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Fine Art: Painting

DIALOGUES WITH THE PAST

GEORG BASELITZ

by

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INTRODUCTION

Georg Baselitz stood the world on its head in 1969 in order to detract attention from, but not entirely eliminate, that subject matter which provided him with his earlier repertoire of heroes and other motifs, drawn primarily from the German Romantic tradition.

During the 1980's, Baselitz began to achieve a European art-world celebrity through his provocative use of upside-down imagery in all the classic genres - history painting, nudes, portraiture, landscape, still-life.

"No other living German painter hangs in as many world-class collections." (Dornberg, 1992, p. 102).

When in this thesis I talk about the Romantic spirit I do so in the knowledge that it is perhaps not unitary and that it is largely undefinable. However, Georg Baselitz's recollection of bygone epochs was to present a special type of innovation; by looking back the artist could only progress more clearly and confidently.

CHAPTER 1

BASELITZ'S AFFINITY WITH GERMAN ROMANTICISM AND EXPRESSIONISM.

ROMANTICISM

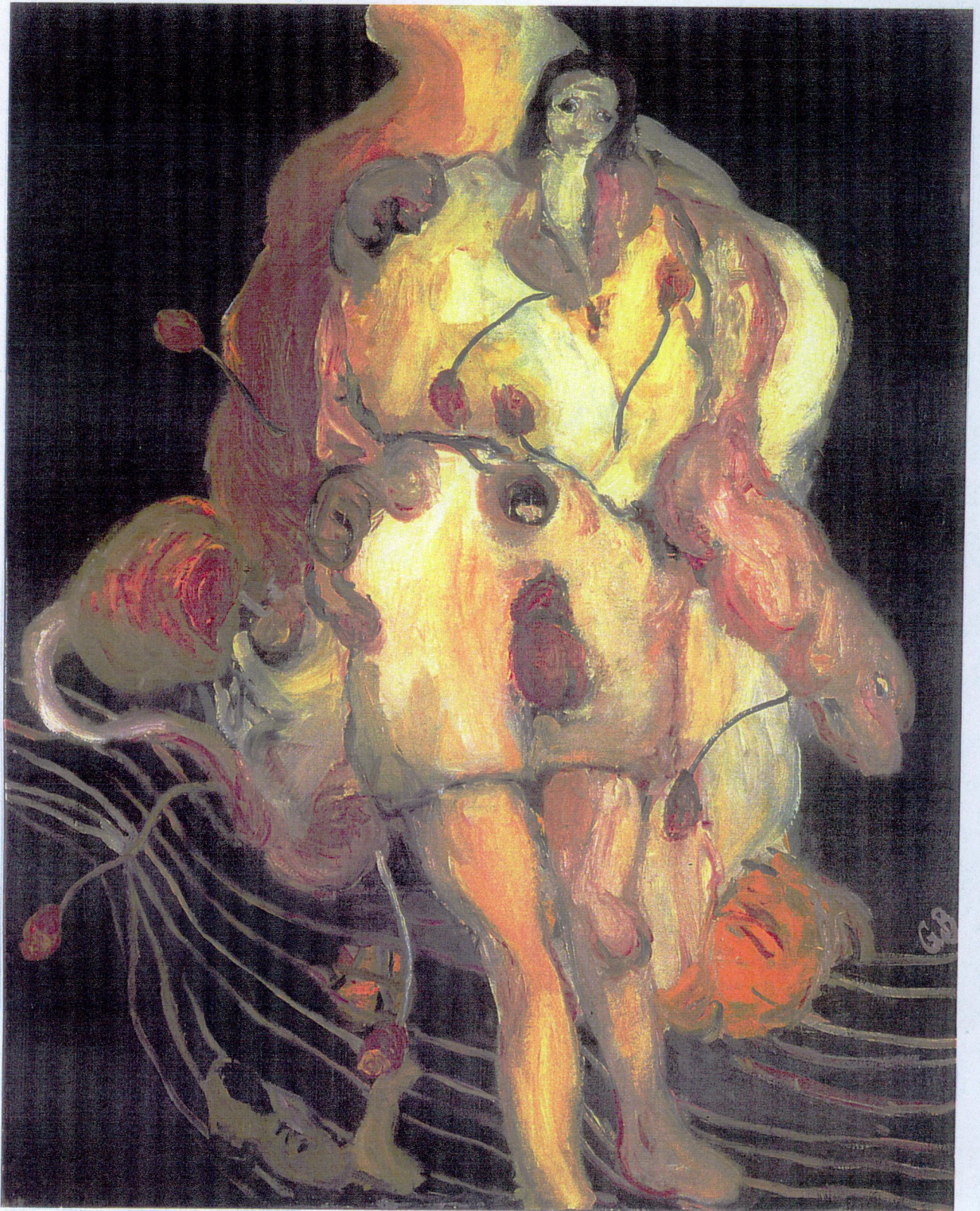
The Romantic movement in art, with its emphasis on emotion, imagination and sensitivity to nature, was at its height from the late-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Although it was a thoroughly international movement that had its roots in varying writers, attempts have been made to trace the impact of Romanticism on the development of Modernism as a whole - notably by Robert Rosenblum in his book *'Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko'* (1975). However, it seemed that it was in Germany above all that Romanticism took a deep hold on the artistic imagination; from Friedrich and Runge to Beuys, Kiefer and Baselitz. German artists have had a strong and continuing engagement with Romantic ideas and themes, drawn to the grotesque, fantastic elements of the movement and inspired by Romantic irony.



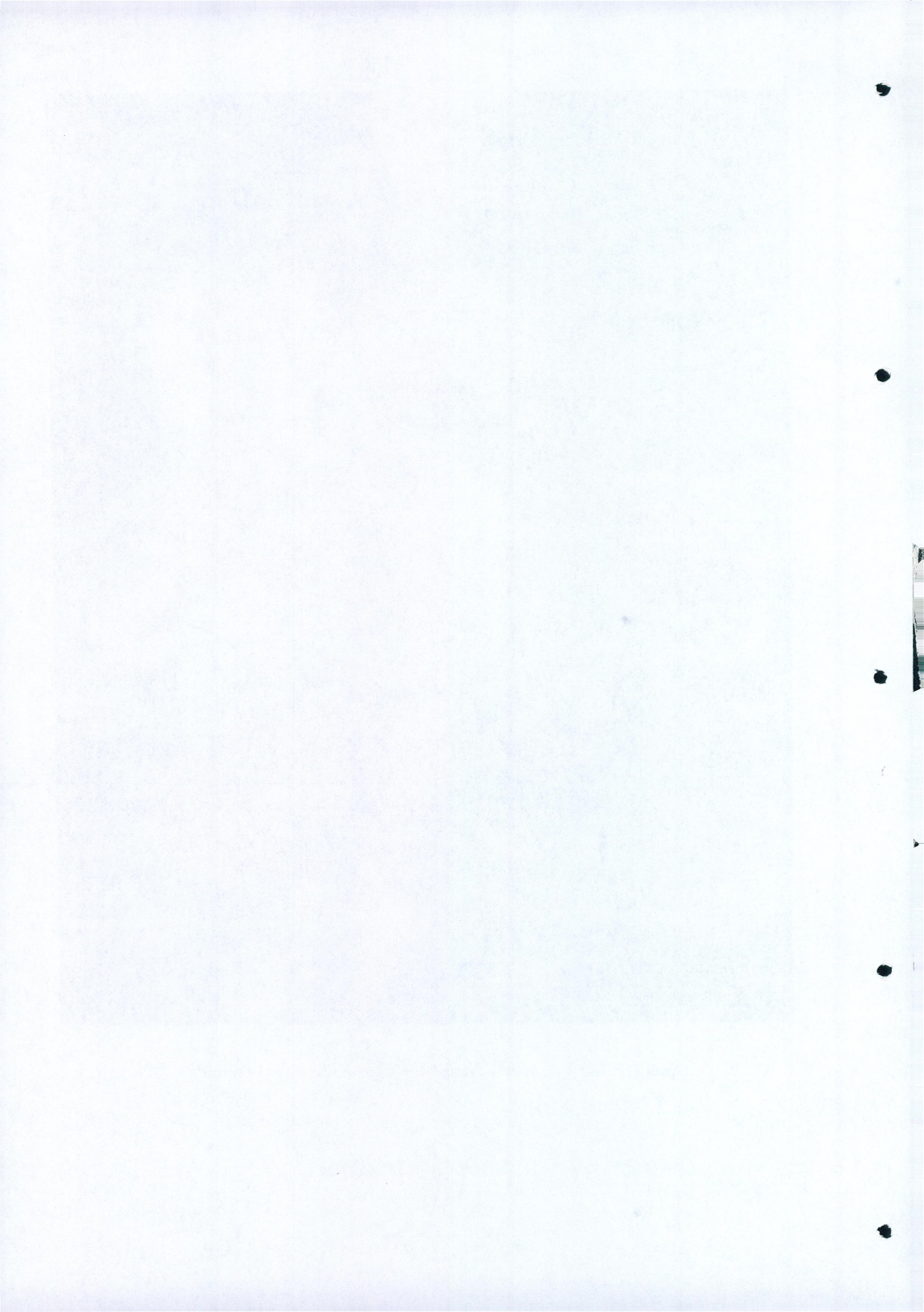
By the late 1950's much of the abstract art in Germany had become anonymously international. If Joseph Beuys helped break its hold by opening up new areas for art to explore, Georg Baselitz gave a new impetus to painting.

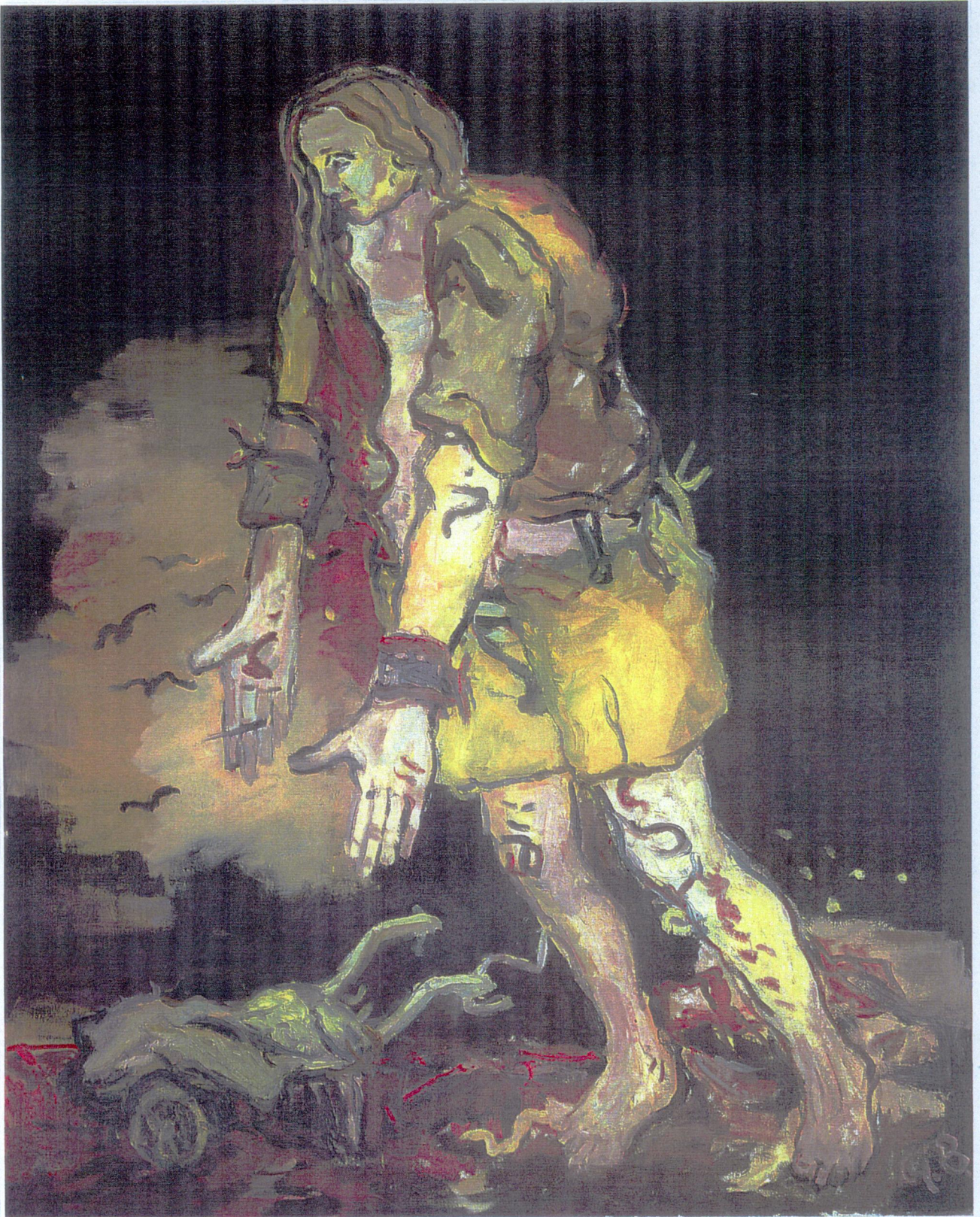
Born in Germany on the brink of World War II, and raised in the Soviet-dominated position of a divided nation, Baselitz, coming from the East was influenced by the memories and experiences connected to Caspar David Friedrich or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner rather than the tendencies in the West, from Paris and New York.

Avoiding both tachiste abstraction and literal-minded realism, Baselitz developed a form of 'outsider' painting that was deliberately anti avant-garde in the sense that it denied the Modernist vision of progress towards a future goal. Like other German Romantic artists it looked back to previous developments as a way forward. Two of his '*hero*' paintings, in which he dramatises his lonely, outsider position as a painter, bear in their titles the names of two German Romantic artists: Franz Pferr and Ludwig Richter. (Pl. 1, Pl. 2). Ludwig Richter's '*Lake in the Riesengebirge*', 1839, with its cliched Romantic image of the



Pl. 1. BASELITZ, *Mann im Mond - Franz Pforr* (*Man in The Moon - Franz Pforr*), 1965.





Pl. 2. BASELITZ, *Ludwig Richter auf dem Weg zur Arbeit*, (*Ludwig Richter on his Way to Work*), 1965.

artist striding confidently through a wild and inhospitable landscape, carrying a knapsack and staff and accompanied by a small boy and dog, was the source for some of Baselitz's anti-heroic figure pictures of the mid-sixties.

Romanticism in Germany began as a literary and philosophical movement. It soon spread to the visual arts and its impact here was various. This variety can be arranged under three main headings (man, past and nature).

MAN

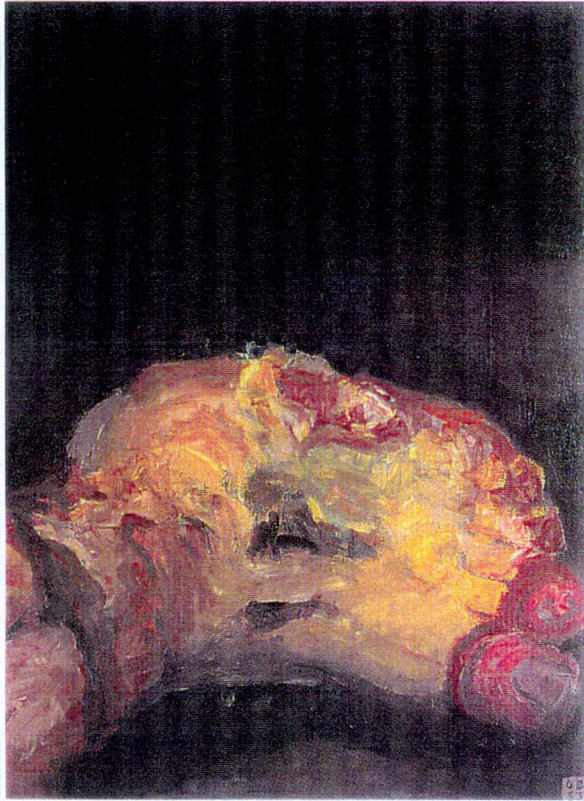
The Romantics saw man not just as a thinking being, but also as one guided by intuition and emotion. The artist took on a heroic, prophetic role, for the artist was seen as having a creative vision that combined both the instinctive and the rational. The poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) shared this view of creativity.

A philosophy of nature emerged in the early 19th century bordering on the one hand on mysticism and pantheism and extending on the other to a point close to the natural sciences. To artists in search of a language of pictorial symbols, nature-philosophy opened new ways of

expression. Goethe influenced the nature philosophers through the emphasis on the need for a penetrating study of nature, not confined to its visual aspect, but extending to internal functions. Goethe's *'Introduction to the Propyläen'* (1798), stressed the essential difference between art and nature, and imposed on the artist the need to study nature, guided by an awareness of the separate values of art -

"The human figure cannot be understood merely through observation of its surface; the interior must be laid bare, its parts must be separated, the connections perceived, the differences noted, action and reaction observed, the concealed, constant, and fundamental elements of the phenomena impressed on the mind, if one really wishes to contemplate and imitate what moves before our eyes in living waves as a beautiful, undivided whole" (Jason, 1970, p. 41).

Particular examples in Baselitz's work are the ten painted versions of *'P.D. Feet'*, begun in 1960 but mostly completed in 1963. (Pl. 3, Pl. 4). In these paintings, Baselitz concentrates on a motif which he obtains by dissection: he isolates one part of the body and gives it a compactness and formal clarity which speaks for the body as a whole. The insight into bodily reality that Baselitz offers is dominated by a paint surface that looks like a mixture of blood and fat, or else like decay. Aside from



Pl. 3.(left), BASELITZ, *2.P.D. Fuß - Alte Heimat*(*Second.P.D. Foot - The Old Native Country*), 1960-63.



Pl. 4.(right), BASELITZ, *Fünfter P.D. Fuß - Russischer Fuß* (*Fifth P.D. Foot - Russian Foot*), 1963.



this use of colour, '*P.D. Feet*' is derived from a profusion of organic or quasi-organic references.

PAST

In the nineteenth century there was a new sense of history, which encouraged a revaluation of the past, in particular the Middle Ages. The visual arts played a full role in this tendency, notably in the work of the Nazarenes.

A group of students at the Vienna Academy banded together in 1808 to paint medieval and religious subjects in an archaic manner. After the leaders of this group (Franz Pferr 1788-1812 and Friedrich Overbeck 1789-1869) moved to Rome in 1810 they became known as Nazarenes. In Rome they were able to put into practice their ideal of a cloistered community of artists. In 1812, the community gradually dispersed, while Overbeck remained the most influential artist of the group. The following excerpts from '*The Three Ways of Art*', written about 1810 as a contribution to the Nazarenes program of study, characterises Overbeck's approach to art and carries a suggestion of the mood and behaviour of Baselitz's '*hero*' -



"Three roads traverse the Land of Art, and, though they differ from one another, each has its peculiar charm, and all eventually lead the tireless traveller to his destination, the Temple of Immortality. Which of these three a young artist should chose ought therefore to be determined by his personal inclination, guided and fortified by reflection.

The first is the straight and simple Road of Nature he may occasionally have to put up with monotonous stretches of wasteland Of the three roads, this is the most heavily travelled What the traveller on this road must chiefly guard against are the bogs along one side where he may easily sink into mud over his ears, and the sandy wastes on the other side which may lead him away from the road and from his destination there are no mountains to climb, and the walking is easy" (Janson, 1970, p. 37).

The '*hero*' Baselitz, stands in a landscape of ruins, larger than life in his ragged clothes, barefoot, with a heavy knapsack - more like a homeless martyr than a radiant hero. The subjects of this series are young men - fighters, poets and painters - with whom Baselitz identified. These paintings demonstrate Baselitz's affinity with German Romanticism, also the defeated German soldiers who returned to the wreckage of their homeland after World War II. This is a country that has never recovered from the war and will always bear its mark. The survivors -



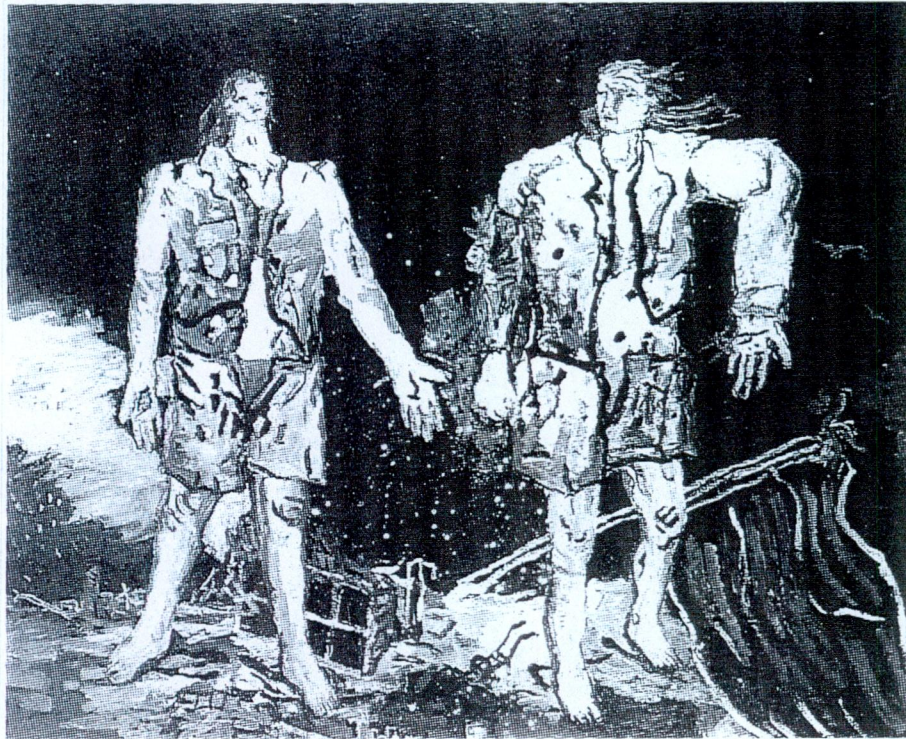
scarred, wounded and disabled though they are - draw themselves up to preserve their dignity, having lost everything else. In a world lying in ruins they want to save their former misused ideals and fill them once more with vitality:

"The second road is the Road of Fantasy. Few dare to enter this region What distinguishes this road from the other is the colossal and sublime.... Never is the wanderer's mind at peace: wild joy and terror, fear and expectation beset him in turn. Let those who love strong emotion and lawless freedom travel this road, and let them walk boldly, it is sure to take them most directly to their destination" (Janson, 1970, p. 38).

What differentiates Baselitz's work from that of many of his German colleagues is his attachment to the art of the past and to the reality of a world that lies tattered around him. The '*hero*' is seen surrounded by scorched earth, burning houses, crosses, or rusting farm equipment. Destruction appears everywhere, but the figure is a survivor. Into this image of a Romantic, one may project the artist himself, as a wanderer, poet, and painter attached to his bit of earth.

One of the most complex 'Heroes' on formal and thematic levels is also the largest, "*Die Grossen Freunde*" (*The Great Friends*, 1965)

(Pl.5). In 1966, Baselitz wrote a manifesto, in which he characterised "*The Great Friends*" as "*an ideal picture, a gift of God, a sine qua non-*



Pl. 5. BASELITZ, Die Grossen Freunde, (*The Great Friends*), 1965.

a revelation. The picture is the idée fixe of friendship" (Baselitz, 1983, p. 33). Adding to the interaction is the way in which they gaze at each other, in silent but amicable companionship, while all around them are the ruins of their world. These figures are the relics of a system that has failed, yet they are also models of the future, companions determined to make their way in a new world:

"But those who love gentler impressions and who



like neither the bright midday light of the land of Nature, nor the stormy night of the Land of Fantasy take the third road the road of the Ideal or of Beauty ... This road, besides, is neither so populous as the first, nor so deserted as the second, and the travellers on it differ from those of the second road by their sociability. One sees them walking in pairs, and friendship and love But in the very charm of this road there lies a danger to the traveller, for it may cause him to forget his destination, and cause him to lose all desire for the Temple of Immortality" (Janson, 1970, p. 39).

NATURE

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the new interest in the natural world as a source of emotional and spiritual enlightenment encouraged a profound transformation in landscape painting, as can be seen in the work of Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840.

A motif in the work of Friedrich might be called the '*pathetic fallacy*' - John Ruskin's phrase in '*Modern Painters*'. Ruskin was pointing, in literary examples, to the strange attribution of human feelings to non-human subjects, especially landscape elements; but he might well have been characterising the new attitude of so many Romantic artists to nature in general, and to trees in particular. Often, in the landscape



PI. 6. CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH, *Lone Tree*, 1823.



painting of the early nineteenth century, we feel so great an empathy of the artist with the life of an individual tree that this lifeless landscape element can suddenly have an almost human presence.

Friedrich's painting is of a single tree against a landscape, centralised to obtain attention and further humanised by the presence, under its sheltering branches, of a shepherd against its trunk. (Pl. 6).

Unique among Baselitz's '*Hero*' paintings, which are otherwise human portraits, is "*Der Baum 1*" (*The Tree 1, 1965-66*) in which the form of the tree is used to suggest the Crucifixion or Tree of Knowledge. (Pl. 7). The tree motif recalls the Romantic era, exemplified by Friedrich, in whose work, nature and religion were often intertwined.

The landscape of Germany had been changed by the War; the picture that Baselitz gives us is a scene of desolation rather than beauty. The tree, shorn of its leaves and branches, is placed, like the figures in '*Heroes*' in the centre of the canvas. To the left of the tree a knife is stuck in the ground. The tree's few remaining branches are brittle. In light of Baselitz's references to Christian iconography in this and other



Pl. 7. BASELITZ, *Der Baum I*, (*The Tree I*), 1965 -66).

works, it could be inferred that the tree sheds the blood and tears of Christ. However, by the mid 1970's, nature had lost its appeal as an emblem of the religious and the sublime.

The philosopher F.W.J. von Schelling 1775-1854 was the most influential spokesman of the nature philosophers during the early 19th century. His philosophy strongly influenced the later, naturalist phase of the Romantic movement.

The following is taken from a lecture which Schelling delivered before the Royal Academy of Sciences of Munich, in 1987 -

“... in nature the perfect in mingled with the imperfect, the beautiful with the unbeautiful. Now, how should he who stands in no other relation to nature than that of servile imitation distinguish the one from the other?” (Janson, 1970, p. 40).

The question of ‘beauty’ - which has occupied French artists since Ingres was a of minor importance to the German artists. They were determined to penetrate behind the objects of the real world in order to disclose an underlying significance which they felt had been lost. Judged according to the aesthetic canon which developed from Post Impressionism, art as an existential assertion of the self is ugly art.

Whether manifested in the contorted figures of a Kirchner or the 'bleeding' tree of a Baselitz.

EXPRESSIONISM

After 1830 Romanticism began to lose much of its initial momentum and clarity of conception. New movements, Realism in particular, came along and led not only to a decline in interest in Romanticism but, in the case of some artists like Friedrich, to an almost total neglect. Towards the end of the century, however, there was a renewed interest in Germany in Romantic themes and ideas. This was partly in response to the emergence of the Symbolist movement in France, which in turn owed much to German Romantic theory. Edvard Munch, who often worked in Germany was united with the Northern German Romantics by his view of the cycles of human life (Dance of Life, Frieze of Life), by the riddles of beginnings and end, by the symbolism of the child, and in general by his replacement of traditional mythology with a new symbolism.

Some of Baselitz's more recent paintings pay specific tribute to Munch. Munch's poignant last self-portraits, in which the aged artist

stands pathetically to attention by his bed, or in front of a window framing a few bare winter branches, are reflected in some canvases painted in 1982. (Pl. 8). The schematic nature of the figures and the agitated brushstrokes relate closely to the work of Munch. The brushstrokes seem random in some areas, while they follow the contours of the figures in others; overall, they create an aura of hysteria and madness, comparable to that captured in *'The Scream'*. (Pl. 9).

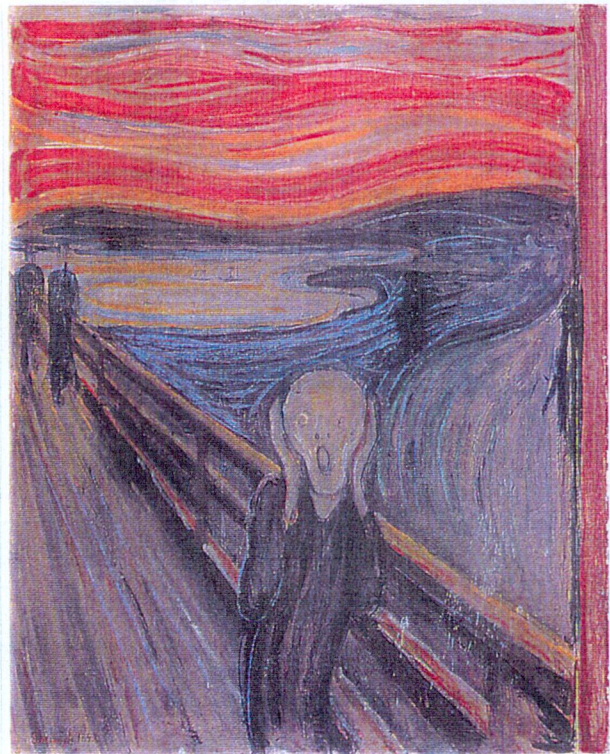
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) has come to be recognised, if not as the leader, as the initiator, of *'Die Brücke'*. The efforts of the Brücke painters in the woodcut medium not only belonged to their most important accomplishments, but were also decisive in the development of their style in painting. *'Self-Portrait at Dawn'* a lithograph of 1906 seems impossible without knowledge of a Munch-like line and also content.

From the beginning the artists of *'Die Brücke'* divided their time between the town, and the country; in order to paint in the remotest natural surroundings. The ways in which Kirchner and his group experienced the world, their artistic intentions, their vision and its



Pl. 8.(top), BASELITZ, *Sterne im Fenster*, (*Stars in the Window*), August 6, 1982.

Pl. 9.(right), EDVARD MUNCH, *Der Schrei*, (*The Scream*), 1893.



translation into pictorial form complemented each other most effectively. The artists shared the same studio and the same literary interests, in many ways resembling the Nazarenes of the early 19th century. For example Pforr wrote to his friend in 1808 -

"We have founded a little club here which is composed of prospective artists who come together for mutual discussion and criticism of each other's work" (Janson, 1970, p.33).

In '*Self-portrait as a Soldier*' Kirchner, wears his uniform as a madman wears a strait-jacket. (Pl. 10). The face is frozen into a mask, the eye-sockets appear sightless and empty. He is lifting up the bloody stump of his right arm - the hand has been amputated. There is also a lot of self-identification in a number of Baselitz's images, such as '*Mann im Mond*' - Franz Pforr (*Man in the Moon* - Franz Pforr) 1965, and '*Der Dichter*' (Poet), 1965: individuals in a hallucinatory state, whose bodies are a source of pain to them. (Pl. 11). It is as though the artists wish to use this forceful metaphor to express the idea that war mutilates man, even if it leaves him physically unharmed.



PI. 10. ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER, *Self-portrait as a Soldier*, 1905.



Pl. 11. BASELITZ, *Der Dichter (The Poet)*, 1965.



The impression that Baselitz was pursuing a link with German Expressionists and their forebears was furthered by *'Nachtessen in Dresden'* (*Dinner in Dresden*, 1983). The Dresden of the title was an explicit reference to the Brücke, which was founded in that city in 1905. The painters of the Brücke are lined up while in *'Der Brückechor'* (*The Brücke Chorus*) the figures are reminiscent of wood carvings, charged with tension by harsh discords of colour. Pure reds, oranges, yellows and blues provide a dazzling contrast to the extensive black overpainting in the brooding Munch pictures of a few months earlier.

In 1980, Baselitz's contribution to the Venice Biennale consisted of just one work, his first major sculpture, *'Modell für eine Skulptur'* (*Model for a Sculpture*, 1979-80). Baselitz has produced more than fifty sculptures since. For each the artist has selected a single tree, cutting into the trunk with a chainsaw, chisel, and axe until a figure emerged. His use of trees may carry some of the same associations as the tree motif in his paintings.

'Ohne Title' (*Untitled*, 1982-84) is a sculpture that reflects Baselitz's interest in the artists of the Brücke as well as their precursor, Edvard Munch. Baselitz used colour to define the torso, hands, eyes, nose;



recalling ritualistic body painting. With its ovoid head and heavily outlined eyes, 'Untitled' is also related to the painting 'Nachtessen in Dresden' (*Dinner in Dresden*, 1983).

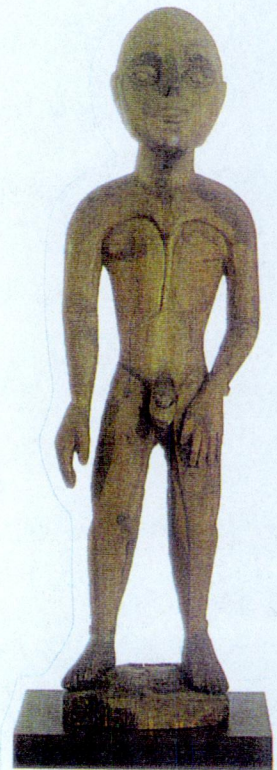
'Ohne Title' (*Untitled*, 1982-83), is a work that has been compared to Kirchner's 'Male Nude' (*Adam*, 1912). (Pl. 12, Pl. 13). The surface of Baselitz's sculpture is far cruder than that of Kirchner's; both are unpolished, with surface markings. However, Kirchner established a careful symmetry by balancing the shoulders, while Baselitz's figure is toppled by the oversized right arm and destabilised legs.

A major exhibition of Abstract Expressionism was held in Berlin in the 1950's. Here the young German artists discovered new dimensions of freedom and form. This new found freedom of expression, coupled with a romantically exaggerated self-awareness, became Baselitz's tools as he worked on a new image of himself by means of a discourse with his own past.



Pl. 12.(top), BASELITZ,
Ohne Titel (untitled),
1982 - 83.

Pl. 13.(right), ERNST
LUDWIG KIRCHNER,
Male Nude, (Adam), 1912.



CHAPTER 2

BASELITZ AND EXPRESSIONISM IN THE EIGHTIES.

BACKGROUND.

When the First World War came to an end artists immediately began working with enormous zest. This marked a sharp contrast to the later situation at the end of the Second World War. Baselitz spoke of the fatherless generation which had to seek out their own models, and therefore went back beyond the generation of their fathers. Baselitz produced his first and second '*Pandämonium*' manifestos in 1961 and 1962. These manifestos represented the cry of youth, the revolt of artists who expressed the anguish of existence in that period. Baselitz declares - "*perspective faces drawn by the moon on the rivers, the faces on which the sewage waters drip*" (Baselitz, quoted by Selz, 1996, p.254). For the first time in the post-war years independent art was developing which was not ashamed of its German origin and rejected international uniformity. These experiences could now be once again expressed in art as in Baselitz's '*Saxon Landscapes*'.

The new art bore the stamp of the German, both in its positive and negative aspects. In its beginnings with Baselitz it was melancholic and impassioned combined with morbid memories. These artists liberated themselves and their painting from the constricted progression of Impressionism, to Expressionism, to Abstraction. They achieved their freedom by recalling the various possibilities of painting independent of these trends. Just as they resisted abstraction, so they did not submit to the pressure of a realistic art. They created the foundations for the re-emergence and recognition of a German art which reflected their spiritual position. It led to the reappraisal of traditional art and to the overthrow of the prevailing concept of the avant-garde. But "*...many years of work were necessary before things began to take shape*". (Gachnang, 1982, p. 35).

No place could be found for the Expressionist impulse in the 60's atmosphere. Expressionism grows in references to the visionary and the irrational, and triumphs in painting's physical properties, which it looks to as a means of generating images and stirring the emotions. The art of the sixties proved inhospitable to these impulses and when *'Neo-*

Expressionism' broke upon us in the late seventies and early eighties, many people were unprepared.

Greater consideration is given to those artists who made a name for themselves at the beginning of the sixties, and they are now appreciated for the freedom which they succeeded in gaining. The most obvious painting from this period, is Baselitz's '*Die Grossen Freunde*' (*The Great Friends*) painted in 1965.

BASELITZ'S RISE TO FAME.

On 15 January 1981 the Royal Academy of Arts in London, opened a new show entitled '*A New Spirit in Painting*'. The exhibition was an attempt to predict what would seem artistically important during the decade to follow. Its inclusions and omissions were highly significant for the art of the 1980s. There was a large group of German artists, whose work was loosely related to the old German Expressionism of the pre-World War I years. Most of these artists were already much exhibited in Germany itself, but the Royal Academy marked their international breakthrough. To this group of Germans were added artists of other nationalities. For critics, these inclusions were the most

important aspect of the show. The controversy aroused by the decision to include so many new German artists put the whole German school in the limelight. German *'Neo-Expressionist'* artists became major international stars, at a level reserved during the previous three decades for the school of New York and for almost no others. It was not merely European artists, but also European critics and curators who began to show a new independence.

"The development and reception of German Neo-Expressionism from Baselitz to Fetting seems to form a complete trajectory from total rejection to the fullest international acceptance" (Smith, 1990, p. 19).

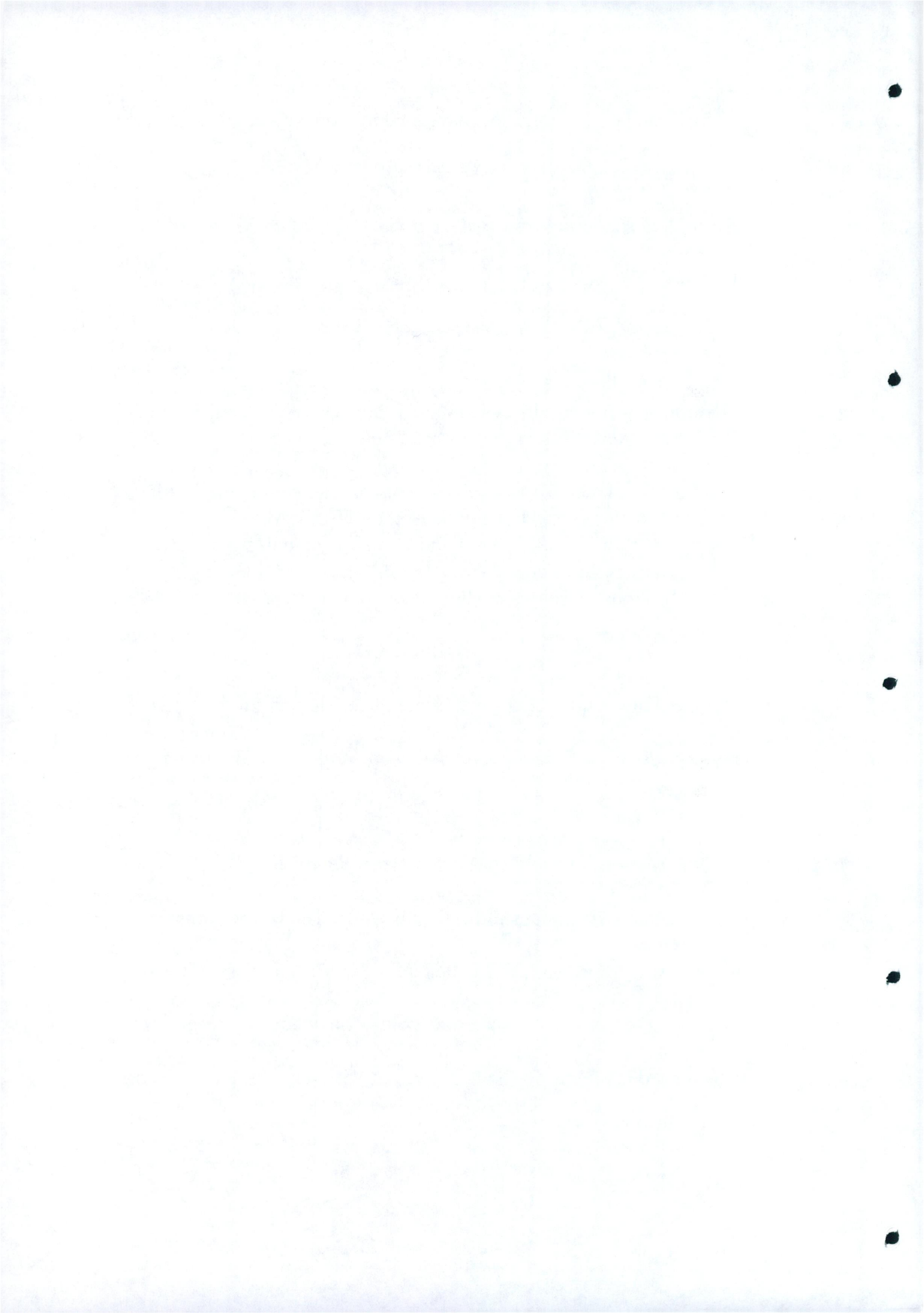
Collectors who had stopped buying contemporary work because they grew tired of Minimalism and Conceptualism fell all over themselves in their haste to buy the large-scale, figurative, deliberately crude, but highly ambitious paintings of Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Robert Longo, Eric Fischl, and their European counterparts. The excitement that greeted the 'new' work was fanned by aggressive marketing and promotion. Dozens of art dealers found they could sell anything in the eighties.

Private and public collectors have paid millions for Baselitz's work - "*\$1.1 million at a Sotheby's New York auction ... for his enigmatic picture 'Ludwig Richter on his Way to Work' (1965) and \$1.5 million ... by Berlin's National Gallery for a canvas from the mid-1960s. And the prices are still climbing*".(Dornberg, 1992, p.102).

"The successful artist today must exhibit more widely than ever before. Twenty or thirty years ago, dealers in New York used to struggle against dealers in Paris or London, each affirming the national superiority of their artists. What you have instead, on the multinational model, is associations of galleries selling the one product in New York, London, Dusseldorf, Paris, Milan ... But this means that the successful artist must work on an industrial scale. How many pictures does George Baselitz, that sturdy German fountain of overwrought mediocrity, paint in a year?" (Hughes, 1990, p.403).

Coinciding with Baselitz's increasing fame, his paintings got bolder and more obvious. "*How else to explain the almost carnivalesque imagery of the 'Orange-Eaters' and 'Drinkers'?*"(Adams, 1995, p.93).

(pl. 14). However, Baselitz has claimed that he has never let commercial considerations influence his work. The fact remains that, most of the European artists labelled '*Neo-Expressionist*' were well established in Germany or Italy long before the boom in the eighties. Baselitz had his first solo show in Berlin in 1961 and one almost every

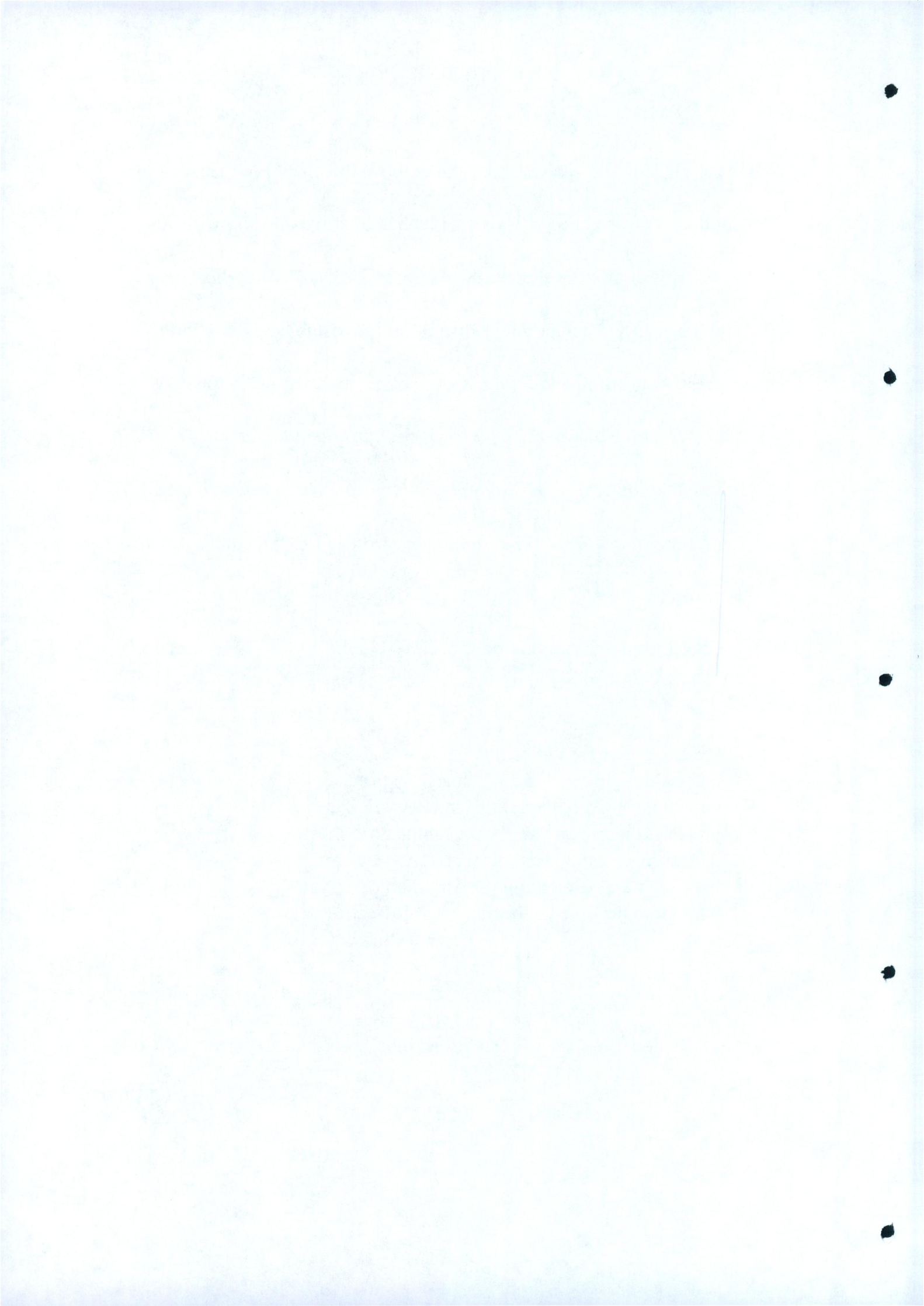


year thereafter. In 1979 he showed at the Stedelijk, Van Abbenuseum, in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, and at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. It was not until 1981 that he had his first solo show in New York - a year after he represented Germany in the Venice Biennale. These artists had actually introduced figurative subject matter, and expressive gestural and chromatic qualities into their art in the early 60's. *"The idea that money, patronage and trade automatically corrupt the wells of imagination is a pious fiction, believed by some utopian lefties and a few people of genius such as Blake but flatly contradicted by history itself"*. (Hughes, 1990, p. 338).

Clearly, something important occurred in the 1980s. In his essay, *"Signs of Passion"*, Krumer states,

"Nothing is more incalculable in art - or more inevitable - than a genuine change in taste the denial of certain qualities in one period prepares the ground for their triumphal return later, its timetable can never be accurately predicted. Its roots lie in something deeper and more mysterious than mere fashion." (Joachimides, 1983, p. 12).

The *'Neo-Expressionist'* had to bring to painting an ability to include the kind of poetry and fantasy that it had long been denied. The mystical,





Pl. 14. BASELITZ, *Orangenesser (x)*, (*Orange Eater (x)*), June 1981.



the erotic, and the hallucinatory were once again made welcome in painting.

NEO-EXPRESSIONISM.

The problem with Baselitz is that his work appears to merely reaffirm the tradition of German Expressionism. His images of nude men seem to belong to the same rough breed as Kirchner's *'Artillerymen in The Shower'* (1915). One might even ask: *"Who needs Baselitz, when we already have Kirchner?"* Baselitz seems *"a late bus of modern art, a macho Existentialist retroactively Germanising past artistic periods"*. (Adams, 1995, p. 93).

However, the term *'Neo-Expressionism'* cannot be applied to Baselitz's painting. It hinders the essential differentiation of its various origins and influences. The term Expressionism has exact meaning as a description of style for Post-Impressionist painting, particularly for the German art of Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter. It can be argued that what we today call *'Expressionism'* occurs in different ways in all art forms. Its particularly German manifestation at the beginning of this century began as a response to tensions that were common in Europe

and which led to World War 1 but which appeared intensely within earlier German Expressionist movements. *'Neo-Expressionism'* suggests superficial imitation of these movements. It only serves as criticism of an art which is judged to be of a later and less distinguished generation, and therefore incapable of innovation.

Yet, post-war art is *"reactions to the decisive impulses of those movements that arose in the early part of this century - expressionism, abstraction, constructivism, dadaism, and surrealism"*. (Joachimides, 1983, p.9). If abstract expressionism had pointed to the traditions of these movements, does this lower its achievement in stretching our visual and spiritual experience? This way of painting cannot simply be dated to the years from 1905 to 1913! There has been a recurring need for such expression ever since El Greco and Friedrich.

From the beginning Baselitz found himself and his vision as to what painting should be about, totally marginalised. In producing his work of the 1960s, Baselitz was consciously seeking the position of an outsider. Appropriately, he drew his inspiration primarily from the experiences, adventures, and dreams that he derived from his reading into the past. Accordingly, the painters who interested him at the time were mostly



those who had worked in a similar context of total isolation. In a list of artists whom Baselitz considered significant during the various phases of his development: Artaud, Vrubel, Chassac, Schönberg, Gallén-Kallela, The Mannerists, Rayski, Malevich, Batthus, Guston, African art, Munch, etc., none of these was an expressionist in the narrow sense. These names represent a view of art that looks back to the 1920's and to the turn of the century and before, not in search of stylistic models but in search of art as existence in opposition to the prevailing norms. In the same way, Baselitz, looks back to Germany's past in search of art opposing the prevailing norms.

What we do find in the new German painting is the coming together of two international discards - painting and German culture with its relationship to the spiritual depths. Both outcasts "*become allies creating a new kind of spiritual painting.*" (Kuspit, 1993, p. 6). Kuspit notes that the new German painters are keenly aware of making art history and are positioned to "*realise history through art*" (Kuspit, 1993, p.5), a notion that is fraught with a special significance for them because of the recent history of the German nation. Kuspit points out that their rapid emergence as a unified movement was generated by a

concerted effort on the part of critics, museum directors, collectors and dealers to make it succeed.

Expressionism in general is aggressive against reality in order to see what is essential to reality. The German tradition is obsessed with such force, which it usually locates in nature. The power once thought of as natural in the symbol is transferred to the act of painting through the very act of "expressively" painting the symbol. In an interview with Henry Geldzahler, Baselitz declared:

"I am German and German painting is called expressive, not only from the Expressionists' time but also from an earlier time; German art always presents itself as expressive. This starts with the primitive Gothic, then Romantic painters, and ends with the present." (quoted in Siegel, 1988, p. 95).

It is too early, of course, to offer any clear judgements about the achievements of the 'Neo-Expressionists' - a fact that is sometimes forgotten in the centre of the publicity and the controversy it has inspired.

"All this media melodrama, of course, when it is not a matter of hard sell, is a way of testing the new painting, putting pressure on it to measure up to high standards. If enough critical pressure is applied, if it is made sufficiently self-conscious to have something to live up to, it might just emerge into greatness." (Kuspit, 1993, p. 29).

CHAPTER 3

THE RETURN OF THE HERO.

THE UPSIDE-DOWN TRICK.

In 1969 Georg Baselitz turned his first picture on its head, a 'trick' which transformed his expressive figurative paintings into objects of pure painting, and made him one of the most famous artists in Germany. The subject matter was edged out in favour of colour, planes, lines, and a composition made recognisable thanks only to the painter's skill.

All of Baselitz's 'tricks' are aimed at being a modern artist, an artist who is part of the tradition, who breaks this tradition in order to continue it, an artist from a tradition - who is a contemporary artist and perhaps a few steps ahead.

"... one must be a German to understand that to make art today is to challenge history as well as art history. One must come from a world that has experienced history with a special thoroughness - a world that, having survived an unexpectedly great number of historical disasters, seems to have a special destiny - to know what it is to "realise" history through art". (Kuspit, 1993, p. 5).

The upside-down 'trick' came neither by chance nor voluntary. It wasn't intended to shock, but had been in the making in Baselitz's work for a long time and finally appeared as a logical conclusion. Turning the image upside-down was an act of freedom from reality, which wasn't abandoned because of it. The picture claimed complete autonomy for itself by putting the old relationship of the visible upside-down.

For the viewer the consequences extended much further than the painter would have thought. The element of surprise proved to be too great. Turning the motifs upside-down had been intended to make one forget the subject, but it riveted the gaze. It wasn't the motif itself which attracted the viewer's attention, but the fact that it was standing on its head. The gaze had thus not been freed by turning the figures upside-down, the one fixed gaze had merely been replaced by another. Also, the object standing on its head begins to attract the viewer anew and he begins piecing it together from the details. Baselitz leaves it up to us to shake off the disorienting effects and detach ourselves from the subject matter, so that the 'abstraction' can emerge from the process of perception itself.



Baselitz uses painting to undermine a powerful reality. Painting is reduced to chance, in order to undermine the apparent hold of reality and "*...to revitalise our relationship to the familiar by respiritualising it*". (Kuspit, 1993, p. 7). The 'hero' Baselitz, returns respiritualised. This is achieved by turning the motif upside-down.

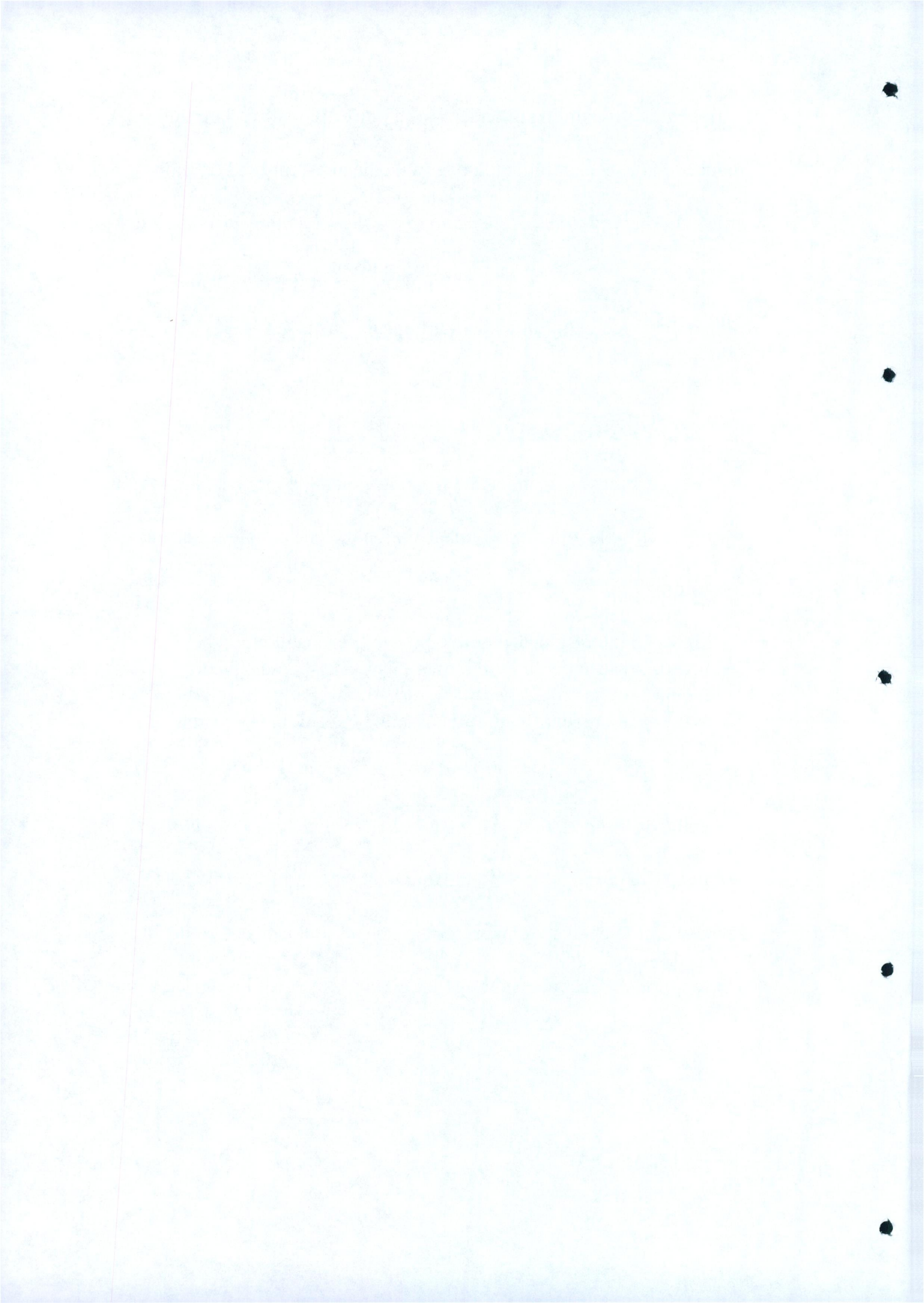
ABSTRACT FIGURATIVE PAINTING.

Baselitz brings an abstract and figurative element into his painting. It would be feasible to leave the image out on the one hand but Baselitz has said:

"I have no interest whatever in doing so (i.e. abandoning the image), because I entirely fail to see why one should have to renounce private messages in the form of images, even if only for the sake of identification". (Baselitz, quoted by Gachnang, 1981, p.71).

On the other hand, the image is for him "*completely inessential and of secondary importance*". (Baselitz, quoted by Gachnang, 1981,p.71).

Baselitz has decided to paint certain images, but he has also decided not to renounce abstract painting. He allows himself to be carried along



with the contradiction, introduces objects into the painting and, in the moment of their realisation, destroys them.

"... signs of the German spirit are treated ironically, with an irony compounded of a sense of absurdist incomprehension and anarchistic abandon. A sign of spiritual power is reduced to an empty abstraction. The power once thought of as inherent in the symbol is transferred to the act of painting through the very act of 'expressively' painting the symbol". (Kuspit, 1993, p. 6,7).

Painting itself should be the theme of painting without adopting abstractionism as a genre. This has a decidedly irritating effect on the viewer, a retention of the subject matter permanently evokes another symbolic level of meaning. Because Baselitz follows the tradition of German Expressionism his subjects generate an emotional quality. Tragedy, fear and menace come through his works, themes which at the same time are rejected by the painting technique. This creates a paradox as the paintings have themselves as their themes. In order to be convincing, the artist must sacrifice reality, although he is tied to it.

Baselitz himself always speaks of the 'motifs' of his canvas but never of themes, subjects, or objects. In this connection, the word 'motif'

denotes something that already existed in painted form before the artist took it up and developed it. The reversal of his motifs are an indication of the fact that Baselitz' goal lies elsewhere than in the treatment of any particular theme. Ever since his heroic images it has been evident that he takes up subjects, and treats them as motifs only on a constructive and speculative pictorial level. Baselitz neither illustrates a theme nor demonstrates a method but achieves both in one. The crouching figure in *'The Gleaner'* 1978 and *'The Eagle'* paintings contain figures that are clear forms in paintings that are otherwise resolutely abstract. (pl. 15, Pl. 16). By holding on to some conventions through his lively gestures and emotive colours, Baselitz strengthened both abstract and figurative painting and infused each with a new dimension. The 'hero' is filled with a new dimension through a combination of both figurative and abstract painting.

"If memory is a subjective action in the present alternately repressing a past and finding a past (at times in disguise), and if memory is played out, as Freud says, in dreams, in images, then it makes sense particularly in Germany that figurative painting would return" (Krens, 1989, p. 37).



Pl. 15. BASELITZ, Die Ährenleserin, (*The Gleaner*), August 1978.



Pl. 16. BASELITZ, *Fingermalerei I - Adler - á la*, (*Fingerpainting I - Eagle - á la*), 1971 - 72.



FURTHER PARODY.

For the Romantic philosopher, Friedrich Schlegel, "*Romantic Irony*" was a way to "the absolutely Romantic", while "irony is the form taken by the paradoxical, all that is simultaneously good and great is paradoxical". (Hartley, 1994, p. 179-180). Contradiction and paradox lie at the heart of Baselitz's art. It becomes a way to terms with his rich and terrifying gift of the past. Baselitz seems to have confessed that change includes continuity, and has shown a model for the practice of reorganisation of that past. His "parodic forms play on the tensions created by this historical awareness" (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 4), and signal a desire to rework those forms to his own needs. "*All avant-garde texts have been... haunted by cultural memories whose tyrannical weight they must overthrow by their incorporation and inversion of them*". (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 5). Baselitz literally 'inverts' his painting, turning them upside-down.

Parody is a form of imitation, while imitation is characterised by ironic inversion. Like parody, imitation gives Baselitz a workable

stance toward the past in its paradoxical *'trick'* of repetition and inversion as a source of freedom.

In his recent paintings, as in all his work, Baselitz reminds us how

"we are continually fleeing from the past and we are always fleeing into the future. And we flee into the future, because the past is present and continually about us ... We speak of art and for art you need material. But this material is applied not by our fathers or grandfathers, but actually by the past, which is hidden to such an extent that when we gaze at it, see it and experience it, we have a feeling that it is a picture of the future. What emerges is strangely complex, which means that one is always very surprised when something is excavated from the earth and how modern it is" (Baselitz, quoted by Rosenthal, 1990, p. 14).

Since 1985, Baselitz has been using a method in his paintings that involve a free, associative overlapping of various motifs and details within a single work. This process resulted in a series of paintings such as *'Pastorale-Die Nacht'* (*Pastoral - The Night*) 1985-1986 and *'In Das Materbild'* (*The Painter's Picture*) 1987-1988, which combine a number of overlaid, associative elements, like memories coming in and out of focus.

'Pastoral - The Night' is a summation comprising a number of motifs and themes from different periods in Baselitz's work. Included are heads from the *'Heroes'* series, eagles, grazing animal forms, and the



figure of Elke (Baselitz's wife), who represents the eternal female. Myth and reality are woven together.

In *'The Painter's Picture'*, the artist again reworked familiar motifs - for example, the tree and the house from the 1960's. Among the artists he set out to paint are Carl Fredrick Hill. The large central figure is a combination of Edvard Munch and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.

Baselitz quotes motifs either from his own earlier work of other artists. This surfaces in an associative way while he is at work on a particular canvas. In the Horse's Head 1988, a memory of a late Munch painting of horses galloping in the snow came to mind which he brought into his own work.

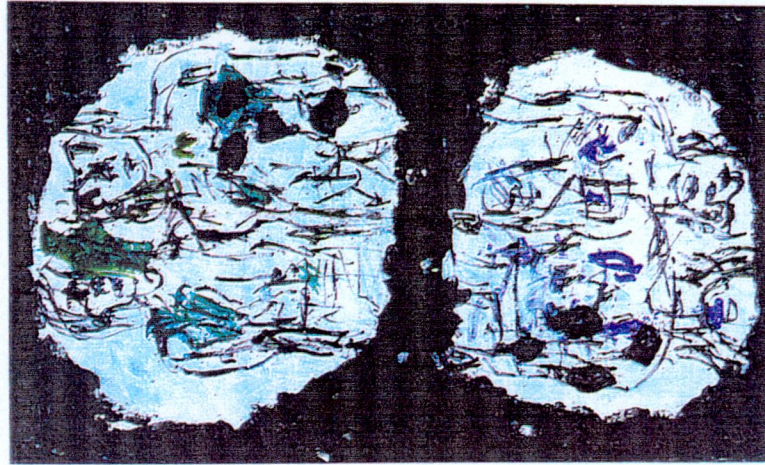
In music, what is usually called quotation or borrowing has become an important, self-conscious aesthetic device. "*Just as Rochberg used Mozart and Mahler in his 'Music for the Magic Theatre', so Foss uses the prelude of Bach's 'Violin Partita in E' in his 'Phorion' (Baroque Variations)*". (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 12). His 'borrowing' is in fragmented form giving an ironic, terrifying experience through distortion. Like the work of Baselitz, 'borrowing' like this is not a meant to show similarity and it is not a matter of nostalgic copying of

the past. If any Mozart or Beethoven's concertos were composed today, it would be shameful, however, like in the work of Baselitz it could be achieved ironically to show an awareness of where music both is and has been.

BACK TO HIS ROOTS.

Many paintings from the 1990's show evidence of the artists footprints. (Pl. 17). For Baselitz, this process heightens the mysteries of the creative act. The brutality captured in '*P.D. Feet*' series has been replaced by an equally daring if different form of confrontation. The artist has trampled black pigment into the pictures with his feet, and has left circular tracks of dancing on his pictorial motif rather like a cave painter. The motifs, as a result, have been desecrated at much the same time as the artist pays them homage. Dancing or walking on the painting like this actually means going back to his own roots:

"I am a German artist and what I do is rooted in the German tradition. Its ugly and expressive and - this is held to be very serious - doesn't make any attempt to spill out garbage, to show the soul, to be dirty, something that if you seriously behave like a member of society, you hide and you don't show" (Flash Art, Summer '93).



Pl. 17. BASELITZ, Bildsechs, (*Painting 6*), 1991.

Baselitz clearly resurrects one of the earliest roles of the artist - as walker or wanderer:

"I dig in the past and the past is buried in the ground. I feel the past when I walk over the stone epitaphs on an old church floor. I am getting somewhat the same sensation in going over a canvas barefoot" (Art News, Oct. '92).

It appears that, in the work of Georg Baselitz, shallow effects are:

"not the important thing; what matters is the quiet, pious spirit of those old times. This is what should inspire the painter and guide to pure Christian beauty, so that like a new dawn, the radiance of this beauty may illuminate the creations of a reviving art". (, Janson, 1970, p. 32).

CONCLUSION.

“This art is not only a function of present needs but a reckoning with past dilemmas”. (Arts magazine, March 1990).

All representation is based on memory. Through a selective dialogue between the present and the past, the work of Baselitz has come to recognise that the present will inevitably have an impact on what is remembered and how. The division of East and West Germany is demonstrated in Baselitz's painting through the presence of the 'abstraction' of the West and the 'figuration' of Germany's past. The reappearances of the figure becomes memory's image in which the forgotten invades the present.

What makes the German scares of war different from that of Europe is the unmatched loss of pride in national heritage that went along with defeat. Baselitz uses a process of historical re-evaluation, where, in creating contemporary art, he must face the threatening presence of the past. This art is not only a work of present needs but a settlement of past dilemmas. Baselitz achieves this by quoting the Romantic and Expressionist's art rather than working from inside a continuing tradition.

Parody has become a way in which Baselitz has managed to come to terms with the weight of the past. The quest for something new in twentieth century art is often - ironically - based in a quest for a tradition.

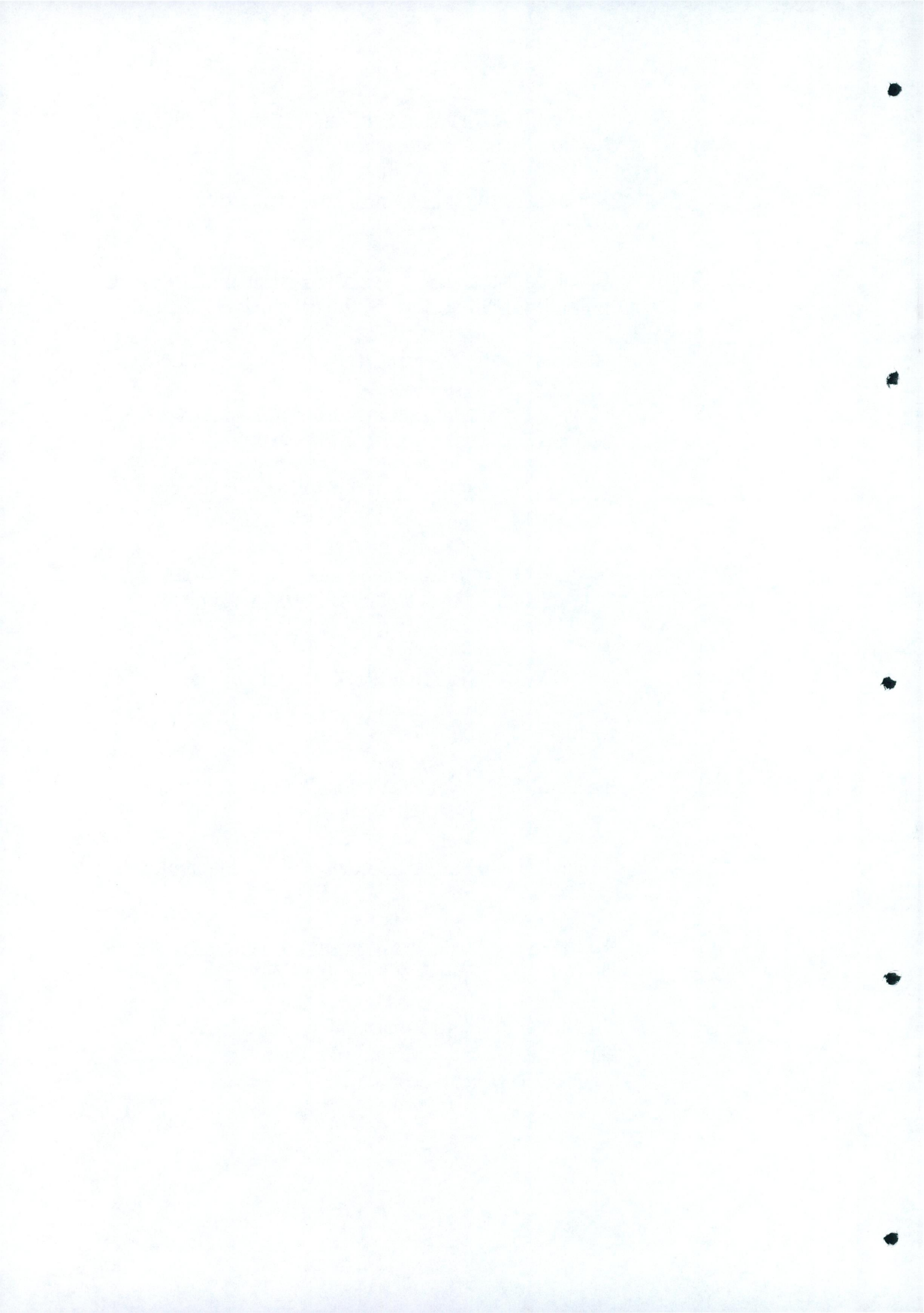
Baselitz's landscape is a wasteland of fractured fences, toppled walls and other debris. As an heir to post-war destruction, the figure is unable to change the past. His only alternative is to look toward the future like Caspar David Friedrich's monk by the sea. As a survivor, he rises above the rubble, ignoring civilisation's self-destruction to become self-reliant. The 'hero' as a symbolic figure is thus deliberately turned on its head. Baselitz is protesting against the unstable world and painting is used as the only medium through which he can create the strength that is evidence against reality. Yet he differs from the Romantics in that he offers no vision that can be realised. In denying the link with Expressionism, Baselitz is perhaps directing our attention away from a superficial similarity to hint at a deeper aesthetic connection - more hidden but also more important to an understanding of his art.



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