
FIGURE STUDIES

DAVID MICHALEK

EXPERIENCE 15

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PRESS RELEASE

From 5 October 2012 to 6 January 2013, Le Laboratoire presents its 15th experiment: *Figure Studies* by American artist David Michalek. The work applies the technology of high-speed HD video toward capturing scenes and subject matter reminiscent of the famous Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey photo-studies of human movement. Both of these bodies of work, which constitute some of the greatest achievements of 19th century photography, are also considered early progenitors of cinema.

***Figure Studies* was developed with the collaboration of Harvard biologist, Dan Lieberman.**

Figure Studies builds on a past work of Michalek's from 2007, *Slow Dancing*. The core premise of that project was quite simple: record a small slice of time (a mere five seconds of dancing) at extremely high frame rates (3000 frames per second), so that when played back in real time, the seconds would stretch to a glacially-paced ten minutes. *Slow Dancing* has now been shown in 17 international cities, both as an indoor installation and out-of-doors work of public art (often on a large scale).

Figure Studies applies a similar methodology to a much broader range of human subjects: specialized bodies shaped by athletics, dancing, and physical labor, as well as non-specialized bodies. Within each group, there is a broad range of ages and body-types as well as ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Each subject is seen executing a particular movement sequence or concept that was arrived at through both artistic as well as scientific considerations -- the latter in conjunction with Harvard Biologist, Dr. Dan Lieberman. He helped to define a variety of biomechanical categories that were explored in project rehearsals; he also advised on strategies for displaying and evoking those categories. *Figure Studies* premiered at Summerhall in the Edinburgh Festival co-commissioned by the Demarco European Art Foundation.

Work by both Muybridge and Marey provided rough starting points, which were then redefined or reconsidered during rehearsal. Other movements were arrived at through interviews with the subjects (which sometimes revealed a present or past physical practice), as well as improvisation. In the end, a single movement idea was crystallized into five-second sequence and then recorded during film production. The resulting films, which typically feature subjects without clothing, are roughly ten minutes in length.

Figure Studies is displayed on several large projecting screens. The visitor discovers the captivating force of gestures decomposed by slow motion, which places them somewhere between phantasmagoria and scientific analysis, inviting the gaze to settle in a space where time is suspended.

BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID MICHALEK



David Michalek is an artist who takes the concept and techniques of portraiture as the starting points for the creation of his works, on both a large and small-scale, in a range of mediums. His focus over the past ten years has been closely tied to his interest in relational aesthetics—specifically using performative and interactive techniques—storytelling, dialogue, movement—relying on the input and responses of others— subjects, collaborators, and audience—as integral to both the creation and the experience of his art. Early in his career, he worked as assistant to noted photographer Herb Ritts. In 1991, he began his professional photographic career and worked regularly as a portrait artist for publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *Interview*, and *Vogue*. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Michalek began experimenting with performance and installation, and developing large-scale, multi-dimensional projects. He has collaborated with director Peter Sellars on two staged works: *Kafka Fragments* and *St. François d' Assise*. Other film and video work for theater includes collaborations with *The Tallis Scholars*; *John Malpede* and *L.A.P.D.*; and with the *Brooklyn Philharmonic* in a project for *The Brooklyn Museum's "Music Off the Walls"* series. Michalek's installations, mixed-media projects and public art have been shown nationally and internationally, including at *Lincoln Center*, *Brooklyn Museum*, *LA Music Center*, *Paris Opera Bastille*, *Venice Biennale*, *Sadler's Wells*, *Luminato Festival*, *Jacob's Pillow*, *Yale University*, and *The Kitchen*. He is a visiting faculty member at *Yale Divinity School*, where he lectures on religion and the arts. David Michalek lives in New York with his wife *Wendy Whelan*, principal dancer of *New York City Ballet*.

For more information :
www.davidmichalek.net

CONVERSATION BETWEEN DAVID MICHALEK AND DAVID EDWARDS, FOUNDER OF LE LABORATOIRE

David Edwards : You explained to me this summer in New York that a radical transformation occurs when observing human body motions when the movement is slowed through film, and that, somehow, a kind of aesthetic optimum occurs in the vicinity of 3000 frames per second, where your work is filmed. Can you speak to this?

David Michalek : In 2006, I began developing the concept and technique for a project called *Slow Dancing* (a work very similar in kind to *Figure Studies*). Even before I got my hands on a high-speed camera, I had a mental image of a certain degree of slowness that I was hoping to achieve for this work as well as some thoughts on how to get there. Initial experimentation with a low-grade, high-speed camera produced some results that were quite different than that which I had anticipated. Firstly, the capture rate that was required to transform human movement into the super-fluid slowness that I had been imagining was very nearly 3000 frames per second (much beyond the 300 fps that I had been expecting to work with). Secondly, the slice of human movement necessary to produce a ten-minute film at that frame-rate seemed ridiculously brief: a mere five seconds, which didn't seem a long enough period of time to adequately allow a dancer to actually...dance. In any event, I stuck to it and would eventually ask each invited dancer to design a sequence of exactly five seconds that had a beginning, middle and end. That formula proved remarkably successful and even highlighted something extraordinary about great dancers: the degree to which every limb, at every millisecond, appears activated by a high degree of "mindfulness" or instinctive control.

Subjectively speaking, I do think there is something of an "aesthetic optimum" that is achieved at this frame-rate, at least with regard to recording the range of human movement that we call dance, and the resulting slowness has an affective quality which impacts people in rather profound ways. When viewers initially confront the work, they are sometimes a little irritated at the degree of slowness. But if they stay with it long enough, the irritation often subsides and transforms into a mesmeric attention that can last for quite lengthy periods and even cause the viewer to lose their sense of time passing. This effect seems to be heightened when the work is projected on a large scale. The reason, I think, is that the viewer is presented with an enhanced opportunity to move around and within the enlarged image and find interest in its smaller parts.

It's my belief that there is more to this mesmeric attention than pure aesthetic experience (one that is strictly feeling based), and that the work is actually touching something that is alive within each viewer – an insight and a knowledge with regard to their own bodies that is at once utilitarian and spiritual, functional and significant, physical and metaphysical (define that as you will).



David Edwards : Your film work is not only inspired by scientific dialog, but also requires immense technical support. Is there anything that you learn about artistic practice itself in this complex collaboration? Can you briefly the technical aspects of realization of *Figure Studies*?

David Michalek : The films in *Figure Studies* may not require as much technical support as many feature films, but given the narrow scope of the subject matter (the single human figure against a black field), it may be surprising to know how much specialized help is required. One example: high-speed photography needs an unusual amount of light and a technician who knows how to get the most out of the available lighting (and available electricity) is crucial. Most essential, however, is the project technical director, Manu Sawkar. Manu is present during production to make certain that all of the various technical elements are integrating and that the footage we're generating on set is on the right track. But the bulk of his work begins after the footage has been captured. At this point he begins a post-production finishing series of about ten steps—each one requiring that the files be manipulated in some way using dedicated hardware and software. The process, which can be maddening, inevitably calls on Manu's training as a computer scientist to trouble shoot and optimize.

I tend not to separate artistic practice from technical know-how – to me they are both requiring of and related to the true meaning of technology: technique + knowledge (Plato would not have seen any difference between the computer scientist thrilled by the creation of a “beautiful software” and the artist thrilled by their formal vision). In this sense, the artist is not a special kind of person, but every person (at least in potential) a special kind of artist. As I see it, art involves an added layer of depth and contemplation in regard to one's field of endeavor. What is implied by contemplation is raising one's level of reference from the empirical to the more ideal, and from mere observation to vision. Vision or what Augustine calls ingenium corresponds to the Sanskrit “Inner Controller,” the immanent Spirit thought of equally as artistic, moral, and speculative consciousness. With that said, I try to surround myself with artists from whatever field that my work requires.

David Edwards : We met at Harvard University during your exhibition on campus of some of your extremely successful *Slow Dancing* works. At the time you expressed a fascination with aesthetic exploration of slow movements of the human body that provoke scientific curiosity as well. In preparing your new *Figure Studies* work for Le Laboratoire, you had several discussions with university scientists, including the medical scientist Dan Lieberman. What did you learn from these interactions, and how did they help shape this new work?

David Michalek : During initial talks with Dan Lieberman, it became clear that the extremely high-quality HD footage that I typically produce would not be of any added value to him in a laboratory context and, additionally, that the degree of slowness which is characteristic of this work may or may not be useful to him in motion analysis (the correct degree of slowness being much dependant upon the type of questions being asked).



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Dan recommended breaking up the movements to be filmed into several broad categories (i.e. throwing, lifting, carrying, climbing, walking, running, and jumping); he also suggested that we seek out subjects that were both specialized and non-specialized within each category (i.e. the normal throwing of a stone contrasted with the highly specialized throw of a baseball pitcher). He also laid out some strategies for bringing about the display of physical responses that occur as reactions to external forces that displace the body's center of gravity (such as putting a subject on a mechanical bull or changing the direction of a treadmill); and again, it was suggested that we include both average individuals as well as those who have become well-trained at being able to reposition their destabilized body (such as professional rodeo riders or tightrope walkers who have become experts at recovery).

For the student of biomechanics, all of this would seem elementary. But for myself, as well as for my collaborator (dancer and choreographer, Jill Johnson), these simple notions proved extremely valuable and gave us tools for focusing our exploration.

David Edwards: It is natural to see your work has continuing the early pioneering film work of Muybridge and Marey. Is this true? What is different about experimental film work of this kind today, and what does this suggest about the contemporary parallels, divergences, and perhaps resonances of artistic and scientific exploration of human body investigations?

David Michalek: I am working in the spirit of Muybridge, but not Marey. Muybridge was an artist, not a scientist and his pictures are inconsistent with what we understand to be a scientific analysis of locomotion. But though the photographs may not have scientific value for biomechanics, they are, in the words of Marta Braun, "a treasure trove of figurative imagery, a reiteration of contemporary pictorial practice, and a compendium of social history and erotic fantasy." Muybridge's image sequences and my films are capable of telling stories using the moving body in space, and of presenting fragments of the world that can be expanded into dramas, jokes, or fantasies, but the end result in both cases is a certain visual affect that can stimulate aesthetic delight and/or suggest vague scientific notions, but not more (aesthetics in this case meaning a kind of feeling rather than understanding). Marey, on the other hand, was a scientist who was producing images for precisely the purpose of study. As such, they were aesthetically disinterested, accurate, analytic, and systematic. Marey sought not to represent nature but to discover the laws that governed it.

David Edwards: Your *Figure Studies* examines the movements of skilled dancers and athletes, but also untrained men and women of all ages. How does this breadth of subject matter enrich your artistic work?

David Michalek: For me, it remained to be seen if myself as well as other viewers would respond to *Figure Studies* in ways that resembled the general response to *Slow Dancing*. The later project was easy to be touched by and attracted to on several levels. Firstly, the dancers represented are some of the most celebrated aesthetic athletes of our time (and not to mention, very often, physically attractive), and are renown precisely for the high degree of beauty (both physical and intellectual) they're able to project. Secondly, the garments in *Slow Dancing* were made of colorful fabrics that seemed, in ultra-slow-motion, to flow like water (both Michelangelo and Bernini would approve).

Figure Studies, by contrast, is stripped down in so many ways. The featured subjects represent a much broader range of humanity (although, there are still some occasional dancers), and there are no colorful fabrics to tickle the mind's eye. And though the subjects are lit and composed within the frame, they are not objectified in the manner that the word "nude" typically implies; neither are they naked in the sense of having been stripped. They seem to be in a category beyond naked or nude – "disrobed" – as Muybridge put it, but still, yet, something else. And yet, for all that has been removed, there still seems much to gain by way of meaning. Much of the meaning that I am referring to lies in the "spirit" of each individuals "performance" – and if that spirit seems lifted, it is, perhaps, because of the apparent freedom (and the permission to feel shamelessly free, in the absence of clothing) that was given on set by the whole crew (an environment of reverence and respect was so deeply present as to be nearly tactile). Experiencing that both as an artist and human being was nothing short of a life privilege. I am better for having done it.



COLLABORATION WITH DAN LIEBERMAN, BIOLOGIST AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Biography

Dr. Dan Lieberman is a Professor in the Department Human Evolutionary Biology at Harvard University. He was educated at Harvard (AB, MA, Ph.D.) and Cambridge University (M. Phil). His research combines experimental biology and paleontology to ask why and how the human body looks and functions the way it does. He is especially interested in the origin of bipedal walking, the biology and evolution of endurance running, and the evolution of the human head.



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For more information :
<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~skeleton/danlhome.html>



Conversation between Dan Lieberman and David Edwards, fonder of Le Laboratoire

David Edwards: Can you describe your work, particularly as it relates to the biomechanics of human motion?

Dan Lieberman: I study how and why the human body is the way it is, particularly from an evolutionary perspective. So I'm interested in why we have everything from arches on our feet to big noses and everything in between, and also how we use our bodies and how natural selection operated over the last few million years to make us the remarkable creatures that we are. I'm particularly interested in the evolution of human athleticism, because I think that humans are actually much more athletically spectacular than we often give ourselves credit. And that's not a fluke, that's actually because of concerted natural selection, because until recently all humans had to be athletes. It was part of our daily living. It's only recently that people like you and me were allowed to actually be non-athletes and survive. So we do in my lab all sorts of biomechanics.

D.E.: Given the nature of your scientific work, have you ever before been intrigued by artistic observation of human movement?

D.L.: Oh, absolutely. I've been long interested in the kind of information you can get about how we use our bodies from art. For one, we live in a very weird world today in which people don't actually do as much physical activity, and we have shoes with arch support and all sorts of stuff, and so I'm interested in using old art to give us almost like snapshots or pictures of what people not only observed or what they thought was good human form. So ancient Greek vases and paintings and even more recent European paintings all, I think, contain tidbits of information about how we think about the body and how we've used our bodies in the past, as opposed to today.

D.E.: That's really interesting. David is obviously in this "weird world" that you've described. Is there anything that you see, either as a scientist or as a scientist who is fascinated with how art captures human movement, anything that leaps out to you about David's eye as an artist or hand as an artist?

D.L.: There's a bunch of things that his "Slow Dancing" raises in my mind. One is of course, motor control. Human dancers are exceptional in their ability to coordinate complex actions that many of us can't do very easily. But if you watch, for example, chimpanzees rushing through trees, they can do things that no acrobat can do and human dancing is the closest to that, I think, that one sees. One of the things I always wonder about watching dancers – and it's especially obvious watching them slowed down the way David does it – was to think about how, and to what extent what they're doing is conscious, how much control they have over the movement, how much they actually know what they're doing. And also the second issue that leaps out at me is out how remarkably gentle their movements are. Good athletes and good dancers learn to be impact-free and graceful.



D.E.: David was interested in your perspective when it came to “Figure Studies.” Did his questions surprise you?

D.L.: I thought it was actually a very sensible, basic question that we ask all the time in my line of work, which is “What are we selected to do? What’s important about human movement?” I’m very interested in what hunter-gatherers do and what people have done until recently. So my mind immediately leaps to thinking about the kinds of activities that we do rarely today, but which were very important for our livelihoods for millions of years, such as digging and climbing and running and even simple movement motions like walking or picking things up and carrying them. We do a lot of these things very weirdly today. We walk with shoes, we carry things with backpacks.... How many of us climb trees on a daily basis? How often have you dug up a root or a tuber with a stick? These are fundamental behaviors to being a human, and we’re the odd ones in not doing it. That’s always my take on those sorts of questions and that’s what I suggested to David to think about as an evolutionary way of categorizing behavior. Of course the flip side of that is that people today do things that we didn’t use to do at all, right? Certain kinds of sports and some kinds of art, etc., are all very interesting, novel behaviors and to what extent are they abstractions or modifications of ancient behaviors? And more important, to what extent are they interesting because they’re not, they’re completely novel and different?

D.E.: How would you describe whatever pleasure there has been in your interaction with David? You mentioned “gracefulness” ... Are there any other words?

D.L.: Science works two ways. It’s often deductive science, but sometimes it is inductive. Some of the world’s greatest scientific insights, like Darwin’s theory of natural selection, were basically inductive, by observing nature. I think what struck me about David’s work ... is that... the origins of the field of human movement actually began in art. Art and science were not actually separate. Etienne Marey, for example in Paris, was helping invent modern cinematography, both from a scientific as well as an artistic perspective. I don’t think he saw a separation between the two. The same is probably true to some extent of Muybridge, who was working contemporaneously in California. So I think we often draw a false distinction between art and science. I think they’re actually more integrated. Science is a more formal way of sometimes asking questions that artists ask and vice-versa. It’s the dialogue that, I think, is often fruitful.

AVAILABLE PICTURES

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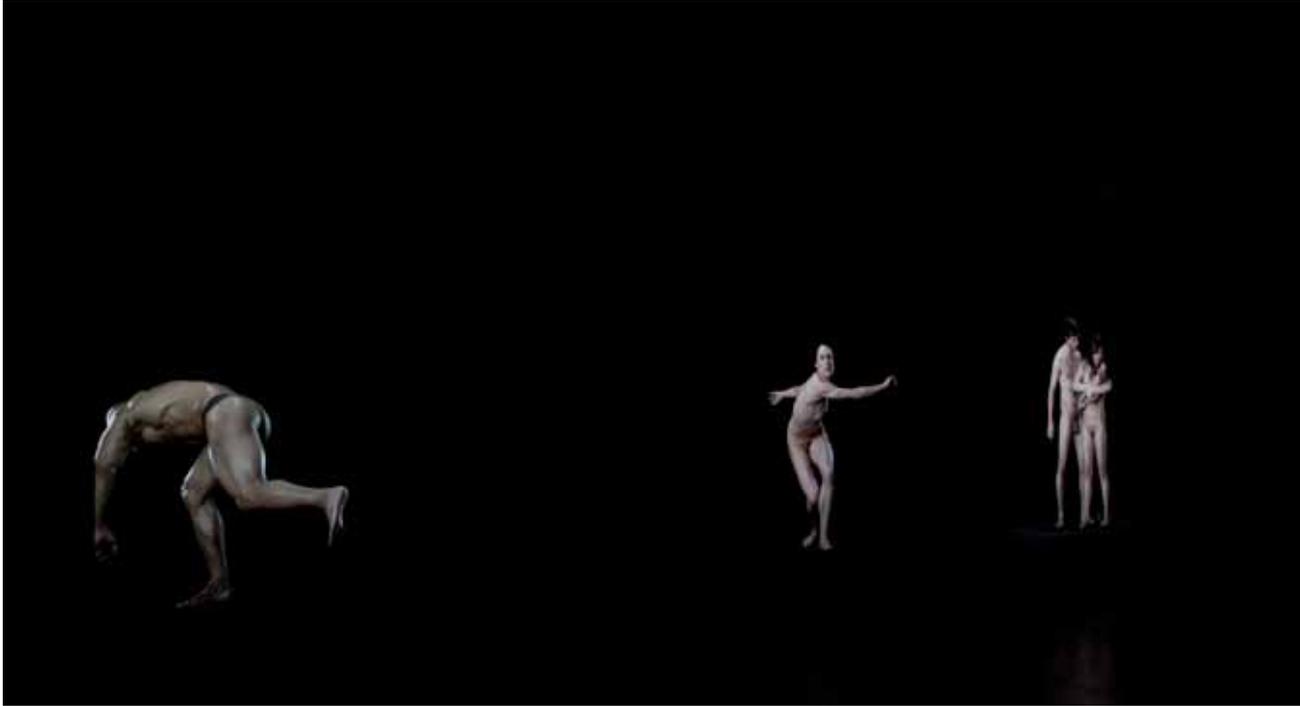






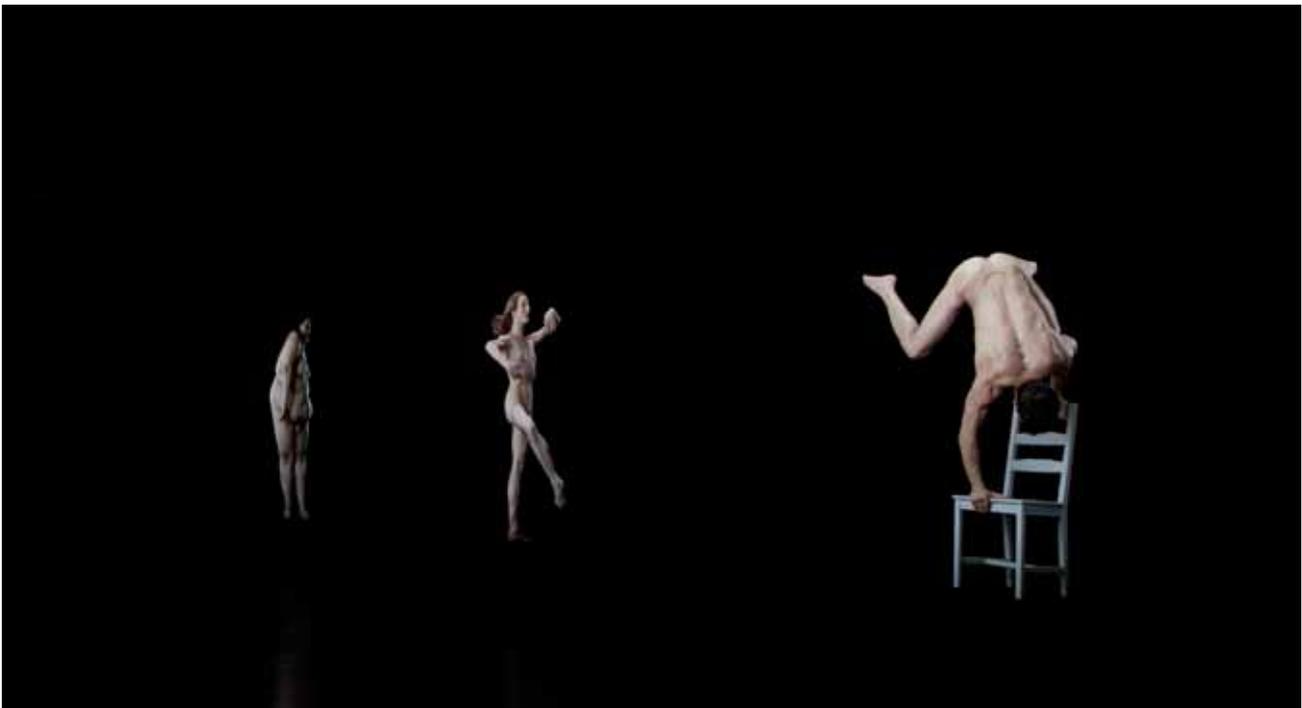
view of the exhibition Figure Studies

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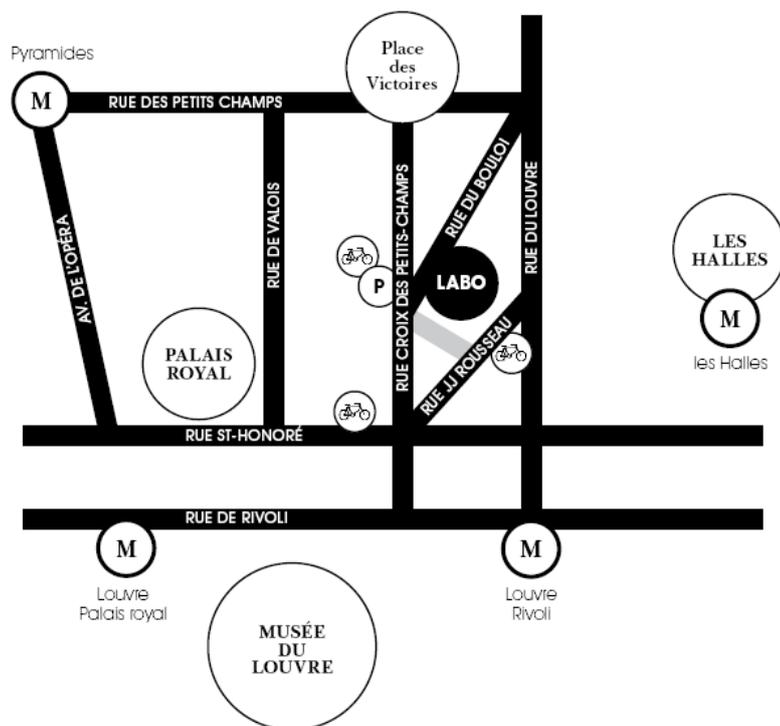
PARTNERS



MEDIA PARTNERS



PRATICAL INFORMATION



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OPENING DAYS

Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday
from noon to 7 pm

ADMISSION

Regular: 6 euros
Reduced: 4,50 euros
Group rate from 8 persons : 3 euros

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Métro

Louvre Rivoli,
ligne 1 (350 m)
Palais- Royal / Musée
du Louvre,
lignes 1 & 7 (300 m)

Bus

48, 74, 85, 21, 81, 67

Vélib'

12, rue du Colonel Driant
29, rue J.-J. Rousseau
192, rue Saint- Honoré

Parking

Parking Vinci, rue Croix des
Petits Champs