Georg Baselitz, monumental prints. Rolf Iseli, monumental prints

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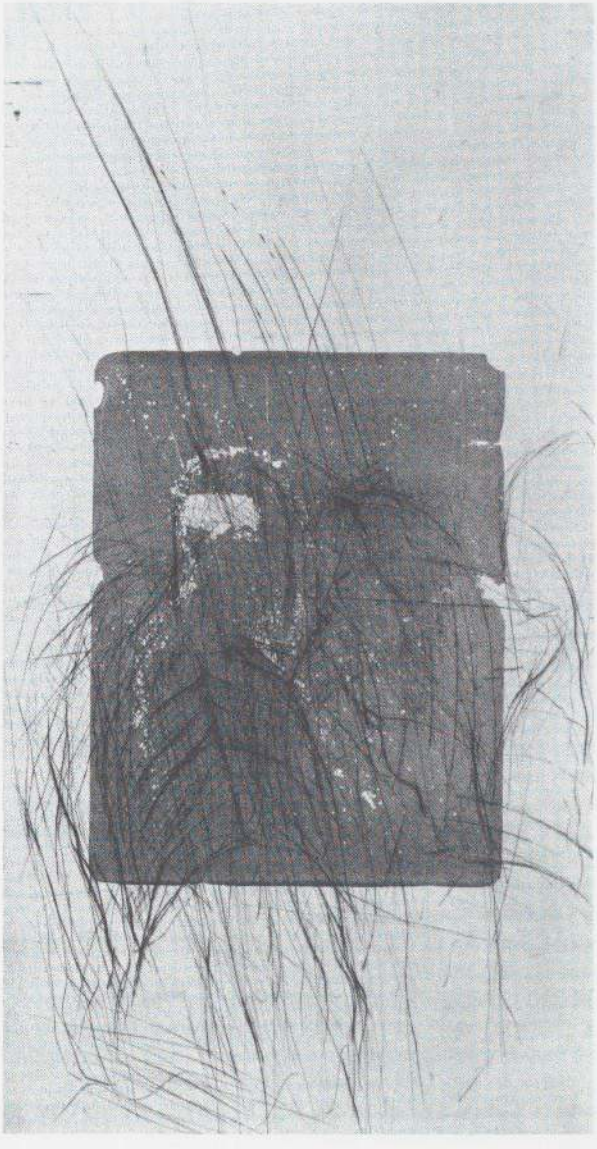
ROLF ISELI



MONUMENTAL PRINTS

The drypoints executed by Rolf Iseli since 1975 are big, confrontational, and iconic. Measuring for the most part 60 x 30 inches, these prints are introspective and yet reflective of the artist's personal experiences in the countryside of St. Romain, France. Printed in small numbers of progressive states rather than standard editions, these monumental works document Iseli's search for the artistic manner most expressive of his subject.

Iseli was born in Bern, Switzerland, in 1934. Initially a successful *tâchiste* painter in the 1950s, in 1966 he renounced painting on canvas for drawing on paper, which could be "torn, pasted, shredded, thrown out and replaced." In 1961, attracted to what he experienced as the freedom and openness of French culture, he had purchased land in St. Romain and had begun to divide his time between Switzerland and France, tapping his experiences with nature to forge a new direction for his art. He began to alter vaguely figurative forms in a series of metamorphosed self-portraits called *Mushroom Man, Feather Man,* and *Rush Man.* These "Men," creatures of the very soil he tilled in the vineyard, were inspired by the artist's shadow as he saw it cast on a sheet of paper one day while working outdoors.

Trained as a lithographer during his student days, Iseli always maintained some involvement with printmaking. When painting large abstract canvases, he produced lithographs mimicking his oils in their flat and broad areas of pure color. He continued printing lithographs with some degree of regularity; then in 1966 he tried his hand at engraving, and in 1973 he attempted etching. The first etched series was on a traditional small scale. The series depicted variations of the self-portrait image he had begun to formulate in his "earth pictures"—works on paper in which bits of soil, grass, and rock were rolled onto a glued sheet of paper with a wine bottle. In these early intaglio prints, vigorously scratched lines obliterate the recognizable form and features of the artist's own head and torso. This energetic use of an intrinsically linear medium was a significant harbinger of things to come.

By 1975, as Iseli's vineyard matured and the rigorous life in St. Romain—in a rustic house without electricity or running water—was becoming more deeply imprinted on his sensibility, Iseli's art grew in size and scope. No longer did he incise conventional copperplates of precious and tentative dimensions. In fact, he abandoned etching altogether for the more confrontational drypoint medium in which the artist directly attacks metal with tool in hand. This significant change of artistic medium enabled Iseli to more closely parallel his life in his art. Hands accustomed to working the earth would now work with copper in a way they had never done before.

Iseli has said that for him a print is somewhat removed from an "original" and that this perceived distance from the printed sheet allows him a degree of objectivity conducive to unself-conscious experimentation. Technically, direct contact is between artist and copper, not artist and paper, so what we actually see is a secondhand registration of an earlier action. There is not only a time lag, but also an intermediary agent—factors that exert their own force independent of the artist's touch. Paradoxically, the urgency with which Iseli incised the copper is an action that the paper merely records, not receives. As Iseli himself so poetically put it: "c'est la cuivre qui chante," it is the copper that sings.

Poetry aside, the struggle between artist and matrix is somewhat less romantic. In a tiny cavelike space at the Centre de Gravure Contemporain in Geneva, Iseli and his printer, Daniel Divorne, devote unimaginable stretches of time to producing these works. There copperplates are walked on, hammered, and considered from every angle as they lie strewn about the ground. Gouges made by a wayward nail inadvertently dragged across the plate by Iseli's slipper are later admired for the unique quality of line created. In the recepetive atmosphere of this atelier, miles from the scene of their conception, the worked surfaces of sheets of metal are finally brought to life.

A crucial and delicate stage in this lengthy process is the actual inking of the plate, a task left to Divorne, who approaches the job much like a musician interpreting a composer's score. After general instructions from Iseli, Divorne takes a "reading" of the plate, relying on both his visual and tactile senses to familiarize himself with the eccentricities of the metal's surface—specific furrows, holes, or abrasions may speak to him more than others. Inking a plate of such large dimensions takes several hours. During this time Divorne works alone, uninterrupted, and with an admirable combination of intensity and sensitivity. As he wipes away ink with the palm of his hand, subtle differences in pressure and direction of the strokes will directly inform the composition's structure and space.

One might ask why an artist devotes so much time and energy to printmaking when drawing would seem to be an appropriate and far easier medium in which to further develop his style. The relatively short life of the delicate drypoint burr prevents Iseli from releasing these drypoints in large editions of identical impressions. Instead, he prints a few examples of each state, working and reworking the copper in stages, thereby documenting the evolution of individual compositions. It is this reportorial aspect of the print medium, combined with the immediacy of working on a copper surface without acid (as in etching), that motivates Iseli. Once a composition is resolved, however, the process has ended, and he goes on to discover the possibilities

of another plate. The bold red ink stamp, a souvenir from a memorable trip to China, is then applied as if to say "finished."

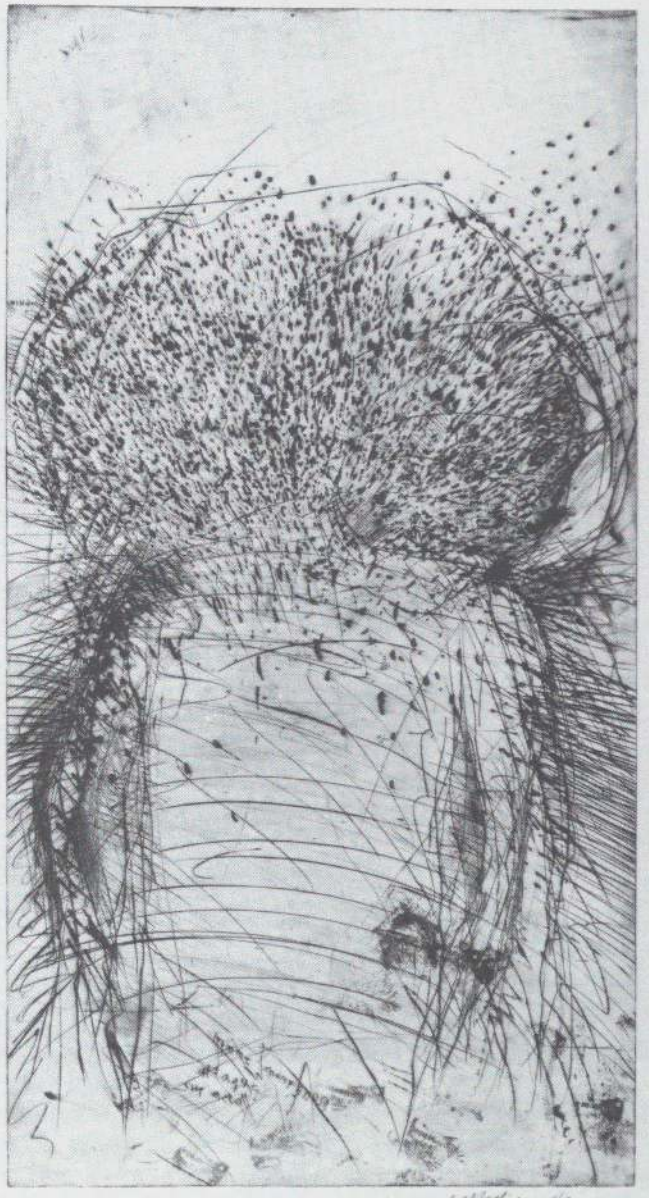
It is difficult to view Iseli's work without considering its direct relationship to nature, but further consideration reveals more complex sources. Iseli began painting in Switzerland at a time when American Abstract Expressionism reigned. The European version of the movement, *tâchisme*, was an attempt to follow the American lead; but for European abstract painters the task was difficult, and artists such as Iseli found themselves painting in the shadow of the New World. It was in this atmosphere that Iseli turned to figurative sources in the early 1970s. After his American counterparts had passed into the second phase of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, Iseli continued to develop his own highly original and personal form of figurative expression. As he continued to evolve this vocabulary throughout the 1970s—the pluralist decade of Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Process Art—he maintained a self-imposed distance from the mainstream. It is only in the 1980s that a "neo-expressionist" movement has taken form, presenting a suitable backdrop in which to present Iseli's art.

In reflecting upon Rolf Iseli's demanding approach to the drypoint medium, several obvious descriptions immediately come to mind: the works are black and white; they are massive; they are straightforwardly executed. It is printmaking stripped down to the bare bones and without the use of seductive colors, mechanical aids, or facile illusions. It is printmaking on a monumental scale, not only because of the work's sheer size but also because of the tremendous ambition with which it is conceived. Utilizing limited means, Rolf Iseli aggressively extracts an extraordinarily vast range of expression from the medium.

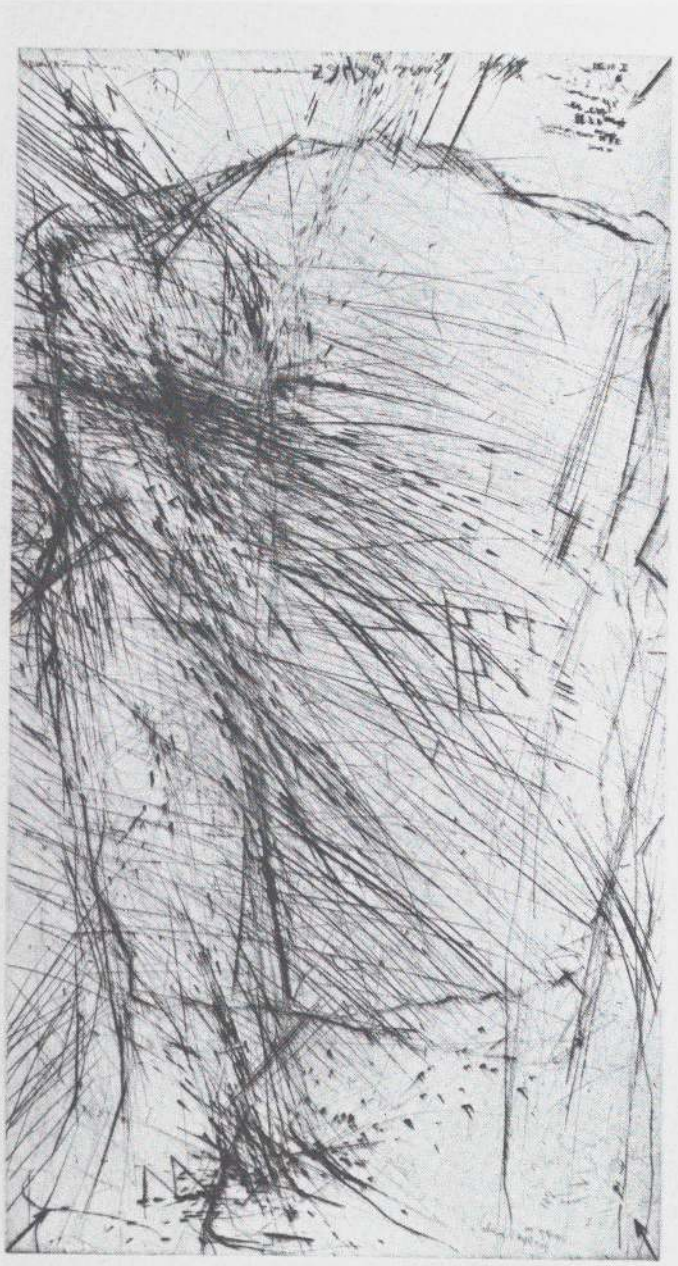
—Audrey Isselbacher
Assistant Curator
Prints and Illustrated Books

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

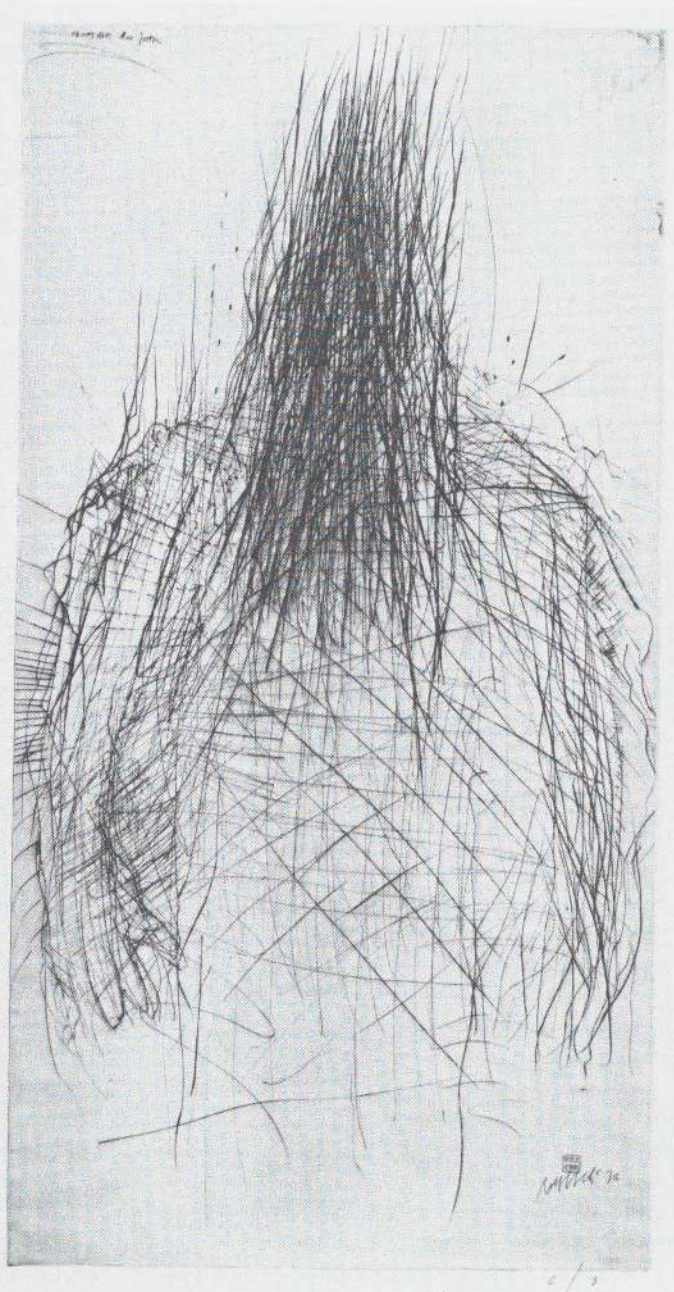
The Museum of Modern Art is most grateful to the following for lending works to this exhibition: seven anonymous collectors; Kunsthaus, Zurich; Kunstmuseum, Basel; and M. Knoedler Zürich AG. Profound thanks are extended to Rolf Iseli, Veith Turske, and the staff of M. Knoedler Zürich AG, particularly Dagmar Bolliger, whose participation was of incomparable value to the preparation of this exhibition and brochure. Sincere appreciation is also extended to Daniel Divorne, Centre de Gravure Contemporain, Geneva; and Rainer Michael Mason, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva, who greatly facilitated research on the artist. The exhibition has been funded in part by a contribution from Pro Helvetia, Arts Council of Switzerland.



1. **Mushroom Man** (Homme champignon)



14. **Under Rocks** (Sous roches)



3. **Rush Man** (Homme de jonc)

16. **Eavesdropper St. Romain Geneva** (Horcher St.Romain Genf)

ISELI CHECKLIST

Dimensions given are in inches and centimeters, height preceding width, and unless otherwise noted are plate size.

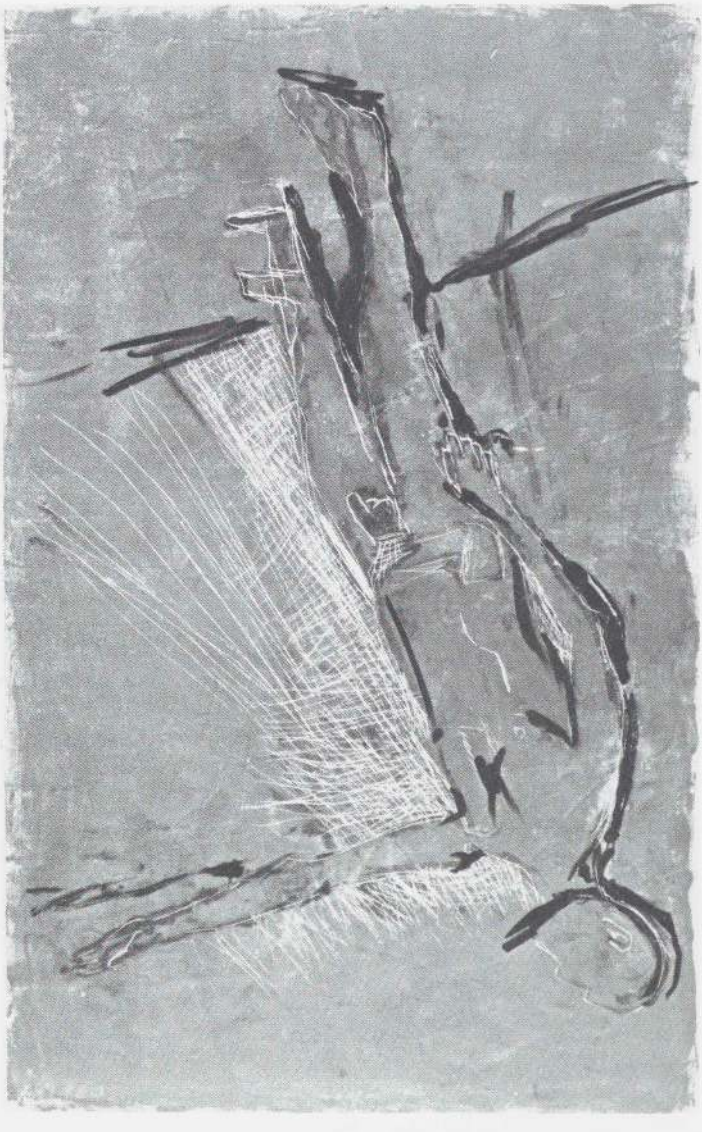
1. **Mushroom Man** (Homme champignon). 1975. Drypoint, 58 11/16 x 31 1/8" (149 x 79 cm). Lent by the Kunsthaus, Zürich.
2. **Mushroom Man** (Homme champignon). 1975. Drypoint, 58 11/16 x 31 1/8" (149 x 79 cm). Private collection, Münster, West Germany.
3. **Rush Man** (Homme de jonc). 1976. Drypoint, 60 5/8 x 31 1/8" (154 x 79 cm). Lent by the Kunstmuseum, Basel.
4. **Nail Head** (Vernagleti Bire). 1977. Drypoint, 42 1/2 x 31 5/16" (108 x 79.5 cm). Private collection, Cologne.
5. **Feather Man** (Fäderman). 1978. Drypoint and lithograph, sheet: 47 1/4 x 31 1/2" (120 x 80 cm). Private collection, Bangerten, Switzerland.
6. **Drypoint and Lithograph** (Kaltnadel und Lithoeindruck). 1979. Drypoint and lithograph, 58 1/4 x 30 5/16" (148 x 77 cm). Private collection, Frauchwil, Switzerland.
7. **Geneva Forms** (Figuren Genf). first state. 1979. Drypoint and graphite, 58 1/4 x 32 11/16" (148 x 83 cm). Private collection, Bottmingen, Switzerland.
8. **Geneva Forms** (Figuren Genf), 1979. Drypoint, 58 1/4 x 32 11/16" (148 x 83 cm). Private collection, Ochlenberg, Switzerland.
9. **3 Beak Men** (3 Schnabelmänner). 1981. Drypoint, 24 13/16 x 36 5/8" (63 x 93 cm). Lent by M. Knoedler Zürich AG.
10. **Périgord**, seventeenth state. 1981. Drypoint, 58 11/16 x 33 1/16" (149 x 84 cm). Lent by M. Knoedler Zürich AG.
11. **Nail Head** (Nagelkopf), fourth state. 1981. Drypoint, 58 1/4 x 32 11/16" (148 x 83 cm). Private collection, Zürich.
12. **Nailed** (Vernaglet), seventh state. 1981. Drypoint and lithograph, 58 1/4 x 33 1/16" (148 x 84 cm). Lent by M. Knoedler Zürich AG.
13. **Under Rocks** (Sous roches), fourth state. 1982. Drypoint and lithograph, 58 7/16 x 32 1/2" (148.5 x 82.5 cm). Lent by M. Knoedler Zürich AG.
14. **Under Rocks** (Sous roches), thirteenth state. 1982. Drypoint, 58 7/16 x 32 1/2" (148.5 x 82.5 cm). Lent by M. Knoedler Zürich AG.
15. **Eavesdropper St. Romain Geneva** (Horcher St. Romain Genf), third state. 1982. Drypoint, 55 1/2 x 32 5/16" (141 x 82 cm). Lent by M. Knoedler Zürich AG.
16. **Eavesdropper St. Romain Geneva** (Horcher St. Romain Genf), sixth state. 1982. Drypoint, 55 1/2 x 32 5/16" (141 x 82 cm). Lent by M. Knoedler Zürich AG.
17. **Eavesdropper St. Romain Bern** (Horcher St. Romain Bern), second state. 1983. Drypoint, 34 1/4 x 22 7/16" (87 x 57 cm). Lent by M. Knoedler Zürich AG.

GENERAL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For her invaluable advice and encouragement I am most grateful to Riva Castleman, Director of the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books. Other members of the Museum's staff who have assisted in the preparation of the exhibition and brochure and deserve special thanks are: Jill Korostoff, Graphic Designer; Richard Palmer, Coordinator of Exhibitions; Susan Weiley, Associate Editor; and Barbara Woytowicz, Registration Assistant.

Cover: 6. **Drypoint and Lithograph** (Kaltnadel und Lithoeindruck)

GEORG BASELITZ



MONUMENTAL PRINTS

Georg Baselitz's upside-down imagery, a quickly identifiable leitmotif, challenges not only the viewer's imagination but the entire tradition of Western illusionism. By boldly turning a figure on its ear, so to speak, Baselitz plays havoc with time-honored expectations of what a picture should be, while leaving tantalizing visible traces of a recognizable representation. A redefined relationship between realism and abstraction results. In his monumental linoleum cuts, begun in 1977, Baselitz fine-tunes these delicate balances as he eliminates established boundaries between painting and printing.

Georg Baselitz was born Georg Kern in 1938 in the village of Deutschbaselitz, Saxony, a region destined to become part of East Germany after 1945. In 1956 he emigrated to West Berlin and formally studied with the *tâchiste* painter Hann Trier. Baselitz, however, insisted on pursuing figurative imagery, even during this impressionable decade when abstract art was synonymous with freedom and the Western world (his nonconformist approach had previously earned him expulsion from East Berlin's Academy of Fine and Applied Arts for "social and political immaturity"). Baselitz, nevertheless, continued to develop an expressionist and staunchly figurative mode. In 1961–62, when he was twenty-three years old, he issued his first *Pandemonium* manifestos, asserting an unshakable independence from abstract painting. Significantly, the first tract was published only a few months after the building of the Berlin Wall.

The first two manifestos focused, as did the paintings, on themes of blood, disease, and decay—and resulted in the confiscation of two paintings on public view and suspicion of the artist's "fascist" tendencies. It was in this hostile atmosphere that Baselitz issued his third manifesto in 1966, abruptly heralding the appearance of a more positive heroic male image, *Der Neue Typ* (The New Type), based on the stylizations of sixteenth-century Mannerism. It remains unclear whether these "heroes" allude to Communism's party-line optimism or reflect the artist's own acutely cynical view of the political turmoil of his age. In a direct translation of the fracture and displacement that ensued in Germany during the mid-1960s, Baselitz began to fragment the looming superhuman figures he had developed in his paintings. At first, portions of the figure were merely delineated in a manner that underscored the individuality of the various units that made up the pictorial whole. This very basic fragmentation became increasingly complex as the pieces then began to move, losing their innate reference to the larger scene. Heads, torsos, arms, and legs began to take on abstract associations and could be understood as pure forms against a colored ground. In the last phase of this subtle move away from conventional figuration, the displaced anatomical sections became partially transparent, allowing portions of the sky and background to show through. Perhaps the artist's shuffling and reshuffling of the individual parts that make up the structural whole was Baselitz's method of responding to the illogical happenings of a turbulent period. To turn the figure completely upside-down was the culmination of this artistic catharsis.

Baselitz actually draws upside-down. He does not execute an image rightside-up and merely invert the canvas or paper. For him, the material evolution of the image is experienced as an abstract restructuring of the readable object or scene. Baselitz's artistic goal is to create a new form of abstraction, *Stil Malerei* (Style Painting), which is intrinsically dependent upon a realistic style. It is the particular adaptability of linoleum cut to these complex artistic concerns that led him to experiment with that medium in 1976.

Baselitz created prints as early as 1964, etching small plates close in style and content to his paintings and drawings of the same period. He continued to utilize printmaking as a primarily reproductive medium until the late 1960s, when he began to issue portfolios consisting of a set of variations on a single theme. It was during this time that the artist first understood the unique potential of printmaking as a means of achieving the further evolution of his style. The relentless revision of representations of mundane subjects such as *Cows* and *Trees* (he moved to an isolated area in the countryside in 1966) subtly but effectively minimized the work's narrative content.

When Baselitz first approached the linoleum cut medium in 1976, it was not without prior experience of other relief printing methods. In 1966 he had executed a group of woodcuts, again reiterating themes he had explored in his paintings. These *clair-obscure* depictions of large brooding New Types offer a first glimpse of Baselitz's natural predilection for relief printing. Ten years later he would use a variety of block printing methods: woodcut, wood engraving, and line-cut, to create his first *Eagle* portfolio. His free embellishment of the printed sheets with fingerpainted additions illustrates an unrestrained approach to graphic technique.

Linoleum, however, is not wood. It is softer, more pliant, and offers far less resistance to the gouging tool. The line it produces is more fluidly and rapidly executed. While the mechanics of woodcut are closer to "chiseling," those of linoleum cut are more aptly described as "shaving." For an artist motivated by a desire to subtract figurative associations from an initially realistic depiction, the reductive method of linoleum cut offered the most alluring possibilities. With it, he could alternately peel away layers of mimetic illusionism or infiltrate an image with countless agitated lines.

Baselitz always painted on a grand scale, so it is no surprise that once wholeheartedly committed to exploring the stylistic

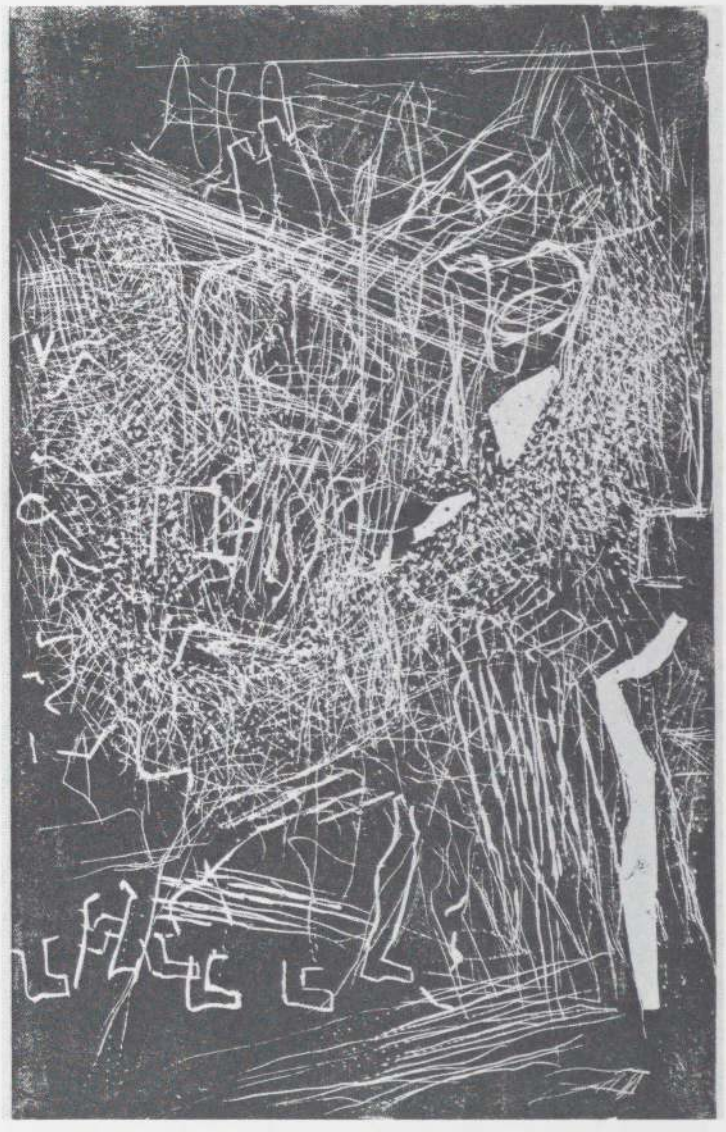
potential of a new medium he would maintain the format he had always worked in. Linoleum cuts measuring 90 x 60 inches, however, were unheard of, and this technical statistic unquestionably expanded the parameters of that medium. Printmaking was no longer confined to the imitative repetition of previously resolved compositions. Now the effort to further evolve *Stil Malerei* would also occur in his printed art. The progressive evolution of this style was now documented by the recording of each print's successive states. Rather than issuing the linoleum cuts in large editions of the final image, the artist exploited printmaking's documentary characteristic to preserve a visual record of each composition's development. Comparison between early and late states of the same depiction provides tangible evidence of the intentions and concerns in *Stil Malerei*. Baselitz uses oil paint instead of ink to print these works, producing thick, rich textures that materially transplant them into the sanctified realm of "painting." Frequently compounding this painterly effect by hand-applying even more oil to the printed paper, he disregards the conventional boundaries that exist between disparate media.

Baselitz's cherished collection of sixteenth-century Mannerist prints has acknowledgedly influenced the direction of his expression, but the disquieting political upheaval of his own century must also be examined. After initially fragmenting compositions during a time when his homeland was violently ruptured, the fantastic pictorial inversion that followed may parallel a frightening realization that life itself has been brutally upset. Responding to the senselessness of his time, the artist has negated visual sense. In spite of the fact that Baselitz maintains that the image is ". . . completely inessential and of secondary importance," there is no denying the psychological human presence of his art, a presence that ultimately disturbs as it looms above, larger than life.

—Audrey Isselbacher
Assistant Curator
Prints and Illustrated Books

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

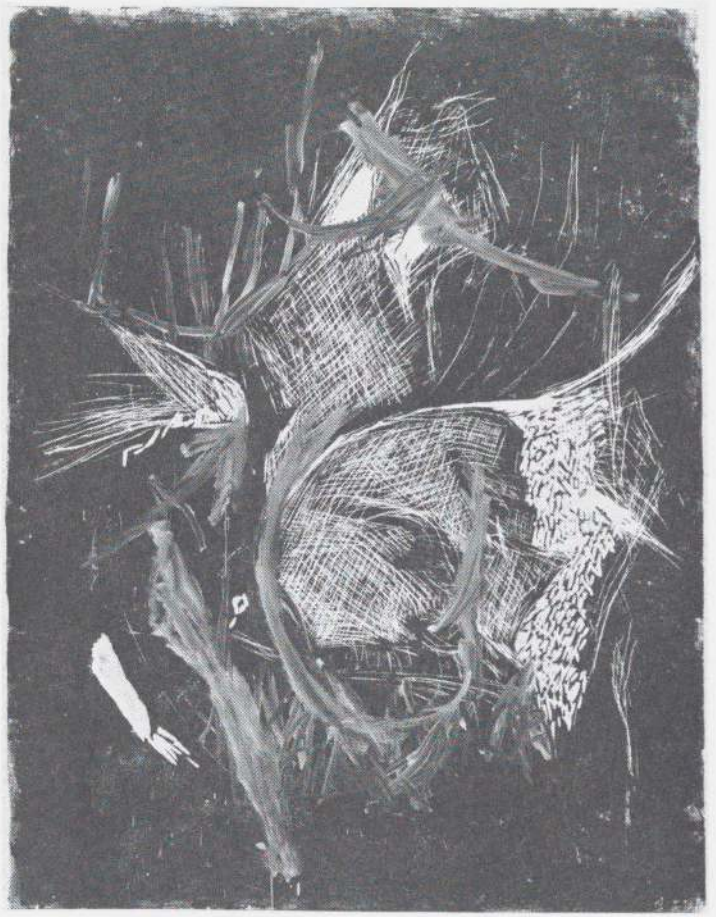
The Museum of Modern Art is most grateful to the following for lending works to this exhibition: Walter Bareiss; A. and G. Gercken; Mr. and Mrs. John A. Lawrence; Raymond Learsy; Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München, Munich; Galerie Neuendorf, Hamburg; Sonnabend Gallery, New York; and Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne. The indispensable cooperation of Fred Jahn was an essential element in preparing the exhibition and brochure, and we acknowledge this with profound thanks. Publication of this brochure has been assisted by the generosity of The Cosmopolitan Arts Foundation.



15. **Small Eagle I**

16. **Woman in Window**

4. **Nude in Easy Chair**



7. **Elke in Profile**

BASELITZ CHECKLIST

Dimensions given are in inches and centimeters, height preceding width, and unless otherwise noted are composition size. All linoleum cuts are cited in: Siegfried Gohr, *Georg Baselitz 32 Linolschnitte aus den Jahren 1976 bis 1979* (Cologne: Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle Köln, 1979).

1. **Female Nude on Kitchen Stool**, unpublished first state. February 1–2, 1977. Linoleum cut, 79 1/2 x 54 3/8" (202 x 138 cm). Lent by Sonnabend Gallery, New York.
2. **Female Nude on Kitchen Stool**, unpublished seventh state. May 3, 1979. Linoleum cut, 79 1/2 x 54 3/8" (202 x 138 cm). Lent by Walter Bareiss, Munich.
3. **Nude in Easy Chair**, unpublished fourth state. February 6, 1977. Linoleum cut, printed in black and hand-painted, 79 1/8 x 51 3/16" (201 x 130 cm). Lent by A. and G. Gercken, Hamburg.
4. **Seated Man, Arms Over His Head**, unpublished first state. February 8, 1977. Linoleum cut, 79 1/8 x 51 9/16" (201 x 131 cm). Lent by A. and G. Gercken, Hamburg.
5. **Seated Man, Arms Over His Head**, unpublished sixth state. February 8, 1977. Linoleum cut, 79 1/8 x 51 9/16" (201 x 131 cm). Lent by A. and G. Gercken, Hamburg.
6. **Back of Standing Female Nude**, unpublished seventh state. February 15. 1977. Linoleum cut, 79 1/8 x 59 1/16" (201 x 150 cm). Lent by Sonnabend Gallery, New York.
7. **Elke in Profile**, unpublished second state. February 25, 1977. Linoleum cut, printed in black and hand-painted, 79 1/8 x 59 1/16" (201 x 150 cm). Lent by Galerie Neuendorf, Hamburg.
8. **Nude with Three Arms**, unpublished first state. April 6, 1977. Linoleum cut, printed in red and hand-painted, 98 7/16 x 59 13/16" (250 x 152 cm). Lent by Galerie Neuendorf, Hamburg.
9. **Seated Man.** April 29, 1979. Linoleum cut, 68 7/8 x 51 3/16" (175 x 130 cm). Lent by Sonnabend Gallery, New York.
10. **Boxer.** May 1, 1979. Linoleum cut, 79 1/8 x 52" (201 x 132 cm). Lent by Raymond Learsy, New York.
11. **Sea Eagle**, unpublished second state. May 7, 1979. Linoleum cut. 79 1/8 x 57 1/16" (201 x 145 cm). Lent by the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München, on extended loan from Galerie-Vereins München e. V., Munich.
12. **Woman in Window.** May 8, 1979. Linoleum cut, 63 3/8 x 51 9/16" (161 x 131 cm). Lent by Sonnabend Gallery, New York.
13. **Gleaner II.** May 10, 1979. Linoleum cut, 79 1/8 x 57 1/16" (201 x 145 cm). Lent by Walter Bareiss, Munich.
14. **Small Eagle I**, unpublished second state. May 16, 1979. Linoleum cut, 64 15/16 x 40 3/16" (165 x 102 cm). Lent by Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne.
15. **Small Eagle I**, unpublished fourth state. May 17, 1979. Linoleum cut, 64 15/16 x 40 3/16" (165 x 102 cm). Lent by Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne.
16. **Woman in Window.** September 20, 1981. Monotype, printed from cut linoleum block and hand-painted, sheet: 64 x 51 1/2" (162.5 x 130.5 cm). Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John A. Lawrence, New York.

Cover: 8. **Nude with Three Arms**