

**CONTEMPORARY  
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**Hommage à  
GEORG  
BASELITZ**

**Directed by  
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## Baselitz Splinters

### The Armchair

In Georg Baselitz’s studio there is an old, clearly worn leather armchair. A blanket protects it from aging too quickly. This piece of furniture stood in Derneburg, and now it offers a view of Ammersee. There are chairs in studios, of course, it is a seemingly banal observation, but Baselitz’s armchair takes up considerable space and is more like a throne than a piece of useful inventory. The armchair indicates who controls the space, who has something to say, and from where events draw their energy. But there is something about this chair, because it symbolizes the time of reflection between actual acts of painting. Long periods of contemplation, quick painting—this principle regulates the artist’s work rhythm, contrary to the repeated claim of his works’ emotional immediacy. Reflection and painting are mutually dependent and are indissolubly intertwined. There is no “Mal-Schwein” at work who has lost his mind out of sheer expression.

### Concentric aircles

On January 23, 1938, Hans Georg Kern was born in a town far in Germany’s East: Deutschbaselitz! Why the addendum “Deutsch”? Because on the other side of the small forest was a twin village named “Wendisch-baselitz.” Sorbs, not Saxons, lived in this village, and they had a special status in the GDR that allowed them to maintain their special folk costumes and customs. When Hans Georg Kern started calling himself Georg Baselitz in 1961, he was referring to this double origin, which would become a permanent point of reference in his orientation and a continuous source of inspiration. The school house in which he grew up, the landscape, traces of prehistoric and Wendish layers that he would later investigate intensively, folk art, and experiences and impressions in Dresden, the old capital and a center of painting since the Romantic era: this is the core around which Baselitz formed numerous new circles that expanded into different spaces and various epochs.

### Outsider

In 1957, after Baselitz was expelled from the academy in East Berlin due to his “political immaturity,” he began studying at the academy in West Berlin under Hann Trier. Trier was a representative of Art Informel in its West German manifestation, developing a method of painting that used both hands, and, through this, strengthening a structural development in the gestural application of paint. Although Baselitz experimented with some of the possibilities of the dominant style, his work was aimed at different results. The *Rayski-Köpfe* emerged as the first solidification of human motifs from the proliferation of color through gesture. Notably, a Saxon painter of the 19th century between Romanticism and Realism

provided the decisive impulse: Ferdinand von Rayski, a prominent landscape and portrait painter. The Dresdner Galerie offered the inspiration for Baselitz. Indeed, the choice for his artistic point of departure right in the middle of the Saxon 19th century must have seemed strange and perhaps even arrogant. But Baselitz found himself isolated and lonely in the West. Hann Trier gave the young man from the East reading recommendations. Baselitz’s reaction to choose other outsiders as his allies was, then, understandable and, from his perspective, logical. The emerging ensemble of poets, artists, and writers is astounding because of the assuredness of the choice and the enduring effects of some of these imaginary encounters. Antonin Artaud played and important role, as did Isidor Ducasse, alias Lautréamont. August Strindberg as painter, Charles Meryon, Ernst Josephson, and others supported the attitude of the outsider and provided motifs, inspiration, and reasons for retreating. Baselitz also carefully studied the art of the mentally ill from Hans Prinzhorn’s collection in Heidelberg. He read a lot, saw a lot, in Paris, for example, and assembled around him whatever could feed his work. He did all this with his characteristic care and thoroughness.

### Manifestos

Impassioned and without humor—these are the basic characteristics of literary texts in the dress of a manifesto. Its actual history began with the 1847/48 Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Artists of the 20th century always made demands or distributed provocations in the form of manifestos, especially after the Italian Futurists addressed the public in this way. It was often groups of artists that articulated their goals and interests in manifestos. Baselitz wrote his first manifesto together with Eugen Schönebeck: “I. Pandämonisches Manifest” (1961). This was followed by the “Pandämonisches Manifest II” one year later. The inspiration for this kind of articulation came from artists in Vienna who, at the time, maintained close contacts in Berlin. With drawings and hand-written texts, these manifestations exhibited a very personal, existential style. Antonin Artaud is quoted with his aphorism: “All writing is garbage.”

When Baselitz wrote a manifesto in 1966 for the poster advertising his exhibition at Galerie Rudolf Springer in Berlin, the gesture had changed: “Warum das Bild ‘Die großen Freunde’ ein gutes Bild ist.” [Why the painting ‘Die großen Freunde’ is a good painting.] After the experience with the scandalous reception of his first exhibition in 1963, Baselitz lessened the existentialism. He ascribed ironic characteristics to the painting, which Hans Prinzhorn called the features of the “art of the mentally ill.”

Much later, another manifesto-style text followed: “Das Rüstzeug der Maler” [The tools of painters], in 1985. Since then, Baselitz has repeatedly commented on many topics in succinct texts, and has also given his exhibitions ironic-programmatic titles. With their idiosyncratic language rich in associations, the succinctness of the sentences, and the visual heft

of the words and terms used, Baselitz established a linguistic possibility to provoke or instruct the public, who paid increasing attention to him over the years.

### Divisions

There is so much literature about Berlin as the frontline between East and West after Germany’s division in 1961 that it could fill a sizable library. The works of visual art on the Berlin situation are equally numerous—they could fill a museum.

The works by Georg Baselitz from the years 1961 to 1966 belong to this group, though, in a way, as Maurice Blanchot wrote on the books of Uwe Johnson, “Perhaps the hasty reader and the hasty critic could say that in works of this type [those that are neither political nor realistic], the relationship to the world and the responsibility of a political decision remain distant and indirect. Indirect, yes. But one has to ask oneself whether an indirect path may not be the right one to engage with the world, and also the shorter one.”

Baselitz’s motifs took form out of a kind of painterly primordial ooze, ironically titled, for example in *Blumenmädchen*. Figures and heads look as though they have just been born, but still tormented by pain and literally fragmented. No new beginning that does not carry the invisible burden of memory seems possible. Memory was, after all, divided, ever since the end of the war in 1945, then in 1949, and yet again with the division of Berlin in 1961. Part of the nature of dividing is the fragmentary, which places an additional burden on memory, and this provided Baselitz with a starting point for an aesthetic painterly strategy. Mutilations, fractures, knots, and injuries: such phenomena could be used both as content as well as form.

### Heroes

In the series of *Helden* paintings, which Baselitz completed in 1965 and 1966, is the work *Ein moderner Maler*, in which a male figure appears sitting before a black background on the floor, his hands trapped in crevices. The torn clothes might have once served as a soldier’s uniform. Seized, looking to the sky tormentedly, lost in a no-man’s land, this figure does not correspond to a traditional notion of a hero. Since antiquity, people with extraordinary mental or physical powers were considered heroes. They were considered role models, but they were also always used to mobilize the energy of individuals, people, and states, especially in times of crisis or war. After the Second World War, such a notion of heroes became untenable in West Germany, and even the term “hero” disappeared from usage for a long time. This was different in the GDR, where the new category “hero of labor” was introduced.

Baselitz’s figures have nothing to do with either the Western or Eastern notion of heroes. Even though they are not self-portraits, the artist reflected on his position between East and West, past and present, which he experienced as an outsider. In the middle of the economic miracle in West Germany, these paintings, with their strangely injured, helpless creatures, could not help but seem alien and disturbing. Consequently, these

inventions were met with very little response at the time of their creation. But with his fictive heroes or “new guys,” Baselitz found formulations for the discomfort that registered with alert artists and writers, despite the glittering consumerist surface of West Germany. During these years, which seemed to be without history, paintings like these visualized what had been suppressed in the German situation between the Third Reich, division, and the future. The modern painter cannot forget anything; in Baselitz’s case, he remains stuck in his connection to his country. The principle of division painfully dominates the final painting of the heroes phase, namely the rift in *Die Großen Freunde* (1966).

On the black and white poster for the exhibition at Galerie Springer, the isolation between the pair of the two “friends” becomes even clearer. Here, the two figures are already dominated by fracture, which was later introduced as a new way of generating images.

### Upside-down World

The images of the external world fall upside down on the retina of the eye, and only the brain turns them right-side up for our everyday orientation. When Baselitz decided to rotate his motifs 180 degrees, he reasserted what would penetrate our visual organs as a beam of light. This decision came about in 1969, apparently as the result of strong will, however, there were preliminary stages in the development of his oeuvre. Apart from some upside down details in earlier works, the so-called *Fraktur-Bilder* anticipated the breakthrough with *Der Wald auf dem Kopf* (1969). Turning the motif on its head was immediately vilified as a mere gimmick. In a most illuminating conversation with Johannes Gachnang in 1975, Baselitz talked about his strategy. For Baselitz, motifs served as an anchor and point of resistance within a relaxed, uninhibited application of paint. This was linked technically with an obstacle termed “finger painting.” With this technique, the painting’s surface could become an independent layer of perception, still requiring a motif, however. This application of paint gave the surface a kind of colorful skin, kept animated by a great restlessness. The viewer senses an impalpable vibration that is charged with energy. In a way unknown until this point, motif and painting were divided into separate elements, though paradoxically, the painter could forge a link between the two, making “new painting” a reality.

### Aggression

The development of painting into three-dimensional wood figures and heads began in 1977. The large linocuts that Baselitz had produced until that point provided the potential motifs that could be translated into sculpture. Furthermore, the linocut technique involved a treatment of material that could, when taken further, also be used for wood sculpture. Because of his own skepticism about the new direction he was taking with the first wood sculpture for the Biennale pavilion, Baselitz called the work *Modell für eine Skulptur*. Soon enough, however, he found a suitably powerful method for attacking the wood blocks using an axe, chainsaw, hammer, chisel, and other

similarly robust tools. With this approach he was able to create the rough, rugged, cracked shapes that occupy their own place in contemporary sculpture, one that strikes many viewers as highly disconcerting. In discussing the creation of these works, Baselitz has frequently recounted the aggression he invested in them. This seems necessary in order to arrive at an understanding of the origin of the motif. In this respect, hewing figures and heads from the block is related to the excavations of archeologists. Even though these sculptures, apart from a few exceptions, do not display anything individual, they confront the viewer with conditions that the viewer can empathize with and compare to their own experiences.

Nevertheless, a few sculptures in recent years were made as self-portraits. One example is the painted bronze seated figured installed in front of the Hamburger Bahnhof. Here, the roughly hewn blocks form a melancholy figure, like a correction of Rodin’s *Thinker*, which is so often placed like a logo in front of museum entrances. In conceiving such a sculpture, Baselitz referred to works known from the Romanesque period that are blocky, adorned sparsely with details, but exude an almost magical presence. Baselitz became Rodin, the admirer of Leonardo, a relative of medieval sculpture whose epoch begins after the year 1000.

#### In the Window

When, in 1979/80, Baselitz produced the twenty-part *Straßenbild*, he expanded the idea of the diptych in his exhibition at the museum in Eindhoven. The inspiration for the *Straßenbild* was a rather strange, large, 1933 composition by Balthus entitled *La Rue*. Balthus’s painting depicts a scene on a street in Paris where many things happen at once without any attempt to communicate between them.

From this mysterious coexistence, Baselitz created a polyptych in 1989/90 called *45*, which has twenty wooden panels that were roughly treated in the manner of his sculptures. Because the individual pictorial fields give the impression of windows, there is the sense of being in front of openings where there is no greeting, screaming, ranting, or even simple conversation. Sometimes only a head appears, as if it had just been invented – raw, immediate, like a blank slate that could soon expand.

After the reunification of Germany, Baselitz depicted a panorama of women coming home in *45*, entering a streetscape from a distant Saxon landscape. Later Baselitz would create the yellow heads of the *Dresdner Frauen*. None of this is directly linked to the “Orange Eater,” but it is, nonetheless, part of its history. While the motifs in *Straßenbild* (1980) are located both in the present and past, in the *Orangenesser* and *Trinker* series from the beginning of the 1980s, Baselitz reacted to his artistic environment. Not least of all, through his turn to more expressiveness after the cool colors in his work from the late seventies in the exhibition in Eindhoven, a new, aggressive color palette emerged, which was sometimes excessively garish. Eating and drinking, both basic necessities of human life, became his theme in extreme formulations. By enhancing the most banal objects

and actions with such crudeness and anger, Baselitz responded to the emerging work of the “Neue Wilde,‒ as it was christened by critics alluding to the historical group of the Fauves in Paris around 1906. Baselitz’s painting style in subsequent years did not just cultivate the crude, but also the ugly. This became a leitmotif of the decade following 1980. Baselitz found a way to produce provocative paintings without working with irony, parody, or political provocation, but rather with an elementary kind of painting, demonstrated with elementary processes of life. The motifs of oranges and drinking glasses could be studied at length; the rare citrus fruits of the GDR, the despairing drinking of the bohemians would offer plenty of material. But in their immediacy and crudeness, these motifs also reflect the intellectual and experimental exertion at the beginning of a new period in his work.

#### Heads

The ever-recurring motif. Since the so-called *Rayski-Köpfe* from the late 1950s, Baselitz has interpreted the human head in a great variety of ways. When a body emerged from the darkness of a 1963 painting’s background, Baselitz placed a grotesque head on top of the bare body, which, in its exaggerated length, is reminiscent of Giacometti. The sallow colors, however, diminish the existential pathos of his predecessor and create a more ambivalent atmosphere. The head and genitals form a pair here, as if they had never been separated from one another. The *Helden* that were to come soon after usually have small heads, anatomically unlikely for such massive bodies. The woodcut, *Großer Kopf* (1966), fills the entire surface with an enormous face that is rutted with ornaments. *Ralf-Kopf* animates a memory of Baselitz’s Dresden friend, A. R. Penck. Baselitz continued returning to head motifs in his sculptural oeuvre over many years, as in his *Blauer Kopf* (1982/83). The title is, actually, only appropriate for the upper half of the sculpture, being that the head, with its round eyes looking upwards, sits on a massive wooden block that becomes something like a source of energy for the visionary and powerful physiognomy of the head. Something rises from the unshaped, rough wooden body into the head, feeding it and simultaneously giving it strength to part from the lower half, a process aided by the blue paint. Around the same time, Baselitz cut the Artaud head in a large linoleum panel. Once again, he chose an unusually long neck to serve as a “pedestal” for the head, surrounded by radiating circles. For this motif, Baselitz imaginatively adapted a self-portrait drawing by Antonin Artaud. Like in 1963 and in the later sculpture, the head in the linocut is fascinating for its visionary suggestion and simultaneous impression that the head is the locus of human will, which, through the concentric rays, has an effect on the space. Here, as well as in other works by Baselitz, the expressive appears as the equivalent of the will as such.

#### Looking Back

The name Baselitz is programmatic; it stands for the inspiration from the lost world of Eastern Germany, which suddenly seemed to be nearing again with the

political changes of 1989. Under the impression of this moving historical moment, Baselitz began a multi-part work on wooden panels. These panels were stained black and treated in the style of the large linocuts, though, due to the material’s brittleness, in a particularly rough manner, and were to display women’s heads. One panel shows a rabbit. The work culminates in twenty pictures in a wall-sized composition, arranged in two vertical rows. Only the succinct title *45* alludes to the historical reflection associated with this ensemble. *Bild Nr. 21* was granted status as an individual work. When the Second World War ended in 1945, women were faced with a harsh reality in a devastated country. At that time, Hans Georg Kern was seven years old and he experienced the historical changes as a transition from dictatorship and war to a completely unstable and disoriented present. By adding the rabbit to the cycle, the symbol for erraticness and exposure, Baselitz alluded to how he experienced life at that time. Although the women’s heads seem simplistic at first glance, upon longer examination a broad spectrum of human emotions becomes visible.

Baselitz’s use of the dark background and his rough treatment of the wooden panels enabled him to develop something out of nothing, the reemergence of humans after a catastrophe. As in some works from the 1980s, the mother/child motifs, for example, Baselitz consciously used ugliness as a stylistic device to avoid any detachment when looking at history. Baselitz achieved an appropriate pictorial realization not through historic argument or allegorization, but rather through direct, unvarnished confrontation with the memory of 1945. In titling the work *45 Bild Nr. 21*, Baselitz hinted that he might not have exhausted this topic yet, demonstrated by the yellow wooden sculptures, *Dresdner Frauen*, from 1990.

If the saying goes that one can dig into memory, then Baselitz found the appropriate means of doing so with his unusual techniques. It additionally required the blunt surfaces of the panels, which were possible through tempera painting, and gouging into wood, which appeared like digging in dark, earthly painting.

#### Inventions

The paradigm shift that the 20th century brought to the visual arts was a shift from mimesis to progress. Novelty become the criterion for quality and fame. Painting was declared dead, the departure from the picture initiated, “art into life” proclaimed, open artworks demanded, the marriage of high and low consummated, and new media celebrated as a great promise. In Baselitz’s case, it is helpful to distinguish between the search for the new and renewal. To further develop painting, sculpture, graphic arts, and drawing, shifts were required of Baselitz that he had to take step by step in order to react to time and history in his work. His inventions took place within a given frame, which he stretched and damaged, but never abandoned. In his reorientation of motifs, Baselitz demonstrated a departure from a painting within the painting itself. In doing so, he provoked an inner pictorial antagonism. With the large linocuts, Baselitz established a new category of graphic art. His sculptures

distanced three-dimensional works from the object and pushed them toward sculptural form in the sense of those created before the Renaissance and outside Europe, for example, those created in Africa. He transformed the polyptych, originally conceived for sacred uses, into a modern form. He turned art about art into a design principle—but not as a reference, but a creative answer. He made memory a category unexpectedly fruitful for art. And he renewed the artist’s collection: Mannerists, Africa, Fautrier, Picasso, Giacometti, Francis Picabia etc. He reinterpreted the remix principle of popular music for painting. He took folk art seriously.

Above all, however, he encouraged a new relationship between intellect and creatureliness of humans.

#### Remix

Already for his large 1995 retrospective at the Guggenheim in New York, Baselitz began returning to earlier motifs. These paintings, pasty, often offset with white, began to claim their place in the artist’s oeuvre late in 1990. These were not precise returns to earlier works, but rather motifs of heroes, heads, or nudes that he developed from earlier inventions. Baselitz, when he originally developed these motifs, forged a path into his own pictorial world, just as Fernand Léger and, from a certain point onwards, also Picasso, had done. Léger, in his cycles *Le Grande Parade*, *Partie de Campagne* and *Les Constructeurs*, summarizes his pictorial world and reassembles it in new combinations. One could also speak of Picasso’s treatment and variation of earlier motifs, like *Le peintre et son model*, or the “sleep watchers” as Leo Steinberg called this iconographic group. The supply of motifs and methods of composition was large and rich enough to create new works from it. In the broadest sense, this touches on the problem of the aging artist, or the possibility of summing things up in a “late work.” Gottfried Benn’s *Aging as a Problem for Artists* identifies a series of phenomena in late works: greater freedom, a tendency to experiment, tiredness, melancholia, mildness, etc. But Benn remains skeptical, since examples and counter-examples seem to balance each other out. His reference to a book by the art historian Albert Erich Brinckmann, *Spätwerke großer Meister*, leads closer to Baselitz. Brinckmann assembles a list of examples demonstrating that, since the Renaissance, artists painted early works again in their old age, which lead to quite remarkable results. That is without a doubt true for Baselitz’s remix period, which began in late 2005. The decision to repaint works like *Die große Nacht im Eimer* (1962/63) is reminiscent of earlier decisions to turn motifs on their head, to hew wood sculptures from a block or stem, or to paint the series of large landscape formats during the 1990s.

Popular music offered an appropriate term for this that could be applied to his later pictorial world: remix. It can be understood as samplers that reshape existing tracks and assemble them in a new way. One’s own cards, in this case: paintings, are remixed.

When Baselitz renewed *Ein moderner Maler* from 1966 in this way, he added to the lower half of the painting a representation of small forest. It references Ferdinand

von Rayski's forest studies, which had been the template for *Der Wald auf dem Kopf* (1969). But this reference makes it very clear that home, the soil from which one has grown, was and continues to be a fundamental element for the "modern" painter Baselitz. "Remix" enables a renewal and, at the same time, a clarification of the earlier *Helden* painting and its intention.

### German Art?

In the second half of the 1990s, a committee started thinking about what artworks should be in the Bundestag in the old Reichstag building. Among other artists, Baselitz was invited to contribute. For this he turned to Caspar David Friedrich, using a small volume that was given to soldiers in the Second World War. Baselitz created paintings after woodcuts by Friedrich, namely *Frau am Abhang* and *Knabe auf einem Grab ruhend*. Baselitz's fluid and transparent manner of painting gives the effect of watercolors, which gives these paintings the impression of hallucinations. It seems that this method enabled Baselitz to realize transparency in these pictures that has various effects. Friedrich appears as the German artist who captures Romanticism, piety, landscape, and the German past in such a suggestive way in pictures that he could be seen as an opposing pole to, say, French painting around and after 1800. With Baselitz, the viewer sees through Friedrich's melancholia and sadness, which have become lighter. The viewer is confronted with motifs of existential significance, such as *weltschmerz* and death. Without illustrating history, these paintings, in their political context, offer many opportunities for reflecting on Germany at the end of the 20th century. Baselitz's contribution to the Reichstag can be considered to echo the motifs of an Albrecht Dürer drawing that belongs to the Albertina in Vienna. It is a study of the proportions of a female nude, which Dürer used in the engraving, *Das Meerwunder* from around 1498. Dürer's interest in studies of proportion, which he observed in Italy, are already evident here. In Baselitz's large 1998 painting, he confronts the female figure with a darkened pictorial plane in which a bright circle gives the effect of the moon. Dürer's famous signature, "AD," became "Ade Nympe I;" that is to say, a farewell to Dürer. This can be understood as the optimism and predictability of the world that are no longer valid today, but that motivated Dürer and his contemporaries. If this example of Baselitz is deconstructed, it is so intended. Because the female figure is rendered in extreme colors and looks into an empty darkness, she seems like a withdrawal of Dürer's Italian-inspired idea.

What Baselitz claimed as a basic feature of German art—and he was not the only one—was, namely, the ugly, which he demonstrated through Dürer. Therefore, it is not just the Friedrich work that can be understood as a commentary on the question, what does German art look like?, especially in the former Reichstag.

A discussion about these questions commenced after German reunification, but a consensus could not be reached between the East and the West. And, therefore, the question of "German art" will not

be settled easily or finally in the foreseeable future. Baselitz, however, has made his position clear.

### Zero

The word "zero" sounds harsher than the German *Null* or *Nichts*. Baselitz had himself photographed holding a piece of paper with "zero" written on it. He is wearing a cap with the word on it, which looks strikingly similar to a self-portrait sculpture. In contrast to artists who are fascinated, obsessed, even, by death and endings, such as Edvard Munch, Max Beckmann, later Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, or Markus Lüpertz, reflection on transience and decay only appeared in Baselitz's oeuvre a few years ago: *Davongehen*, *Weggucken*, *Abgehen* or *Ohne Hemd auf der Matratze liegen* are two paintings from 2015. Soon after Baselitz painted them, he painted a female nude, *Abwärts III*, who is bathed in the same sallow, unrealistic color. In this painting, the orientation of the motif corresponds to the iconographic meaning of reflections about his own fragility and approaching death. In opposition to earlier representations of violence, pain, or injury, the bodies now seem to disappear into the pictorial space because the extremities dissolve. In the paintings with the "Zero" attribute, self-mockery comes into play. By not shying away from representations like *Abwärts III* (2016), Baselitz not only shows how it is or will be, but he also demonstrates sovereignty opposed with fears and painful experiences of the body. The colors in this group of works are reminiscent of a stage left mostly dark; it could be the set of a Samuel Beckett play, whom Baselitz met while Beckett was in Berlin. Self-mockery is also present in the use of the Italian word "Zero" because it has to do with casinos, which can also be a stage for human fate. But zero is also a recurrent challenge for an artist who must keep reinventing himself from zero. The loneliness and isolation of the young artist in West Berlin was the first and unforgettable "zero" experience for Baselitz. His oeuvre since then has been frequently structured by "zero" situations that were resolved by reflection and willpower. Baselitz proceeded in a similar way to his friend A. R. Penck, who closely studied Picasso's many stylistic changes.

However, a hint of resignation may also be mixed in with the "Zero" attitude, something of the melancholia of completion. In his late years, Eugène Delacroix painted Michelangelo sitting deep in thought in his studio amongst his famous figures. It displays Delacroix's own mental state in the mirror of a great predecessor. But from this melancholia of mastery, from this zero, new unique works emerge. In the photo of Baselitz holding the "zero" note, he is smiling.

*Translated from the German by Wilhelm Werthern*