

## The Blind Spot

Adam Szymczyk, Artistic Director of the international art exhibition documenta 14, explains why in 2017 he would like to show the estate of the Nazi art dealer Gurlitt.

Interview by Catrin Lorch

The estate of the Nazi art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt became known in the German media as the “Schwabing art trove”, named after the suburb of Munich where it had been stored. After the Kunstmuseum Bern was made Cornelius Gurlitt’s sole heir, its director, Matthias Frehner, told the magazine *Focus*: “There’s no doubt that every museum in Germany” would have liked to be the first to show the art. He had decided on the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, he said, but a date had not yet been set. It was not clear until now that not only museums but also documenta had sought to show the works. Adam Szymczyk, artistic director of the Kassel-based global art exhibition, which takes place for the fourteenth time in 2017, has been trying to get access to the art trove since his appointment in late 2013.

SZ: Mr Szymczyk, you avoid using the word “collection” in reference to the Gurlitt estate—but still you’re interested in it.

Adam Szymczyk: Terms such as “Schwabinger Kunstfund” and “Gurlitt Nachlass” appear to me as more fitting and fair as names for over 1500 art objects amassed in two modest private residencies of the late Cornelius Gurlitt. Hildebrand Gurlitt acquired them, first as a critic and art historian and then in his role as an art dealer buying for the “Führermuseum” as part of “Sonderauftrag Linz” (Linz Special Commission). After the war he kept private holdings with which he worked as a dealer until his death in 1956. The word “collection” suggests a grouping with a certain conceptual consistency. But this is rather an unusual ensemble of works that have outlived the storm of history and were hidden from public view for 65 years. Most collectors one encounters today collect with the idea of making what they own public. For Cornelius Gurlitt—who once said in an interview „Ich habe nur mit meinen Bildern leben wollen, in Frieden und in Ruhe“ (I only wanted to live with my paintings, in peace and quietly)—that was out of the question. The lyricism of these statement may be disarming at first, but then we realize they relate to a very extreme form of collecting or keeping hold of the art works that are meant for their custodian’s eyes only.

SZ: But why should one show the inheritance of a Nazi art dealer in Kassel, at the most important exhibition of contemporary art?

AS: Precisely because it was not intended to be shown and seen. Documenta is an exhibition on contemporary issues, not necessarily of contemporary art. In the preceding Documenta there were also four-thousand-year-old sculptures and photographs that were taken in

Adolf Hitler's bathroom by the American photographer Lee Miller after the end of the war. Documenta since its inauguration has also been a meta-exhibition — making a statement about the contemporary world, of which culture is a sensitive part, a cognitive extension. In addition the Gurlitt case—quite apart from the scandal it created—provides a perfect vantage point from which to observe a variety of contemporary cultural phenomena.

SZ: The first Documenta in 1955 was originally conceived, after all, as a result of the desire to establish a bridge to what had been considered “degenerate art”.

AS: In establishing such bridges, there will always be a small part that evades such efforts in a material, historical, or aesthetic dimension. And here we're dealing with a blind spot of exactly this kind. What is really important stays hidden under the bridge—indeed, for that matter, in the murky area between the exhibition “Degenerate Art” in 1937 and the first Documenta in 1955. At the time several art dealers were “working” with the art owned by Jewish collectors. At the same time the Nazis developed very sophisticated forms of censorship. Arnold Bode, the founder of Documenta, was himself a victim of Nazi repression. And his Documenta in 1955 presented artists whose works were at the same time being held by the Gurlitt family and hidden from public view. Hildebrand Gurlitt had been cleared by the American investigators - the so-called Monuments Men - and was allowed to keep the art he owned.

SZ: But showing this “collection” would have nothing to do with the contemporary art of today.

AS: No, that is not true. One of the moments that helped my ideas for documenta 14 take shape occurred when I saw the reproductions of some works found in Cornelius Gurlitt's house in Salzburg in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. It was almost a shock when I recognized a picture there that I previously knew only in black and white, as a lithograph. The art historian Linda Nochlin had reproduced this work of Gustave Courbet's, which has the long title “L'apôtre Jean Journet partant pour la conquête de l'harmonie universelle” (The Apostle Jean Journet Setting out on a Quest of Universal Harmony, 1850). In a brilliant essay she attempts to establish that there is a now-scattered group of works by Courbet, all devoted to people excluded from society. One of them is a portrait of this very Jean Journet, who was Courbet's friend and an “apostle” of Fourier's utopian socialism. As far as I know it was never reproduced anywhere as part of the Gurlitt inheritance. And now it pops up again from the realm of the lost. I would want to use this group of works to pose questions concerning today's art. Courbet thematises exclusion and exploitation, but also hope: the possibility of sharing resources and the transformations wrought by progressive ideas.

SZ: So you would try to put the art from the inheritance of the Gurlitt family into a different context?

AS: Kassel would have the advantage that the exhibition here is part of a larger context: The majority of visitors—last time there were nearly a million—do not come because of a spectacle or a scandal, but because they are passionately interested in art. And they are a thinking audience. The Neue Galerie in Kassel would be an excellent place to show the “Gurlitt Nachlass” in its entirety—also the works that have been kept in Germany as potential “Raubkunst”. And we would endeavour to arrange loans of those works that are now being given back to their owners. The presentation in Kassel would avoid focusing on highlights. Rather, it would show the entirety of the inheritance in a quiet way, almost neutrally, maybe just arranged chronologically. One has to almost ignore the art-historical content in order to lend contours to the place of this art trove in history.

SZ: The director of the Kunstmuseum Bern said Stuttgart would be the first port of call. Didn't you speak to him about your interest?

AS: Yes, we did. The CEO of documenta GmbH and I had a constructive meeting with Matthias Frehner very early on; he was interested in the idea. But the Kunstmuseum Bern's board members did not share this interest. We also wrote to the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media Monika Grütters back in June 2014. We received an answer from the Ministry notifying us that the inheritance court would be the responsible party to address. When we made further enquiries, the Ministry told us that the works that remain in Germany can be exhibited only “for the purpose of informing about the history of persecution of the original owners and to give the heirs of those rightful owners who currently remain unknown the opportunity of asserting their claims.” Which would, however, be exactly the case at Documenta, an exhibition with hundreds of thousands of international visitors. I am not interested in an exclusive or first spectacular presentation, but I would like to show the entire Gurlitt estate in the political and aesthetic context of documenta 14. Our exhibition provides a unique and timely public platform for such presentation.

Original URL: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/kunst-der-blinde-fleck-1.2434563>

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung, April 15, 2015