

Foreword

The Flemish artist Berlinde De Bruyckere stands out among her contemporaries for the emotional intensity of her work. Against the backdrop of history and traditional Christian iconography, she formulates in her sculptures a harrowed and harrowing view of humanity, marked by suffering, mutilation and brokenness. In view of the growing prevalence of acts of violence and catastrophes, the advances in medicine and the increasing dominance of media-generated processes, these images of the human being today acquire an ethical relevance that challenges us both on an individual level and as a society at large. Whereas religion once imbued suffering, wounds and death with meaning, the overall decline in religious commitment has shifted the responsibility of understanding to the individual. Berlinde De Bruyckere's sculptures phrase the body of suffering as a question, which she puts to our age and our conception of humanity.

Long fascinated and inspired by the paintings of Lucas Cranach the Elder, »painter of the Reformation«, and his ability to express mental processes in the body, here Berlinde De Bruyckere enters into a dialogue with Lucas Cranach and Pier Paolo Pasolini with a selection of works from the past few years alongside a range of new works produced especially for this exhibition. In Halle, her dialogue with Cranach is pointedly focused upon a lesser-known masterpiece, the *Schmerzensmann* (The Man of Sorrows) from the parish of Wörlitz, which has found a permanent home in the historic collection of paintings endowed by Leopold Frederick Franz, Duke of Dessau-Anhalt upon the Gothic House in Wörlitz's Garden Realm. As the exhibition tours to the Kunstmuseum Bern, and later to the Kunsthalle Wien, other works by Cranach will be added to the display. Pasolini's film *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (The Gospel According to St Matthew), a work typically screened at the cinema, marks a third, existential and political standpoint. In its radical humanity, Pasolini's view of the figure of Christ becomes provocatively contemporary in the constellation put forward by the exhibition. Juxtaposed with the works of De Bruyckere and Cranach, the film unfolds its visual force in an unaccustomed context. A further insight into this approach is offered by the accompanying film programme of selected works by Pasolini which, in their exploration of the corporeal as a condition of our humanity, probe the depths of primordial existence.

This companion book is more than a mere exhibition catalogue. It is comprised of two parallel levels: a visual level, which combines and contrasts the expressive figures of all three artists in dense, associative pictorial sequences, and a reflective level consisting of a series of essays. In the encounter between seemingly disparate works and media, and against the backdrop of modern philosophy and art, the artist and authors explore a view of humanity that has become questionable and fragile, as well as the meaning revealed therein. The exhibition makes clear that even works of art produced under very different historical conditions carry a potential for dealing with the present. In order to access that potential, however, we must move beyond viewing them as mere witnesses of the past, as the discarded inventory of art history, towards an examination and observation of their determinants from today's perspective. The museum is the right place in which to establish a presence for the critical substance of art from different periods in history. Yet its mission should not be the referential affirmation of young artists through the authority of older, canonised art on the one hand, or the shallow imitation of its imagery on the other. What is at stake, rather, is the attempt to see the ongoing questions we face, in all their varied and shifting manifestations, as a potential for sharpening our senses in our bid to come to terms with the events and experiences of our time.

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