

Art Behind Bars:

## **Luther and the Avantgarde**

Contemporary Art in the Old Prison, Wittenberg

With special presentations in Berlin and Kassel

May 19 to September 17, 2017

Cells morph into exhibition rooms, prison walls into galleries: On May 18 the exhibition *Luther and the Avantgarde* will be inaugurated in Wittenberg's Old Prison. 500 years after the legendary posting of his theses and 50 years after the last inmate was incarcerated there, the prison is being transformed into a temporary museum. Sixty-six artists from across the world will be turning this historic site into a vibrant hub of artistic creativity and intellectual freedom. With *Luther and the Avantgarde*, the focus of the Evangelical Anniversary Summer and the World Reformation Exhibition lies firmly on contemporary art. Special artistic presentations on church premises in Berlin and Kassel augment the central Wittenberg exhibition. And over a period of 40 days Bazon Brock is extending an open invitation to attend his Visitors' School.

### **International contemporary art meets the pugnacious visionary Luther**

The exhibition *Luther and the Avantgarde* has been organised by Bonn-domiciled Foundation for Art and Culture, together with the Reformation Anniversary 2017. Their starting point is the thesis: Luther changed the world and his multifaceted character has lost nothing of its enduring fascination until the present day. Not only did he bring about a fundamental modernisation of the Church, he also unleashed a process of reforms which reverberated across all areas of society. Today, some 500 years after the Reformation we ask: How does art relate to him today? As a visionary trailblazer and socio-cultural avantgardist of his time, can Luther serve as a source of social and artistic inspiration for society in our time? And, in turn, as initiators, admonishers and disruptors, are artists the social avantgarde of our age? *"The selected works form a kaleidoscope of contemporary art, a mirror of social observations"*, explains the internationally recruited team of curators. *"Today, the critical stance of artists, in a world in which plurality, democracy, freedom and equality are under threat, is more crucial for our society than ever before."*

Over half the works on view were produced especially for the exhibition, by, among others, **Ai Weiwei, Maurizio Cattelan, Ayşe Erkmen, Richard Jackson, Alexander Kluge, Ulrike Kuschel, Markus Lüpertz, Jonathan Meese, Marzia Migliora, Andreas Slominski, Pascale Tayou, Erwin Wurm or Xu Bing**. Others were created on-site other to do justice to the complexity of the theme. The artists articulate their response to the critical social issues of our day and examine the pioneering reformatory ideas for their topical relevance. The major themes addressed are individual freedom and its adversaries, personal responsibility and tolerance, and the interrogation of power structures against the backdrop of profound political, social and religious conflicts and a multishifting global media landscape. *"Luther's critical intellect and his unequivocal convictions are inspiration enough to formulate one's own artistic position on societal issues"*, commented the chairman of the curatorial team Walter Smerling. *"The works featured in the exhibition are highly socially relevant. They all strive to interrogate both critically and rigorously the status quo and to lay their finger in the wounds of society."* Some artists engage quite directly with Martin Luther's ideas and his personality, whereas others adopt a different, more abstract approach.

### **Snowden and the 95 art theses of the Devil: The central exhibition in Wittenberg**

The venue of the central exhibition is the Old Prison in Wittenberg, which has been especially renovated for *Luther and the Avantgarde* and offers exhibition space in a setting, unusual both for artists and visitors alike. The spectrum of works on show ranges from paintings, sculptures, installations, murals, photography, video and

sound to performances and urban interventions. These art works demand close attention and scrutiny, as they highlight injustices and pose questions – often stridently, other times softly.

Just as the World Reformation Exhibition today is interrogating the world in general and scrutinizing not only ecclesiastical, but also societal norms, so too are the artists in the Old Prison addressing the issues of our time and formulating a wide range of thought-provoking responses to the current issues. The cells of the former prison - entirely in the tradition of the Reformation – are now resonating with an appeal for free thinking and for the freedom of thought," emphasises Ulrich Schneider, managing director of the Reformationsjubiläum 2017 e.V.

For the Catholic convert **Markus Lüpertz**, Luther is "in all his vulnerability - a hero". He approaches the multifaceted character of the great reformer by fashioning a monument. Currently on view in the prison are the model and preparatory drawings, with the monumental sculpture scheduled to be installed in Wittenberg in the autumn of this year.

In his contribution **Ai Weiwei** revisits his own period of incarceration. Entombed within a concrete block, his human figure is an appeal for individual freedom of expression.

**Jonathan Meese**, who has no hesitation in characterising Luther as an artist, addresses the reformer's fear of the devil. ERZTARZAN'S CELL", incorporating the "95 art theses of the devil (babies)", is an exuberant manifesto-like installation comprising wall paintings, sculpture and multimedia.

Capitalism as a substitute for religion and the intrinsic connection between moral guilt and economic debt are the subjects examined by the Italian artist **Marzia Migliora** in her contribution. She transforms her prison cell into a strongroom with the aid of a stylised church pew.

**Luise Schröder** has called on the Wittenberg residents to nominate the names of 100 females whose life achievements are deserving of a memorial plaque in the city. Her artistic response to the male-dominated historiography and public commemorative culture is to be unveiled on May 18 in Wittenberg.

In her work for Wittenberg, the Chinese artist **Jia** highlights the identity-building power of language within a society. In her encounter with her own mother-tongue, which extends over the cell walls and through the stairwells, the artists succeeds in forging a bridge to Luther's translation of the Bible and its repercussions for the subsequent development of the German language

The avowed atheist **Jörg Herold** has painstakingly scored the "99 Beautiful Names of Allah" into the walls of his cell. Motivating him is a quest for knowledge and the sheer fascination of a "neutral" contemporary artist for a life philosophy, which is alien to him.

The old master **Richard Jackson** has adorned his cell with wall paintings, from which the reverse sides of canvasses protrude. The front sides of the paintings are drenched in colour. Here Jackson is making a graphic and direct comment on the prohibition of images during the Reformation and on the role of the viewer.

In front of the prison **Achim Mohné** has assembled a freely-accessible monumental mosaic made of stone slabs, which - from an aerial perspective – resolves into the pixelated portrait of Edward Snowden. As he explains: "The - for its time - 'rapid' medium of book printing enabled Luther to launch the Reformation, whilst Edward Snowden's global revelations succeeded in defeating the cutting-edge digital technology of his time with its own weapons. The aim of both 'whistleblowers' was to expose systemic injustice."

### **Gilbert & George with "Scapegoating Pictures" in Berlin's St. Matthew's Church**

Gilbert & George are taking their art into St. Matthew's Church in Berlin's Kulturforum - a novelty in the long exhibition history of the London-based artists, who are better known for their anti-clerical stance. The Turner Prize winners, who integrate themselves into their art, present a selection of their SCAPEGOATING PICTURES, whose central themes are religious and social conflicts, war and fundamentalism. They describe the "central nervous system", the condition and the anxieties of today's multicultural, multireligious, high-tech society. The exhibition of Gilbert & George's work is perceived by the St. Matthew's Foundation as the Church's contribution to fostering a critical dialogue in their endeavour to highlight and counteract the dangerous demonisation of sections of society and promote reconciliation, without glossing over the harsh realities."

### Shilpa Gupta and Thomas Kilpper & Massimo Ricciardo in the Karlskirche Kassel

The Indian artist Shilpa Gupta and the Berlin-domiciled artist Thomas Kilpper are exhibiting their work in (and on) the Karlskirche in Kassel.

On show are four works by **Shilpa Gupta** which examine the spoken word, and draw historical references to the Huguenot origins of the Karlskirche and to the reformatioinal tradition which views the spoken and heard word as being of great importance in sustaining faith. Her sound installation *I Keep Falling at You* investigates the power of language in the digital age. Resembling a vast, pod-shaped swarm of bees, thousands of microphones hang from the ceiling into the room, from which a cacophony of whispering and singing emanates. The visitor is exposed to the omnipotence of this cloud of words, which is both threatening and alluring in equal measure, This destructive potential of this "living" statement becomes directly and sensually experiential.

**Thomas Kilpper** dedicates himself in his work *Ein Leuchtturm für Lampedusa!* (A Lighthouse for Lampedusa!) to the current refugee crisis, and transforms the bell tower of the Karlskirche into a lighthouse. Using material recovered from stranded refugee boats, he has fashioned here a symbol of orientation. Since 2008 the artist has been working on the idea of creating a combined lighthouse and culture centre on the island of Lampedusa, which for many refugees is their first point of contact with Europe - a hub of communication and dignity amidst a sea of inhumanity. His installation is augmented by a work fashioned jointly with Massimo Ricciardo in 2015. Titled *Inventuren der Flucht* (The Inventory of Flight), it comprises a collection of highly diverse objects lost by refugees during their crossing to Europe.

### The curators of *Luther and the Avantgarde*

The exhibition is curated by an international team of experts, comprising Walter Smerling, Chairman of the Curatorial Committee and Chairman of the Foundation for Art and Culture, Bonn; Kay Heymer, Director of Moderne Kunst, Foundation Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf; Susanne Kleine, curator, Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn; Dimitri Ozerkov, Director of Moderne Kunst, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg; Peter Weibel, Director of Center for Art and Media Technology, Karlsruhe, and Dan Xu, art historian, Foundation for Art and Culture, Bonn.

*Luther and the Avantgarde* is being organised by the Foundation for Art and Culture, Bonn ([www.stiftungkunst.de](http://www.stiftungkunst.de)), in cooperation with the Reformatioinsjubiläum 2017 e.V. ([www.r2017.org](http://www.r2017.org)). Further partners are the Foundation of St. Matthew's Church, Berlin and the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck.

The exhibition enjoys the generous sponsorship of the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) and the support of the Commissioner of the Federal Government for Culture and Media.

*Luther and the Avantgarde* is part of the *World Reformation Exhibition* ([r2017.org/weltausstellung](http://r2017.org/weltausstellung)).

Further information on the exhibition, the visitors' service and the accompanying events is available at: [www.luther-avantgarde.de](http://www.luther-avantgarde.de).

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