

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening on June 11

## THE LINE OF WIT

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## *The Line of Wit*

- Dates: June 11, 2020 – February 6, 2021
  - Curator: Lekha Hileman Waitoller
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- The artists represented in the exhibition employ unusual materials and techniques, and many playfully defy aesthetic conventions demonstrating ingenuity and wit.
  - In his iconic series *Mrs. Lenin and the Nightingale* (2008) Baselitz presents the human figures upside down in expressive, large-format canvases, which serves to distance the viewer and to achieve a form of abstraction while maintaining figuration.
  - *Hichiko Happo* (2014) by Yoko Ono is a gestural painting made during a poignant public performance that the artist staged on the occasion of her 2014 exhibition at the Museum that synthesizes her performance and painting practices.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *The Line of Wit*, a selection of works from the Museum's Collection and long-term loans that can be characterized as clever and experimental. Bringing together artists of different generations working across a variety of media, the presentation includes rarely seen treasures from the Museum's Collection alongside many beloved works. Relentlessly inquisitive in nature, the artists represented in the exhibition employ unusual materials and techniques, and many playfully defy aesthetic conventions demonstrating ingenuity and wit.

*The Line of Wit* is the first exhibition curated by Lekha Hileman Waitoller, who came to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in October 2019 from the Art Institute of Chicago.

### **Gallery 305. Defying Tradition**

The exhibition is organized thematically with the first gallery dedicated to unorthodox artmaking processes and systems of display. Some works in this room occupy space in unexpected ways as in Cristina Iglesias' *Untitled (Alabaster Room)*, (1993) which relies on the architecture of a corner for its display. The translucent sheets of white alabaster hover lithely above head, gently sloping downward on each end, altering both the surrounding light and space. Alyson Shotz's *Object for Reflection* (2017), consists of countless small pieces of perforated aluminum bound together by steel rings. From a distance, the object appears to be a solid, voluminous sculpture, but a closer look reveals translucence and malleability of the material. Indeed, the work takes on three-dimensional form only once it is installed: suspended from the ceiling, tension and gravity transform the metallic sheet into a sculpture.

Yoko Ono's *Hichiko Happo* (2014) provides a unique example of artistic process as the painting was created during a performance the artist staged during her retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in 2014. On the nine canvases that comprise the work, Ono painted the phrase "seven happinesses

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and eight treasures” in Japanese. The black sumi ink she energetically employed drips down each canvas at once recalling the traditions of action painting and ancient calligraphy from her native Japan. *Hichiko Happo* embodies Ono’s performative and plastic artmaking practices.

In the ultimate demonstration of wit, artist collaborators Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s *The Way Things Go* (1987) cinematic chain reaction creates the illusion of continuous movement between ordinary materials such as tires, fireworks, and a balloon. Misleadingly simple in its presentation, the film is a sequence of orchestrated failures in the form of falls, spills, and small explosions that create a continuum of controlled chaos. In a delightfully inventive combination of play and experimentation, *The Way Things Go* is an embrace of absurdity and the everyday object, challenging the foundations of high culture.

## Gallery 306. Modes of Representation

The second gallery in *The Line of Wit* includes a selection of works that are representational or figurative in nature and exemplify the myriad ways in which artists explore the human form as subject. Serial repetition across multiple canvases or within one composition is a strategy used by several artists in the room. Through artworks spanning fifty years, a variety of approaches to figuration are explored highlighting formal and conceptual experimentation through the motif of the figure.

A selection of George Baselitz’s iconic sixteen painting series *Mrs. Lenin and the Nightingale* (2008) form part of the exhibition. In a twist on traditional portraiture, these expressive, large-format canvases present the subjects of the painting upside down. Half of the works in the series contain brightly colored figures on a white ground and the other half are painted mainly in gray and blue hues on a black background, a framing device that puts the focus on the figure. Baselitz has remarked that this strategy of inverting the figures in his work serves to distance the viewer, requiring that one carefully consider the content. Formally, the paintings achieve a form of abstraction while maintaining figuration.

A selection of Alex Katz’s *Smiles* (1994) series of eleven portraits of smiling women will also be shown. An ongoing theme for Katz is portraiture in a style characterized by flattened planes of color, shallow pictorial space, and reductive but acutely descriptive lines, set against a monochrome background. His subjects function as a tool for artistic investigation of the traditional figure-ground relationship. Katz’s aim is not to represent the sitter’s personality, but rather to present a more profound reflection on the nature of representation and the perception of images. By repeating the same framing device, figure-ground treatment, and gesture—the smile—Katz beckons the viewer to focus not on the specific subject but on the pictorial experimentation across these varied depictions.

## Gallery 307. Methods and Materials

The final gallery draws together a selection of abstract works that are experimental in methods and materials. These experiments were undertaken to achieve a particular effect, pushing the boundaries of different mediums. Some embraced nontraditional materials, such as commercial paints, ordinary plates, or a blackboard and chalk. In these works, the viewer is invited to contemplate the critical choices artist’s make in selecting materials and techniques and how they lend themselves to different possibilities.

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Julian Schnabel began exhibiting his signature plate paintings in 1979, featuring shards of broken crockery embedded in Bondo (a putty-like polyester resin), loosely overpainted with crude images in oil paint. Notable for their heroic scale, distorted subjects, and flamboyant textures, the plate paintings were inspired by a 1978 visit to Barcelona, where Schnabel encountered mosaics by the Catalan architect Antonio Gaudí. In works such as the monumental *Spain* (1986), he transferred the mosaic surface to painting, transforming both in the process: the broken plates and cups project out from the surface like jagged, sculptural brushstrokes, disrupting the picture plane.

The work of Erlea Maneros Zabala explores the role of mass media in shaping contemporary narratives through their treatment of images and subjective view of history. Her 2013 work entitled *Basque Graphics; Typography and Ornament: 1961–1967* employs appropriated imagery charged with political and historical significance and subsequently inverts, transforms, and serializes it. The thirty-nine etched copper plates that comprise the work do not show the printed page itself, but rather the matrix from which the text springs, like an archeological presentation that attempts to demonstrate the process of mechanical reproduction, an obsolete industrial technique.

Many of the artists in this room experimented with the physicality of paint. Prudencio Irazabal's primary medium is a thin liquid polymer, which he thickens with gel, before adding small amounts of liquid pigment to create different colors with varying degrees of translucency. Because of the paint's viscosity, the artist temporarily places borders around the edges of the canvas to prevent it from running the sides. Once the surface has been built up, the borders are removed revealing the depth of the surface and the luminous quality of color as in *Untitled #767*, (1996).

Through a close examination of themes centered on artistic choice and process, *The Line of Wit* presents profoundly experimental holdings from the collection marked by ingenuity.

## DIDAKTIKA

As part of the Didaktika project, sponsored by BBK, the Museum designs didactic spaces, online contents, and special activities that complement the exhibitions and offer the public tools and resources to facilitate the understanding and appreciation of the works on view.

In this case, the didactic space offers a technical approach to the work processes employed by the artists featured in *The Line of Wit*. Unusual materials and methods, the use of technology, or the incorporation of the architecture of the building into the work of art can be seen in the representational and more abstracted pieces displayed. How can different materials be combined to achieve new effects?

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## Special activities complementing the exhibition

### An Introductory Talk to *The Line of Wit* (June 9)

Lekha Hileman Waitoller, curator of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Collection and curator of *The Line of Wit* will discuss topics related to the show, comprised of works from the permanent collection as well as some long-term loans.

### \*Shared Reflections

Unique tours led by members of the Museum's Curatorial and Education Departments where different perspectives on the exhibition are offered.

- Curatorial Vision (June 16): Curator Lekha Hileman Waitoller will lead a tour of the exhibition.
- Key Concepts (June 23): Education Coordinator Luz Maguregui will discuss the general and didactic keys of the exhibition.

\*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

### Creative Session: Let's Get to Work (October 14)

A workshop about the materials and methods used by artists such as Sigmar Polke or Jean-Michel Basquiat.

### Creative Session: Moving Images (November 18)

A workshop for adults where they will explore the audiovisual aspect of the exhibition, taking Peter Fischli & David Weiss's piece as starting point.

### Local Artists Reinterpret the Collection Works

Activity in the galleries where some local artists who work in different disciplines dialogue with participants and will offer them the opportunity to view the artwork through the local artists' perspective.

## Cover image:

**Georg Baselitz**

***Mrs Lenin and the Nightingale***

*Lucian and Frank plein air (Lucian und Frank Plein-air)*, 2008

Oil on canvas

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© Georg Baselitz, Bilbao, 2021

## **For more information:**

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Images for press usage  
*The Line of Wit*  
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## Online press image service

In the press area of the Museum's website ([prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es)), you may register to download high-resolution images and videos of both the exhibitions and the building. If you do not yet have an account, you can register and download the material you need. If you are already a user, enter your username and password and you can access images directly.

- The images provided must be used solely for editorial advertising related to *The Line of Wit*, which is open to the public at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao from June 11, 2021 through February 6, 2022.
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For more information, you can get in touch with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao press area at tel. +34 944 359 008 or email [media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus](mailto:media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus)

## Peter Fischli and David Weiss

*The Way Things Go, (Der Lauf der Dinge)*, 1987

Color video, transferred from 16 mm film, with sound, 30 min.

Tubacex

© Peter Fischli, Bilbao, 2021

© David Weiss, Bilbao, 2021



## Alyson Shotz

*Object for Reflection*, 2017

Punched aluminium and stainless-steel rings

309,88 x 368,3 x 144,78 cm

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© Alyson Shotz, Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, Bilbao, 2021



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## Antonio Saura

*Karl-Johann Strasse II*, 1997

Oil on canvas

200 x 400 cm

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© Antonio Saura, Bilbao, 2021



## Georg Baselitz

*Mrs. Lenin and the Nightingale* (Selection of 4 works)

*Lucian and Frank en plein air* (*Lucian und Frank Plein-air*), 2008

Oil on canvas

300 x 250 cm

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© Georg Baselitz, Bilbao, 2021



*Brightening as a white tread, Kiki's dream of Prague*

(*Hellung als weißer Faden, Kikis Traum von Prag*), 2008

Oil on canvas

300 x 250 cm

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© Georg Baselitz, Bilbao, 2021



## Jean-Michel Basquiat

*Man from Naples*, 1982

Acrylic and collage on wood

124 x 246,7 x 3,5 cm

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© Estate of Jean Michel Basquiat, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2021



## Sigmar Polke

*Kathreiner's Morning Wood* (*Kathreiners Morgenlatte*), 1969–79

Acrylic, Wood, mixed media, and framed collage on canvas and fabric

235 x 305 cm

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## Erlea Maneros Zabala

*Basque Graphics; Typography and ornament*, 2013

Copper plate etching

32 x 45 x 9 cm (with frame) each

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© Erlea Maneros Zabala, Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, Bilbao, 2021



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**Prudencio Irazabal**

*Untitled #767, 1996*

Acrylic on fabric on wooden panels

211 x 347,5 x 6,3 cm

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© Prudencio Irazabal, Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, Bilbao, 2021



**Julian Schnabel**

*Spain, 1986*

Oil, plates and Bondo non wood

333 x 580 x 23 cm

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