest nature of the painting's owner, and the actual style. It was the most remarkable pastiche she had ever seen. She told our science editor about it in our cafeteria. She had met all the volunteers and was suspicious, asking the art correspondent for a description of the owner of the Van Gogh forgery. They both went down to see the owner of the painting. There they found a dismayed and disgruntled NumFive. He said he wasn't an art lover but why shouldn't he make some real money out of it like all those rich people? He told them that he had skipped back in time to buy a genuine Van Gogh from the man himself, and at a fraction of their cost today, thus making him, NumFive, a very rich man. It had been a genuine Van Gogh after all, he even had a receipt for it somewhere.

When we asked him where the painting was, he replied that he was so angry with his treatment by the auction houses that he skipped back in time again with the painting. He told Van Gogh that he wanted his money back because nobody where he came from wanted rubbish like that.

Van Gogh Never Painted Sunflowers

Van Gogh told him he couldn't have his money back because he had just bought a gun, and proceeded to blow holes in every sunflower painting he had. Moreover, he said he'd never paint another sunflower for the rest of his life. NumFive lost his temper and said he didn't care if Van Gogh never painted any kind of painting again, but he still wanted his money back. Van Gogh, having emptied the gun into the sunflowers, picked up a knife and came at NumFive, saying he didn't have any money, how about a piece of his ear? NumFive, thinking that Van Gogh was about to attack him with the knife, pressed reset on his skipper and popped back into our own time. He escaped just in time, leaving a very angry and bewildered Dutchman with a knife in his hand wondering what the hell had happened.

The debate still rages among art historians for and against the idea of going back in time to buy masterpieces from the very artists themselves. If artists' paintings disappeared hundreds of years into the future, their work wouldn't have been around in the intervening hundreds of years.

They wouldn't, therefore, have gained the reputation of being major enough artists for the expense of skipping back in time to buy the paintings in the first place. This is nothing to the debate raging over what Van Gogh's sunflower paintings looked like, for, as we now know, he destroyed them all after NumFive's visits, and only painted pots of petunias for his still life subjects.

NumFive's story doesn't end there though. He had a twinge of conscience about saying nasty things about the Dutchman's paintings, and decided to take back some magazine cuttings to show how valuable the work would become. When he arrived, he found that the Dutchman had moved north, so skipped back and forth to find out where he was living. Locating Van Gogh some way out of Paris, he skipped back to the very field the Dutchman would be working in. He popped back just a few feet in front of the Dutchman as he painted. Van Gogh was furious, lifted his gun and fired just as NumFive pressed reset and winked out of existence again. The rest, as they say, is history.

We now have an interesting problem. As a result of NumTwo's market manipulations bringing about a future that wouldn't have otherwise existed, legislators throughout the world have made it a capital offence for anyone to change the past in any way whatsoever. We cannot go back to prevent any of our volunteers from setting off without changing the past, which is now the past of our current present. We can't change any of the events described above. If we did, we'd be in prison waiting for that fatal injection.

Out of fifteen volunteers we had five delinquents, inadvertently or otherwise, trying to change the past or affect the future. We now realise that this is a dangerous power to be left in the hands of the untrained individual and therefore unreservedly support all moves to control and regulate time skippers in all their forms.

Our lawyers have asked us to state that we cannot take any responsibility, nor do we admit to any liability, for changing supposed futures or imagined pasts.