

Malelade by Georg Baselitz : April 11- July 23, 1991, the Tatyana Grosman Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art, New York : [brochure]

Author

Baselitz, Georg, 1938-

Date

1991

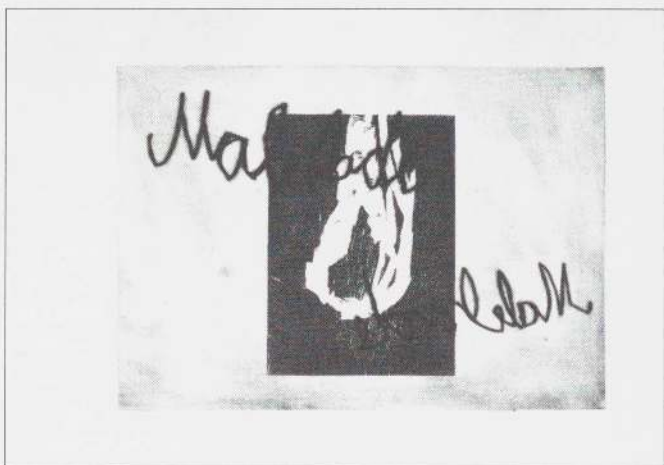
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M A L E L A D E

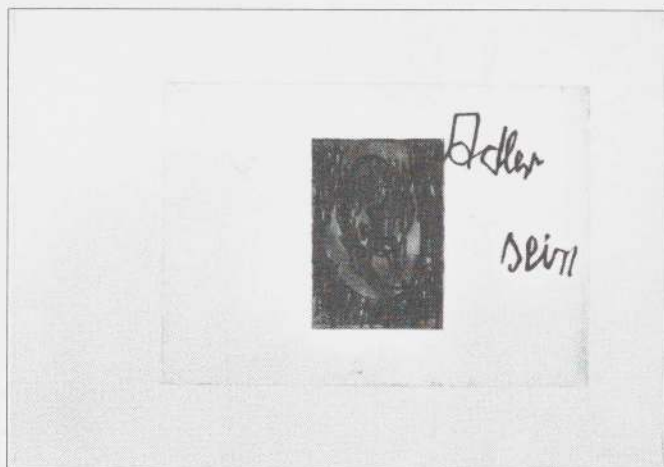
BY

Georg Baselitz

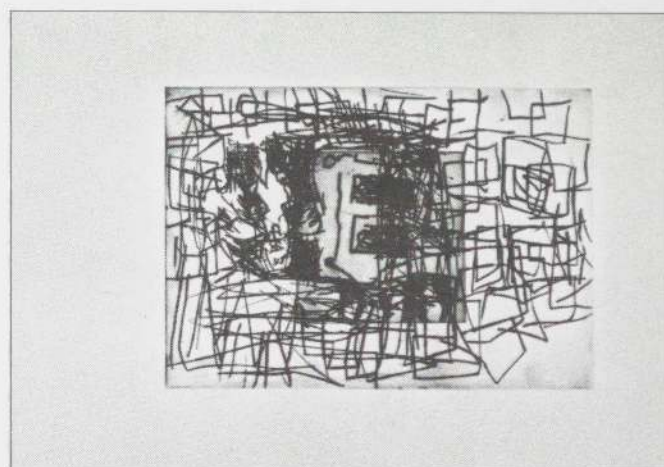
April 11–July 23, 1991

The Tatyana Grosman Gallery

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



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Georg Baselitz

M A L E L A D E

When modern artists create illustrated books, they, like their predecessors, most often fashion their pictures after an existing text. Some of the best efforts of this kind have been directed at texts whose authors are no longer living, and so can offer no opinions about the art that accompanies their long-esteemed words. When such books are the result of a collaboration between artist and writer, some personal rapport inevitably enhances their pages. Few books consist of both writing and illustration by an artist, and in these a special unity pervades the completed work. The most famous book of this sort in the twentieth century is Henri Matisse's *Jazz* (1947), in which the artist's colorful evocations of amusements, figures, and foliage are paired with pages filled with his own arabesque handwriting. In pamphlets and books of around the same time, Jean Dubuffet allied his figurative drawings (inspired by those of the insane) with phonetically transcribed texts. Other artists including Francisco Goya and William Hogarth produced albums containing laconic commentaries as footnotes to the images, and these may be the spiritual if not literal ancestors of Georg Baselitz's book *Malelade*.

Both the title of the book and the words incorporated into each print's composition are contrived, made up, poetic. Baselitz's invented German, *Malelade*, has been translated into English as "Paintfool," which approaches the artist's meaning but does not convey the *malade* ("sick," in French) that forms a root of the made-up word—the sense of exhaustion from painting that the artist felt when he devised the title. Throughout the book, which consists of forty-one plates, sets of words appear next to or surrounding images on which they may or may not depend. In one plate, Baselitz takes up the persistent repetition of sounds—a frequent tool in poetry—when he writes in the form of a childish chant, "Schwein Schwein ein sein" (literally, "Swine swine one being"). As in the book's title, the combi-

nation of sounds in German produces other words and more intricate meanings.

When Baselitz, a prolific painter, sculptor, draftsman, and printmaker who has shown his work internationally since the 1970s, began *Malelade*, he had been working on several small etchings for a text by Samuel Beckett. Frustrated by the complexities of obtaining permission to use the text and by the problem of fitting the text and the pictures together without misrepresenting the author's intent, he decided temporarily to abandon that project and begin a book of his own (the Beckett publication will appear this year). He had several models in mind when he began the first drypoint plates for *Malelade* in 1988. Looking into Picasso's volume of aquatints after texts of Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, Baselitz was only attracted by the "extra" illustration—that of the Flea (represented by a nude who finds a flea on her backside). His fascination with the irrational found examples in folklore, particularly in nineteenth-century books filled with tales and homilies, like the American superstition that predicts the end of winter based on a groundhog's shadow. Fragments of a twelfth-century *Physiologus* from Smyrna (one of several copies of a medieval natural history in which descriptions of birds, beasts, and fishes are accompanied by moral and religious allegories) provided another source. In them, the artist found small, symbolic drawings that identified constellations and other natural phenomena. He also sought out later bestiaries, those compendiums of animal life, both imaginary and real, that have been the backbone of book illustration for centuries.

This variety of models had already inspired a series of paintings and drawings in 1988 that were brought together under the title *Das Motiv* (Motif). Many of the elements in that group form the basis for the prints of *Malelade*. In his studio, surrounded by the Motifs, listening to old forms of

folk music from Europe and Africa, Baselitz took up the tools of the printmaker. In almost every case, he used a drypoint stylus and cut his lines directly into metal plates. The resulting incisions are surrounded by bits of displaced metal, which hold onto ink and make the printed lines appear softer and wider. Baselitz incised his lines quite deeply into the plates, and the prints taken from them are filled with thick, even massive, passages and cross-hatching and other linear patterns that, together with the written texts and figurative motifs produced in the same manner, have the appearance of rusted or burnt graffiti on time-worn surfaces. Occasionally, Baselitz used acid to etch the surfaces of the plates, but more often he scraped away the burred surface of his drypoint to produce ghostlike images, such as a rooster and a hare on a chair. Baselitz made proofs for *Malelade* on his own press, inking the incised plates so that not only were the lines filled but a film of ink, sometimes quite thick, remained on the surface of the plate after it was wiped. This style of printing requires the artist's constant involvement since it is extremely difficult to make uniform prints when the inking is not restricted to grooves in the plate. Baselitz normally prints smaller editions alone or with his wife, but for this larger project, Till Verclas, an artist-printer from Hamburg with whom the artist worked in the past, came and did most of the printing in Baselitz's studio in Derneburg, Germany.

Georg Baselitz, born Georg Kern on January 23, 1938, in Deutschbaselitz, near Dresden, left East Germany in 1957 to study in West Berlin (he had been expelled from art school in East Berlin). A year later he changed his name. His interest in anamorphosis and figuration during the heyday of abstract expressionist art was later accompanied by a fascination with the Italian mannerist artists of the sixteenth century. Moving away from the fermenting art scene

of Berlin in 1966, he began to paint the animals of rural areas, which he preferred. By 1969, after he had integrated his figures into landscape settings by breaking them apart he inverted the objects in his paintings, drawings, and prints, composing them upside down to dissociate the figurative elements from the pictorial expression. Nevertheless, one still searches for the familiarity of a face, figure, animal, or bird in the vigorous strokes of paint and the cunning wildness of his pencil. The scribbles and webs of lines in Baselitz's prints, from his earliest etchings and chiaroscuro woodcuts (1963-66) and the monumental linoleum cuts of 1976 to the drypoints of *Malelade*, disclose a community of imagery that is extended beyond the literal by these methods of facture.

The "motifs" in *Malelade* are, for the most part, the birds, fish, and animals of the bestiary, accompanied by words that, like annotations on a musical score, seem to emphasize the overall rhythms of the forms rather than the marks that make them up. Several of the compositions are given structure, not just from the edges of the plates (which are often superimposed upon other rectangular plates), but from patterns of lines that suggest chairs, ladders, houses, bricks, bridges, piles of rocks, fences, and even plaid. Scribbles and cross-hatching explode into rounded masses like tumbleweed. Meanders, the labyrinthine endless lines of the absent-minded doodler, appear underneath other, more aggressive batches of lines and also create the basic organization for a plate occupied by fish. Along with horses and elk are a man and a woman, not associated with each other but with endless meanders and rectangles. Throughout the book, nonsensical sets of words about a cuckoo, dog, swine, hare, horse, eagle, fish, and jackass provide a counterpoint, and occasionally announce, on plates without images, something that emphasizes what might be an essential point (for example, on page 33, "me meander always," or on page 38, "green brown like homeland once").

Malelade was completed in 1990, two years after it was begun. During this period, great changes came about in Baselitz's homeland. His earlier works resonated with the undertones of an exile in his own land. First an upstart, then a mocker of heroes, Baselitz later began to make intriguing connections with earlier artists. Abandoning this tactic at the moment when the people of East Germany began to confront their situation, Baselitz started to take a new look at simple things, his childhood, the Slavic peasants of his old village, the fields, the forests. The eagle that had once formed a central element in the artist's prints and paintings around 1974, undoubtedly symbolic of the old Germany as well as individual freedom, has been reduced to a head in profile dominated by one wise eye. With this emblem and the others that arose from his memories, he composed *Malelade*.

Riva Castleman

Director, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

Malelade was published by Michael Werner (Cologne and New York) in 1990. The drypoints and etchings were printed by Georg Baselitz and Till Verclas, the typographer was Wolfgang Schröder, and the binder was Mechthild Lobisch. The edition consists of eighty signed copies on Zerkall paper, annotated 1-60/60, I-X (not for sale), and a-j (accompanied by a suite of the prints, signed and numbered by the artist, on Richard de Bas paper).

All photos courtesy Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne

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Cover: *Malelade*, plate 1

Inside, left to right: *Malelade*, plates 16, 32, 4

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