

Col tempo

Homage to Georg Baselitz

by Eric Darragon

Until the very end, Georg Baselitz, who passed away on Thursday, 30 April 2026, continued to surprise us. Until the very end, he defied the obstacles that stood in the way of his artistic expression: the constraints of advanced age no less than the political and intellectual prohibitions of his youth, with, in the intervening years, the traditional conventions of the cultural world as his daily terrain of struggle. He possessed astonishing inner resources, which enabled him to confront, with lucidity and energy, not only the physical trials of his final months, but also, and above all, the mastery of his art, an art repeatedly put at stake – notably with the carefully considered decision to undertake the *Remix* in 2005. Resources that were, so to speak, intact; resources systematically renewed over time, stemming from the decisive period of the *Pandemonium Manifestos* of 1961/62 and from the figure to whom he had still laid claim quite recently: Antonin Artaud. A surprising Requiem for a restless body of work, the *Eroi d'Oro* exhibited at the Cini Foundation at the time of his death were painted in haste in 2025, with the sense that, after more than sixty years of intense activity, he had to sum himself up – he who had always thwarted the idea of evolution and of style, even an Expressionist one; he who believed that history should not be confused with an outcome, but was above all a departure into the unknown, a beginning without aim or end. What he called a method was essentially a way of suspending everything on a technical decision until it became possible to change it radically. In 1991, the *Bildübereins* cycle would provide an eloquent demonstration of this. With 39 large-format canvases, impossible to view together or exhibit together, a process had been set in motion that lasted until 1995 without ever concluding. One painting upon another: a painting covered like a recumbent figure beneath a slab (Baselitz referred in this regard to Domenico Beccafumi's floor in Siena Cathedral); a painting that calls for, for better or for worse, a successor, since that was what he expected of painting: a renewal destined to catch the logic of interpretation off-guard, time and again. By choosing to paint upside down, he had intended for the painting – that fleeting moment of certainty and uncertainty wrested from consciousness – to decide for itself, without, however, renouncing the challenges posed by the figure, a recurring leitmotif in his work, or those of traditional themes such as the portrait, or the landscape, through which, in 1969, he inaugurated the reversal of the motif with *The Wood on its Head*. The golden background of his final paintings transcends what constituted the singular intensity of the *Heroes*, produced in Berlin after a six-month stay at the Villa Romana in Florence in 1965, a period marked by the study of Mannerism: shifting figures of a painter in rags worthy of Callot's *Bohemians*, caught in the trap of his era, now partisan, now rebel, bound to the destroyed world of his native country. The golden background of the *Eroi d'Oro* neutralises this pain and grants it eternity. What then appears is a figure reduced to itself: that of his wife Elke, or his own. Drawing and colour speak for themselves, dissociating and associating skeleton and flesh, as in Renaissance painting. With no other foundation than their history, no other redemption than time – which in Venice merges with that of Giorgione – the glorious bodies of 2026 expose themselves to a final judgment, awaiting what they do not know. We then witness, *in statu nascendi*, this unlikely accord of drawing and colour, which defies experience and recomposes it. The instant of a single glance is enough to see, without understanding, what cannot be said.

The past was Baselitz's great concern, the endless conversation he maintained with the woman who had shared his life since 1958, until it ultimately merged with his painting. The past he had lived in his village near Dresden, that of the destruction and horrors of war, that, too, of happy days in the countryside, that of adolescence and of exile in West Berlin after a false start in the manner of Picasso, which drove him out of the GDR for "socio-political immaturity," but also, and above all, the past of his own paintings and of those he admired and never ceased to discover or rediscover. Baselitz always reacted against the authority of dominant ideas. It took the obscure and untimely Ferdinand von Rayski for him to extricate himself from the modernity being insistently proposed to him at the Berlin-Charlottenburg Academy. Thus began a long experience that would lead him to Amsterdam, to documenta 2 in Kassel, to Paris in 1961, and then to Italy, where he would have his studio first in Castiglione Fiorentino, near Arezzo, and later in Imperia. The art history he practised so intensely was not the one found in history books. It was that of an outsider who kept his distance from group opinion. "Avanti passato": with these two words, parodying the rhetoric of the Futurist manifestos, Baselitz humorously underscored the delay that allowed him to appreciate Edvard Munch, Willem de Kooning or Henri Rousseau at his own pace. One had to have heard him speak of David's *The Assassinated Marat*, or of its 1793 counterpart, the lost portrait of Lepelletier de Saint-Fargeau, to understand that, in his hands, painting essentially offered an unexplored history, an unwritten history, made present through the experience of art. In Vienna, in 2023, at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, an exhibition brilliantly brought to light, within the prestigious Habsburg collections themselves, this claim on the past, which seeks the provocation of the present and of nudity in order to express what it is and what it is not. Marcel Duchamp, it should be recalled, was invoked with the *Descente* series for the same dissonant purpose in 2017. Baselitz was not a history painter; he made that clear. But his paintings have a history. Adolf Hitler's features appeared, in keeping with the logic of the *Remix*, recalling the scandalous gnome of 1963. Feet and legs, an anti-idealistic motif he favoured, ultimately composed the *danse macabre* of a Nazi swastika. One of his last paintings is a composition of four figures on a golden background, underscored by the slogan that appeared in capital letters on the facade of his childhood home, the village school where his father was a teacher: *Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer*. *The Women of Dresden* are the unforgettable sculptures of that Germany he carried deep within himself in a conflicted way. He was closer to Picasso's *The Weeping Woman* than to *Guernica*. *The Great Friends*, the painting that accompanied, in 1965, a manifesto mocking the categories of psychiatry instrumentalised in the East to stigmatise deviant art, was continually brought up to date by him and revisited in recent years, as if nothing had fundamentally changed. In 2021, he confounded expectations with a New York exhibition entitled *Springtime*, using, in homage to Hannah Höch, collages made from nylon stockings. A whole history of the genre was at stake in this boldness, not without provocation and not devoid of a Dadaist spirit that irresistibly found its way back to painting. One might recall the impressive *Russenbilder* series (1998–2005) and the way in which, beyond ideology, he brought forth a humanity scorned or destroyed. A Soviet painter, Geliy Korzhev, standing before a portrait of Stalin in his cold 1953 studio, became the long-lost brother of Caspar David Friedrich; a 1935 portrait of Ivan Pavlov by Mikhail Nesterov became that of Baselitz's father, Johannes Kern, who died in 1987. An armed peasant played the piano in Berlin in 1945, and one thought one could hear Sviatoslav Richter. For many reasons that one might now speculate on without, alas, risking being proven wrong, Baselitz kept alive, right to the very end, a history that began with him.