

Drawing Connections
Baselitz, Kelly, Penone, Rockburne, and the Old Masters
October 12, 2007, through January 6, 2008

Artist Bios

GEORG BASELITZ

Georg Baselitz was born Georg Kern in 1938 in Deutschbaselitz, Saxony. Raised near Dresden, he moved to East Berlin in 1956 to enroll at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, from which he was soon expelled for “sociopolitical immaturity.” He continued his artistic training in West Berlin while immersing himself in the writings of Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, and Artaud, all of whom exerted a strong influence on him. Reacting against the abstract tendencies that dominated West German art of the fifties, Baselitz adopted an expressive figurative idiom marked by a crude handling and grotesque, often sexual, imagery. His paintings caused a scandal during his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Werner & Katz in Berlin in 1963, and two of them were confiscated by the public prosecutor for obscenity. In 1965, during a six-month fellowship in Florence, Baselitz developed an interest in sixteenth-century Italian mannerism, the anticlassical stance of which appealed to him. The odd proportions and exaggerated poses typical of mannerist figures soon found their way into his work, notably his series of Heroes and his so-called fracture paintings of 1967–69. In the latter Baselitz fragmented the image and divided the picture plane into several sections in order to play down the narrative implications of the painting and draw attention instead to its pictorial qualities. The same concern led him, in 1969, to invert his motifs, a device that would become the hallmark of his style and liberated him from the dilemma between figuration and abstraction. Concurrently with his paintings, Baselitz produced a large body of drawings in which he explored the same themes and compositional strategies. His formless and often gruesome images of the early 1960s gave way after 1965 to figures drawn more freely with a multiplicity of curved lines, influenced by the mannerist prints that the artist had begun collecting. Working in series—another way to deemphasize the importance of the subject in favor of its formal treatment—Baselitz developed a more abstract imagery in the following decades. In the 1990s, his painting style became looser and more fluid, in parallel with his abundant production of watercolors. Baselitz’s urge to revisit earlier motifs culminated in his recent Remix series, a large group of paintings and drawings in which he has been reworking themes and compositions from earlier pictures.

ELLSWORTH KELLY

Ellsworth Kelly was born in 1923 in Newburgh, New York. In the early 1940s, he studied at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Inducted into the U.S. army in 1943, he was assigned to a camouflage unit and traveled to Europe. After the war, he attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston for one year before moving to Paris. His formative years in France, from 1948 to 1954, were marked by numerous visits to museums and monuments, where he developed an interest in Romanesque and Byzantine art. From the start drawing was an essential medium for Kelly, who explored on paper several concepts that would become essential to his art, such as chance (as in the surrealist technique of automatism) and the use of a grid. A keen observer of the world around him, he elaborated a distinctive form of abstraction based on details that caught his attention, for example, stripes on a beach cabana, patterns reflected on water, or the play of light and shadow on a building. He recorded such “fragments of vision,” as he called them, in sketches and drawings that became the basis for paintings in which he distilled each form to its essence until its source was no longer recognizable. In the summer of 1949, Kelly created a series of drawings of plants, which he later saw as seminal to his formation: “The drawings from plant life seem to be a bridge to the way of seeing that brought about the paintings in 1949 that are the basis for all my later work.” Returning to the United States during the mid-1950s, Kelly lived in Manhattan among a community of artists that included Robert Indiana, Agnes Martin, and James Rosenquist. In 1956 he had his first New York solo exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery. He continued his exploration of abstract art, first in multipanel works composed according to rules of combination and permutation, then in large paintings of elemental shapes in black and white or unmodulated colors. While his paintings and sculpture remained uncompromisingly abstract, Kelly’s graphic production encompassed a wider range of modes of expression—from abstract collages to naturalist self-portraits. His major output on paper, however, consists of plant drawings, which he has continued to produce to this day, and in which, eschewing all emotion, he translates his perception of the world into pure form.

GIUSEPPE PENONE

Giuseppe Penone was born in 1947 in the village of Garesio, south of Turin, and lived on the family farm until 1966, when he moved to Turin to study sculpture at the Accademia di Belle Arte. In the late 1960s, he was associated with the Arte Povera (Poor Art) movement, a loosely knit group of Italian artists who rejected artistic conventions in their sculpture, installations, and performances by using nonartistic, everyday gestures and materials. (Other members included Alighiero Boetti, Jannis Kounellis, and Mario Merz.) From the beginning, Penone’s work has dealt primarily with nature, time, and the relationship of man to nature through transfusion of energy and metamorphosis of human and vegetal forms. Many of his pieces were realized outdoors and result from his direct intervention on natural processes, as when he locally altered the growth of a tree by placing an iron cast of his hand on the trunk. Sculpture and drawing have been Penone’s primary mediums and are frequently closely related through their processes. Both often involve the artist making a mark or an impression with his own body on some type of support, such as clay or paper, a heap

of leaves on the ground, or a strip of adhesive tape from which the impression can be projected onto the wall. Penone developed the concept of drawing as the record of a trace. "Drawing is the organization in space of a dirty material," he said. A large number of his drawings are based on the imprint of his skin, either by direct contact, for instance in drawings based on his fingerprints, or indirectly, as in the enlargement of the imprint of his eyelid on a forty-eight-foot-wide drawing made of almond-shaped sheets of unwoven fiber, which suggest a pattern of leaves. In a major series of ten drawings, executed in 2002–3, using each of his fingerprints as a starting point, Penone extended each line of the fingerprint until the entire design resembled the growth rings of an ancient tree, in a beautiful visualization of the fusion of man and tree that has always been at the core of his art.

DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE

Dorothea Rockburne was born in Verdun, Quebec, in 1932 and received her first artistic training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal. In the early 1950s, she studied at the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina, taking classes in mathematics and philosophy as well as art. The innovative teaching methods of Black Mountain and the relationships Rockburne formed there with professors and fellow students were crucial to her formation. In 1955 she moved to New York City, where she has lived ever since. From her experience as a dancer and her participation in performances, she developed her conception of art as a process. "I am doing the things to the material that when I danced I did with my body," she said in 1995. From her first installations, in the late 1960s, mathematics and physics have been a major source of inspiration. In an early series of multipart works based on set theory, she visualized organizing principles and abstract relationships by combining sheets of cardboard, paper, and crude oil. Disregarding the traditional distinctions between drawing, painting, and sculpture, she spread these pieces over the wall and onto the floor. Subsequent series dealt with different mathematical concepts, such as the golden section, non-Euclidean geometry, and Mandelbrot's equation. Rockburne's primary medium is paper of all kinds, from carbon paper and Kraft paper to vellum and papyrus. In creating a piece, she is guided by the properties of the material. This approach led to the ground-breaking series of the early 1970s, *Drawings that Make Themselves*, in which each drawing was self-generated by folding the paper according to a geometric rule. Several sojourns in Italy, notably at the American Academy in Rome in 1991, have fueled Rockburne's interest in Italian art, especially from the early Renaissance (Giotto, Piero della Francesca) and the sixteenth century (Pontormo, Tintoretto). A mural of the skies, with planets and constellations, in a seventeenth-century Italian villa spurred her interest in astronomy, which has remained central to her work since the early 1990s and found a major expression in the mural paintings on a cosmological theme that she created for the headquarters of Sony USA in New York in 1992. The chromatic richness and sensuousness of Rockburne's recent works based on astronomy underscore the subtle balance between intuition, emotion, and rigorous intellectual thought on which all of her work is predicated.