

Georg Baselitz

(born Hans-Georg Kern, Deutschbaselitz, Germany, 1938)

Georg Baselitz belongs to the generation of German artists born during the period of the Second World War for whom the pictorial matrix, combined with the equally traditional matrix of sculpture, offers a basic point of departure for questioning what it signifies to be a German artist in the second half of the twentieth century.

Raised in East Germany, in Dresden, Baselitz was deemed by Academy officials to be immature as an artist and as a citizen. The artist responded with humor: he began studying artistic immaturity. He became passionate about children's art, studied the Prinzhorn Collection of work by psychiatric patients and interwove the explosive instinctivity of those examples with the literary models of Artaud and Beckett. He began to expunge from his work any intellectualism that had fed the pictorial and sculptural tradition over the centuries. He annihilates the mental, the mystical and the symbolic, recognizing in the material of the body the sole thing remaining to be preserved and nurtured, the only acceptable ruin of an ideological world that should not be rebuilt. Even technique, the subtle temptations of bravura and beauty, are risks from which the artist chooses to flee, like Trojan horses of the mind and its mystifications. This is one reason he paints on the floor, on his hands and knees above the canvas, concentrating only on the area on which he is working. He cannot see the whole and thus cannot regulate the harmony of the composition. He says in this regard, too, children inspire him, in the way they color completely in curves on the sheet of paper, rotating it again and again, focusing on a single detail and forgetting the idea of the whole. When, in the late 1960s, he began exhibiting his paintings with upside-down figures, his violent concentration on the materiality and gesturalism of painting, more than on compositional organization, could be seen as an extreme homage to an instinctive and childlike intensity that art seemed to have lost.

Thus his upside-down human figures and animals repossess an objective dimension, like so many quartered oxen in the style of Rembrandt, hung with their front paws downward. Perhaps because the force of gravity seems to press down on them more violently, the figure's corporeal existence—and only the physical body—becomes pitifully evident, even if the punishment at times is transformed into the lightness of abandon.

In *Gut Grau*, 2009, it is again the human figure that stands out against an opaque black background. The head is not represented turned downward, but, instead, the framing of the canvas severs the forehead, place of the mind. Typical of Baselitz, the body is disheveled and muddy. The limbs have no elegance or individuation. The form is delineated by disorderly black brushstrokes over a liquid gray-green material. As a result, the flesh and cloth seem to soil the space beyond their outlines, overflowing like mud, beyond the drawing, while gravity, which subjects all things because of their corporeal weight, works its force in the painting in the form of snow-white drippings. (EV)