

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

APOLLO

FEATURE
GEORG BASELITZ

The Master of Reinvention

George Baselitz has long been an established figure in both the German and international art worlds, but his new work continues to confound expectations. Recent paintings and sculptures attest to his restless investigation of his country's past – and of what it means to be an artist

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Whenever I think of Georg Baselitz (b. 1938), I think of contrasting concepts that form an idiosyncratic, ever new and surprising combination. His art is convincing, and constantly captivating, because it is permanently reinventing itself – but without sacrificing everything that has gone before, far less repudiating his own history. He once characterised this attitude as a consequence of his basic understanding of art: 'For me what is visible is only a skin.'¹ It is not a masterly interpretation of reality that he has in mind – rather he is trying to explore the narrow point between objectivity and abstraction, between the picture as nucleus and total cosmos. If, for painting, visible reality means only the outer skin that provides data for the picture, what is the

picture itself? Is it a metaphor for a different, intellectual reality, or a commentary on a general social question? Baselitz would reject both options as presumptuous, and instead stress an idea of art for art's sake – similar to that claimed by wide areas of modern art.

The separation into an emotionally or socially determined art on the one hand, and its pure autonomy on the other, marks the dilemma of a strain of Modernism that, devoid of any self-evident social function, nonetheless always seeks to assert its right to survive. Of course this discussion has special resonance in Germany, where conditions were more problematic in the early 20th century than in many European countries. The contradictions of a specifically German past and present are part of Baselitz's biography and his development –

and are factors that have contributed to the artist's conscious dissociation from any kind of ideology.

Baselitz was born and grew up in Deutschbaselitz, in what was then East Germany. He began his art training at the East Berlin Academy of Art, but was soon expelled for disobedience. He then transferred to the West Berlin Hochschule, which in the late 1950s and early 1960s was influenced by the Art Informel movement. The political, social and artistic contrasts between East and West Germany, but also the questions raised by overcoming the past, form the basis of Baselitz's work. Even today this past has a decisive importance for him, reflected in pictures that are now invested with greater emotional distance and authority thanks to their historical hindsight.



Baselitz is regarded by both admirers and critics as one of the less controversial artists of his generation, and for years he has been widely accepted by the artistic establishment. He embodies all those ideas associated with the figure of an outstanding yet socially uncontentious artist: links to the traditional genres of painting and other visual arts, virtuoso handling of technical and formal pictorial resources, ambitious formats, a clear strength of conviction, official recognition and commercial success.

Nonetheless, Baselitz has always wanted to turn everything on its head; something he did literally when he reversed the motifs of his paintings and created images that appear to be upside down (Fig. 1). From 1968–69 this became his trademark, often interpreted purely as a practical joke, though now regarded more as a playful and liberating pictorial strategy. ‘The new picture is my picture,’ Baselitz said, ‘the eye follows a trace that had not previously been followed...It is important that things that have hitherto been valid are pushed away. That taboos are broken, that... radicalism is deployed that covers lack of talent and the handicap of being unable to draw.’² His attempts to redefine painting and sculpture are experiments with no firm ground beneath them. This is precisely what makes for their force – and their sense of risk.

The artist demonstrated this with his contribution to the Venice Biennale in 1980. The invitation to take part came at a juncture when he had transformed from *enfant terrible* to star. However, he used this platform as an opportunity to go on the attack, not presenting paintings at the Biennale as expected, but instead taking over the main area of the German Pavilion with a single wooden sculpture – *Modell für eine Skulptur* [Model for a sculpture].

This was his first work in the medium, provocatively placed in the centre of the space. It was a perfect scandal. Not only did Baselitz deny himself a smooth reception at this historically charged place,³ he appeared to be embracing the possibility of being misinterpreted. Inspired by the typology of

African ritual sculpture,⁴ the figure, thrown to the ground, raises an arm at an angle above its head. This gesture of surrender was misconstrued as a Nazi salute, and the artist was categorised as latently – or even overtly – neo-fascist. It created a stir at the time; but ultimately this detour from his usual work would develop into a constructive exploration of the potential of sculpture. Following this audacious trial run on the big stage, Baselitz was motivated to expand his work in what was a new medium for him into a substantial second mainstay.

How far Baselitz has advanced in this field is spectacularly illustrated by his first outdoor sculpture, *Volk Ding Zero* [Folk Thing Zero] (2009; Fig. 2), on permanent loan to the Hamburger Bahnhof museum in Berlin. This piece brings together and reworks many of the artist’s fundamental ideas in a masterly fashion. The monumental male figure in white boxer shorts and white hat ironically subverts clichés about dignity and timeless greatness – acquiring, by those very means, an unusual presence and intensity. The bronze casting still displays the deliberately rough, aggressive action of the earlier wood sculptures, but its detail also reveals fragility and sensitivity.

Sitting on a stool, the man supports himself with his right arm on his knee and his hand resting on his head: the pose is inspired by the figures of the Man of Sorrows, as well as being an interpretation of Rodin’s *The Thinker* (1880–82) – albeit a version that looks to be deep in conversation on his mobile phone. His shoes are faintly ridiculous, Cuban heels attached to his scrawny legs. The body is cursorily daubed with baby-blue oil paint, and white smears flow from the eyes like tears.

The title adds further layers of meaning to the work. *Volk*, usually translated as ‘folk’ in English, can also mean a nation or a people in German: is this figure individual or representative? The word ‘ZERO’ is scrawled on a label on the clunky, visored hat: does this refer to the contents of the head it protects, or to the artist’s recurrent demand to abandon his established styles and subjects and start again from scratch?

The images illustrating this article show works by Georg Baselitz (b. 1938) and are © 2012 Georg Baselitz.

- 1 *Finger Painting – Eagle*, 1972
Oil on canvas, 250×180cm
Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich
Photo: courtesy Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich
- 2 *Folk Thing Zero*, 2009
Patinated bronze and oil paint
306×120×130cm
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris and Salzburg
Photo: Jochen Littkemann, Berlin



Three years earlier, the ‘George Baselitz: Remix’ exhibition – first shown at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, in 2006 before travelling to the Albertina in Vienna the following year – brought together work that was even more complex.⁵ This was a group of new versions of earlier paintings that had cemented his international reputation and continue to underpin it today (Figs. 3–5). My first reaction was scepticism, indeed bewilderment. Why take this risk? Why paint anew the pictures that had already been so successful? But that impression was wide of the mark. Seeing the pictures for the first time in Baselitz’s Derneburg studio in December



3 *Sand Pond Dam 1953 (Remix)*, 2006
Oil on canvas, 262×307.5cm
Galleri Bo Bjerggaard, Copenhagen

4 *The Big Night Down the Drain (Remix)*, 2005
Oil and charcoal on canvas
300×250cm
Private collection
Photo: Jochen Littkemann, Berlin

5 *The Big Night Down the Drain*, 1962–63
Oil on canvas, 250×180cm
Museum Ludwig, Köln
Photo: Jochen Littkemann, Berlin

4

2005 was captivating: they had a brilliant, painterly directness and a virtuosity that made many of these new works seem like happier versions of those they were modelled on (compare Figs. 1 and 8). But of course that would not in itself be sufficient justification for this undertaking, even if Baselitz laconically suggested that he wanted to 'test whether I can once again succeed in soaring to those heights I once reached. For I still think today that the pictures I did then were rather good.'⁶ In fact, the concept of *Remix* implies a radically different genesis of the works; the process does not lead to better or worse pictures, but to new ones that succeed or fail on their own terms.

3

Baselitz consistently argues that as an artist it is necessary 'to escape from the spirit of the time', yet: 'What it was impossible to escape, what I could never escape, was Germany, and being a German. That is something, whether you want it to or not, that sticks to you very unpleasantly. You cannot renounce it with pictures, however beautiful they may be...not even by emigrating...my resulting way of working was in fact that I gave up renouncing it, and instead steeped myself completely in this "being German", and still do so today.'⁷ This sentiment is often stretched to breaking point in the *Remix* works. The programmatic early pictures of heroes, for instance, are transformed into images of antithetical characters; the resigned, melancholy attitude of the figures in the early versions is now darkened with frighteningly explicit references to recent German history.

The *Helden* [Heroes] works of the 1960s reduced their subjects to a few emblematic forms: young men with powerfully built bodies and often oversized hands, but with comparatively small heads that are frequently pressed up against the upper edge of the picture (Fig. 7). They stand against a virtually monochrome background or in devastated landscapes that show the vestiges of a ravaged civilisation. These so-called 'Neue Typen' [New Guys] are fixed in impassive poses that precludes the idea of action and hence of liberation. Their vulnerability is underlined by the fact that they are represented with open trousers. Rather than an emotive symbolic figure, the hero becomes the silent refusenik, blanking himself out of contemporary political reality at the height of the Cold War.

In that unstable context, Baselitz was able to use painting as a means of reaching for stability and strength. The application of the paint and formal treatment confirm this: nothing appears spontaneous; rather the compositions are developed from a laborious, almost excruciating working process. But the colours, frequently mixed with white, contribute still further to the intense and disturbing effect of these 'Neue Typen', who

5

stand stridently in counterpoint to all artistic and political ideas prevailing at the time.

The new versions of the *Helden* strike a completely different note (Fig. 6). Their experimental variety is in line with the particular importance of the theme in Baselitz's work as a whole; it has always seemed to identify him as a specifically German artist. The *Helden* are the quintessence of his sense of national identity, and the trigger for his early recognition and difficult reception. He also felt motivated to re-examine his previous position in the context of today's widespread exploration of 'new romanticism in the art of the present' (a term often applied to the New Leipzig School painters such as Neo Rauch).

His recapitulation of these paintings differs radically both from his first versions and how younger artists have approached comparable subjects. The *Helden* now have various forms, and the figures can be interpreted ambivalently; often, they even mutate into physiognomies that resemble Hitler. However, in contrast to the dirty, dull tone of their predecessors, the paintings have all transformed into light, watercolour-like compositions; they are also more coherent structurally. In addition there is often a compositional trick: for instance, the bare legs of the *Helden* – in elegant brogues, conventional women's court shoes or even completely without feet – sometimes hover horizontally, vertically or above the head, so that although they are disproportionately large they nonetheless appear playfully light.

This year yet another successful somersault has been achieved by Baselitz: while *Remix* refers to a method of music sampling, in the group of works entitled *Das Negativ* he plays equally unabashedly and brilliantly with another recent technological development: Photoshop.⁸ Negative photographs of *Remix* works produced with the computer are transferred to a largely black ground, which is then washed with water and painted with watercolours. Impressionistically dabbed on dotted lines, reminiscent of pattern books, and an extremely reduced use of colour – with just a little pink, purple, yellow or blue in the grey



6



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6 *The Great Friends (Remix)*, 2006
Oil on canvas, 300×400cm
Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery,
Märkisch Wilmersdorf/New York
Photo: Jochen Littkemann, Berlin

7 *The Great Friends*, 1965
Oil on canvas, 250×300cm
Museum Ludwig, Köln
Photo: courtesy Archiv Georg Baselitz

8 *The Eagle (Remix)*, 2005
Oil on canvas, 300×250cm
Hall collection
Photo: Jochen Littkemann, Berlin

9 *The New Flat*, 2012
Oil on canvas, 285×207cm
Private collection
Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus
Ropac, Paris and Salzburg
Photo: Jochen Littkemann, Berlin



whether further works are likely to derive from this starting point, I was met with a prompt answer: 'I always used to be thinking about failure. Today things are different. Today I always feel euphoric when I begin afresh.'⁹ Confirmation of this came from my first sight of a half-finished, three-part sculpture that promises to be sensational: three young girls, walking arm in arm and visibly happy, seem to be running towards us. Discussing this work, Baselitz told me how as a young boy growing up in the final years of the Nazi regime, he was entranced by the Bund Deutscher Mädel [League of German Girls] in the village square in Deutschbaselitz; in their uniforms, he was struck by how attractive they looked. Still in its rough state, this is an unusually vital sculpture. This is partly a result of Baselitz's direct input in the piece; the artist does not work with assistants. 'I have an almost religiously respectful relationship to my work, which I divide between physical and intellectual exertion,' he told me: 'I need this physical work.'¹⁰ Whether as a painter, often conceiving pictures in his head before they reach the canvas, or as a sculptor labouring at his material, Baselitz constantly explores his identity in the creative process. **A**

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and white of the negative – turn these large-format pictures into images of ephemeral in-between realms. The memory of the source paintings is literally washed out in the process of producing these negative variations – though without losing the shadow of the original image.

After this extensive exploration of both traditional and experimental pictorial processes, and such sophisticated play with new media, it is hard to conceive that yet more surprises could follow. But experience has taught me that each visit to Baselitz's studio in Inning am Annersee, west of Munich, will present something new – even if the artist has created it with the conscious knowledge that it may turn out an artistic failure.

Die neue Wohnung [The New Flat] (2012; Fig. 9), viewed during a recent studio visit, remains a work in progress – and is, in one sense, therefore characteristic of Baselitz's work. When I asked him, almost impertinently,

1/ Georg Baselitz in conversation with Heinz Peter Schwerfel, in *Kunst Heute 2*, Cologne, 1989, p. 55.

2/ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

3/ In 1934 Adolf Hitler visited the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale with Mussolini, emphasising its propagandist importance for his own concerns. After 1945 all German artists and representatives at the Biennale have felt the need to engage with this difficult past.

4/ At this time Baselitz had already begun to concentrate seriously his now extensive collection of African tribal art.

5/ See *Baselitz Remix*, exh. cat., Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, 2006, with contributions from Carla Schulz-Hoffmann and Richard Shiff.

6/ Georg Baselitz interviewed by Axel Hecht and Tim Sommer in *Art, Das Kunstmagazin*, no. 3 (March 2006), pp. 36–43, p. 40.

7/ Georg Baselitz speaking in a press conference at the 'Georg Baselitz: Remix' exhibition at the Albertina, Vienna, 17 January 2007.

8/ See *Georg Baselitz: Das Negative*, exh. cat., Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris and Salzburg, 2012.

9/ Georg Baselitz in conversation with the author in September 2012.

10/ *Ibid.*