

# MARKUS LÜPERTZ

## AUDIO TOUR TRANSCRIPT

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### **STOP 1: Director and exhibition curator Dorothy Kosinski introduces this exhibition, prepared in collaboration with artist Markus Lüpertz**

This presentation is organized in very close collaboration with Markus himself, and it's the first major US retrospective of this acclaimed German painter. The exhibition explores his five-decade long career from his very earliest works in the 1960s, the perplexing dithyramb and provocative manipulations of German motifs such as helmets and grains of wheat to his most recent paintings that are redolent with mythological subject matter and art historical allusions. Lüpertz began painting some 20 years before the reunification of Germany, when the country was still in the shadow of the Berlin Wall. At that time German artists strove to refine their voice amidst the social stigma of their nation's recent history. By the early '60s painting itself had fallen out of fashion as conceptualism and minimalism and pop art became popular abroad. In this context Lüpertz adopted a rebellious position producing paintings that departed from any of those of his peers.



Markus Lüpertz, *Satyr and Nymphe II*, 2014, Mixed media on canvas

Lüpertz's entire body of work is fraught with a fundamental tension between figuration and abstraction with the artist continuously challenging the norms of modernism. Viewers are often deliberately perplexed by the "subject," while being simultaneously gripped by their drama and authority. The nearly 50 works in the exhibition, rich with many references and approaches, reveal the physicality of his art-making and the creative manipulation of mass and volume.

### **STOP 2: Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs Klaus Ottmann describes Lüpertz as an artist-philosopher**

Of all living painters, Markus Lüpertz resembles most closely what in German is called a *Künstler-Philosoph*, an artist-philosopher. The term was first used by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche for his vision of a higher concept of art, one that is essentially "a metaphysical activity." For Nietzsche, art and philosophy thus are intertwined. He once said that "in all of philosophy, what is missing until now is the artist." Lüpertz, who in his paintings and in his own writings refers frequently to Nietzsche, has insisted that there is a distinction between philosophers and artists: the former questions the world,



while the latter questions itself. Yet, like Nietzsche's expanded vision of art, Lüpertz's paintings straddle the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the idealized world of representation through form and beauty on the one hand, and the contradictions and pain of human existence on the other.

Lüpertz's painting *The Raven Philosopher*, composed as a studio still life with various props, depicts a symbol of melancholy as much as wisdom. Like the black bird in Edgar Allen Poe's poem "The Raven," Lüpertz's philosophizing raven depicts both death and beauty, and it could be read a portrait of the artist. But ultimately, as an artist who compels us to see his representational paintings as mere abstractions, Lüpertz insists that "in painting the truth can only be the canvas, the paint itself."

Markus Lüpertz, *Il corvo che filosofa (The Raven Philosopher)*, 1990, Oil on canvas

### **STOP 3: Max Rosenberg, Postdoctoral Fellow in Modern and Contemporary Art at the Phillips Collection and the University of Maryland, discusses painting in Germany after WWII.**

In the '60s, when Lüpertz began his career, the arts in Germany were in a tenuous situation. After World War II, critics and artists in the new West German state had embraced abstraction. Artists like Willi Baumeister and Ernst Wilhelm Nay created totally abstract compositions that were distinct from, but also connected to, international trends in the United States and France. Yet, while there are indeed broader historical implications to Abstract Expressionism in the US and Informel in France, the avoidance of representational imagery in West Germany came to be viewed in the decades following the war, as an avoidance of history itself. Artists spoke of a "year zero" and often created primordial looking abstract forms that appeared outside of history, as though going back to some mythic beginning or abstract, pre-historical origin could escape the trauma and horror of Nazism and the Second World War.



Markus Lüpertz, *Seerose (Water Lily)*, 1970, Oil on canvas

**STOP 4: Dorothy Kosinski on her recent time working with the artist to install this exhibition.**

I'm excited to be able to share my very recent experience with Markus Lüpertz as I worked with him to install the exhibition. It was a truly exhilarating experience to have the opportunity to get inside the artist's head. It was fascinating to me, an art historian, who thinks in terms of progression, who thinks in terms of chronological orders, that none of that was important for Markus Lüpertz. In fact, to the contrary, he wandered through the gallery once, twice, three times, and changed the position of every object in the show. As he said to me, he was looking for an optical order. It had to do with robust juxtapositions of colors, of shapes, of small canvases and big canvases. So, contrary to most exhibits in the Phillips, or in most museums, the visitor, my dear, will be disappointed if you're looking for the early works, the middle works, and the late works. Instead you can go in any direction in this exhibit because he deliberately intermixes all of the works from those five decades of his very rich career.



Markus Lüpertz, *Baumstamm Abwärts—dithyrambisch (Tree Trunk Down—Dithyrambic)*, 1966, Distemper on canvas, Hall Art Foundation, New York

So you might then ask, why? Is he trying to provoke us? Surely, but it also is an installation methodology that reflects his fundamental aesthetic philosophy. He and I were talking about this during his visit, his work is never about a style. A lot of people in the contemporary art world could say, "Aha!" that's a Kiefer, "aha!" that's a Baselitz, their works are wonderful, he was quick to point out, but they're very recognizable. As you walk through our galleries, you'll see it's not about a style, it's not about consistency, it's not about a kind of consistent progression. It's surely teasing us, challenging us to think about, "What is this object?" "Look at this thing," when you look at the label it's a tree trunk, but he paints it with the majesty of a 19th-century history painting, it's monumental, it's beautiful, and the subject is so trivial. For him that's precisely the point, it's not about painting an object—art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of things.

Lüpertz is trying to bring us forward, allow us a way of seeing our world. He said every time he paints a painting, he's starting from the beginning, and by that he was talking about starting from the sort of infancy of his artistic practice, that every time he paints a painting it's a voyage of discovery. He is never satisfied, he is returning again and again often to the same subjects, it's a serious and eternal challenge that he grasps every time he takes paintbrush to canvas.

I'm willing to bet that before the end of this exhibit, we get comments from our visitors about the lighting—"You forgot to light the canvases!" And I want to assure everyone that, again, this is the desire and direction of the artist himself. He moved those light canisters with his silver-tipped cane, trying to give us a sense of the quality of light that he desired. Not spotlighting the canvases but rather illuminating the wall around the canvases so that the canvas had a kind of even light, rather than a kind

of artificial drama, and, as you'll see, the works in the show are filled with drama. They're dramatic enough that we don't have to try to stage them, and I think that that's his point.

**STOP 5: Max Rosenberg, Postdoctoral Fellow in Modern and Contemporary Art at The Phillips Collection and the University of Maryland, talks about responding to the arts in Germany**

When Lüpertz began his career, there were many trends and movements dominating the arts in West Germany. On the one hand, there was the persistence of large-scale German abstraction. Unlike Pollock or de



Markus Lüpertz, *Der große Löffel (The Large Spoon)*, 1982, Oil on canvas, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Kooning in the US, many German abstract painters created very sleek, crisp abstract compositions that were often devoid of the more expressive and emotional language of the Abstract Expressionists. The Zero movement, founded by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, were even more overt in their opposition to emotion and expression. More aligned with Minimalism and Arte Povera, the Zero artists largely abandoned traditional painting in favor of non-traditional, industrially produced materials, creating art that explored light and movement. The typological photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who began working in the '60s, came to influence a generation of art photographers who adopted the Becher's cool, rational style. International movements like Pop Art and Fluxus became increasingly popular in Germany at this time as well, challenging the relevance of traditional painting. Lüpertz along with a handful of other artists with whom he is often associated, like Georg Baselitz and Eugen Schoenebeck, was therefore unique in his contrarian commitment to expressive, ambitious, and challenging painting. As one German critic in the '80s put it, "the qualities [Lüpertz] praised were no longer rationalism, clear lines, smooth surfaces, but passion, expressivity, physicality, and visionary forms and content, which leads to myth."

**STOP 6: Nicholas Kulish, former Berlin Bureau Chief for the *New York Times*, discusses nationalism, globalism, and cosmopolitanism in postwar Germany**

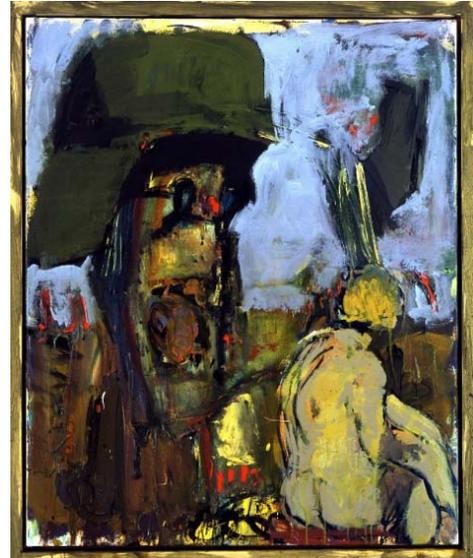
As a reaction to the excesses of Nazism, overt displays of nationalism and even patriotism were long frowned upon in German society. *Mein Kampf* was banned in the country, as were most Nazi symbols. Instead, German ambition had to be sublimated and absorbed into the project of European integration. Germany could only lead the European Union in partnership with France, and then with deference and

modesty. Germans highlighted their cosmopolitanism, their globalism and their environmentalism, including their dedication to recycling, held up only half in jest as a point of national pride.

But over time taboos have begun to fade, as the crimes of the 20th century recede further into the past, and generations of younger Germans have criticized American militarism first in Vietnam and then in Iraq. When Germany hosted the World Cup in 2006 German teenagers freely and proudly painted the black, red and gold flag on their faces, to the great surprise of their parents.

The euro crisis thrust Chancellor Angela Merkel into an undeniable leadership position on the continent. Meanwhile her decision to accept as many as a million refugees from war-ravaged countries like Iraq and Syria enflamed nativist sentiments among Germans who say their culture, religion and history are threatened by such an influx.

The rise of the right-wing, populist Alternative for Germany party—known by the German acronym the AfD—further threatens to upend the postwar consensus. The party already holds seats in the European Parliament and 13 of the 16 German state Parliaments. The upcoming parliamentary election could see the nationalist party win seats in the Bundestag for the first time, but Chancellor Merkel and her party have been rising in the polls again, perhaps a sign that populism will have a harder time gaining traction in Germany than it had recently appeared.



Markus Lüpertz, *Ohne Title (Untitled)*, 2009, Oil on canvas, Würth Collection

### **STOP 7: Museum Director Dorothy Kosinski discusses the dithyramb that Lüpertz frequently references**

By now you might be asking, “What is the dithyramb?” You’d find that word repeated over and over again on several labels. So let me quote Markus Lüpertz: he said, “I didn’t want to paint figuratively anymore, so I invented something abstract that is also figurative, a dithyramb.” In there you feel the contradiction, he’s challenging us to figure out what he’s saying. So he imposes that term on paintings that ostensibly present a tree trunk, roof tiles on a house, a helmet, a traditional cake form in Germany, a stalk of wheat, a man’s suit, such disparate and trivial objects, and again he paints them with authority and drama, instilling their trivialness with importance, or at least the importance of a painted object.



Markus Lüpertz, *Mann im Anzug—dithyrambisch II (Man in Suit—Dithyrambic II)*, 1976, Distemper on canvas

For instance, he defies normal expectations, so it's not really a depiction and it's not figurative but it's not abstract, those are the kind of norms that he's discarding very vociferously. When we expect things to be part of a landscape, none of them appear outdoors; they seem to inhabit a flat, ill-defined, poster-like environment. That log does not rest in a landscape, it can hardly be described as a still life, is it now a monument? Those are the kind of questions that he's prompting us to engage in as we look closely.

I'm quoting Lüpertz again, "The dithyramb was my totally individual contribution to abstraction, abstraction not in the sense of rational analysis or reduction, but as an in the invention of a nonsense object." He embraces riddles and mysteries as fundamental to art. He says, "Art survives only in riddles, only in mystery can art's eternal truth be retained, therefore the artist must be, as Nietzsche demands, a seeker of riddles, because those who seek to solve riddles are many." The reference to Nietzsche is important because this whole Dionysian poetic term from the poetry of antiquity kind of reemerged in the late nineteenth and early 20th century in the German-speaking world and had a resonance for him.

**STOP 8: Nick Kulish, former Berlin Bureau Chief for the *New York Times*, discusses German identity.**

After World War II, Germany lay in ruins and its economy was shattered. There were tons of rubble to clear, bridges and railways to rebuild, and unexploded bombs to remove. The British even had to release 300,000 German prisoners of war in their occupation zone specifically so that they could harvest crops to stave off a famine. A large share of working age men had been killed in the war and many believed at the time that Germany would be dependent on handouts for decades, such was the extent of the destruction. What little economic activity there was largely took place on the black market.

Conditions improved drastically in the western occupation zones after the currency reform introducing the deutsche mark. The postwar period of deprivation would soon come to a close. The new currency was an instant success, quickly reining in the black market. Goods returned to the store shelves almost overnight. With the help of American assistance known as the Marshall Plan, the German economy rebounded and the deutsche mark became a symbol of German economic strength. The period of rapid rebuilding in the 1950s became known as the *Wirtschaftswunder* or Economic Miracle.

West German politicians chose to focus on economic growth and the country's burgeoning power as an industrial exporter. Most Germans simply wanted to forget what had happened under the Nazi regime. They preferred to be known for industrial powerhouses like BMW and Mercedes, Bosch and Siemens, rather than the era of militarism that brought the country low.



Markus Lüpertz, *Mann im Anzug—dithyrambisch II (Man in Suit—Dithyrambic II)*, 1976, Distemper on canvas

Today, many believe that in the wake of Brexit the German financial capital Frankfurt could replace London as Europe's financial capital, the triumph of the German man in the suit.

**STOP 9: Nicholas Kulish, former Berlin Bureau Chief for the *New York Times*, discusses the difficult history that Berlin represents**

In 2005, the German government unveiled 2,711 gray concrete slabs, arranged in a grid covering five acres of central Berlin. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe occupies one of the most central locations in the entire country. It is a short walk from the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag to the north and the commercial district at Potsdamer Platz to the south.



Markus Lüpertz, *Tageszeiten (Morgen, Mittag, Abend) (Times of Day [Morning, Afternoon, Evening])*, 2010, Mixed media on wood (triptych)

The darkest episodes in the country's history are omnipresent in postwar Germany. Concentration camps have been preserved and turned into museums. Sections of the Berlin Wall have been rebuilt out of the same core-ten steel that Richard Serra uses for his sculptures. In West Berlin the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church was left in ruins, the jagged top of the church tower a reminder of the destruction that rained down on the city.

But some have criticized the epic scale of the Holocaust memorial, where tourists sunbath on the slabs and would-be lotharios post pictures standing in front of them on dating sites. The tiny brass plaques—four inches by four inches—known as Stolpersteine or stumbling blocks, are for some more effective and more representative. Hammered into the sidewalks, the Stolpersteine give the names, dates of birth and dates and places of death of Holocaust victims in front of the very buildings where they lived. As such the presence of history announces itself in the everyday, in a personal way, as you lock your bicycle or wait for a friend or stoop to tie your shoe.

**STOP 10: Max Rosenberg, Postdoctoral Fellow in Modern and Contemporary Art at The Phillips Collection and the University of Maryland, talks about the different between abstraction and realism in relation to politics**

The Cold War and the global divide between the Capitalist West and the Socialist East led to the politicization of both abstraction and realism. In New York, the new art capital of the postwar era,



Markus Lüpertz, *Deutsches Motiv—dithyrambisch II (German Motif—Dithyrambic II)*, 1972, Distemper on canvas

Abstract Expressionism was cast as a symbol of freedom and individualism that was meant to contrast with the oppressive, restrictive realism of soviet and socialist art. Often covertly through the CIA, the US Government began supporting exhibitions of Abstract-Expressionism abroad and helped fund magazines and support critics who promoted American art. In the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, the art policy of Socialist Realism—realist art that heroized workers and depicted the progress of the socialist utopia—was presented as the art of the people and was pitted against the imperialistic capitalist West whose art of abstraction was derided as indulgent and bourgeois. Thus, both abstraction and realism were politicized in the Cold War, and Germany—literally split between Socialist East and Capitalist West—embodied this divide. From this standpoint, Lüpertz’s mix of abstract and representational imagery becomes both more understandable and more engaging. Negotiating between these two positions, Lüpertz’s insistence that the “object is not important” can be understood as a kind of refusal of both extremes of this polarized world. While the human body, or the appearance of helmets or knives inevitably engages German history, Lüpertz often situates these forms within a kind of unknowable, surrealistic setting that keeps them from ever satisfying the desire to “understand.”

### **STOP 11: Nicholas Kulish, former Berlin Bureau Chief for the *New York Times*, discusses militarism**

Following the Third Reich’s defeat and division after World War II, the new West German state went a decade without a military until the founding of the Bundeswehr in 1955. American and Soviet troops remained for decades, facing off along the border between east and west preparing for an eventual conflict if the Cold War turned hot. Many Germans strongly opposed military action on any grounds, believing they were better off avoiding taking part in conflicts entirely. Pacifism became an entrenched strain of German politics and protests against the stationing of nuclear missiles on West German territory were common.



Markus Lüpertz, *Arrangement für eine Mutze—dithyrambisch V (Arrangement for a Cap—Dithyrambic V)*, 1973, Oil on canvas

I first moved to Berlin in 1995, just a few years removed from the triumphalism of the victory over Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf War. I was shocked to see the largest demonstrations I had ever witnessed over the deployment of ambulances—not soldiers but ambulances from military units—to the Balkans.

For decades NATO allies and in particular the United States, have pressed Germany to spend more on its military, to send peacekeepers, and combat troops to conflict areas. That has slowly changed, with Germany sending soldiers to Afghanistan. Even then, allies criticized them for not sending troops to the southern part of the country where the heaviest fighting was taking place. With a resurgent Russia and an increasingly isolationist United States, the future of the German military is once again an open question.

**STOP 12: Max Rosenberg, Postdoctoral Fellow in Modern and Contemporary Art at The Phillips Collection and the University of Maryland, discusses Lüpertz and why he is not as well known in America.**

This is likely the first encounter many visitors have had with Markus Lüpertz's work. There are a variety of reasons why Lüpertz has remained relatively unknown in the US to this day. Like his contemporaries, Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Jörg Immendorf and A. R. Penck, Lüpertz's importance in the German art world has been recognized for decades. Yet, while many of those artists have had major US exhibitions and retrospectives, Lüpertz has yet to break through to American audiences.

In many ways, this is a product of Lüpertz's prodigiousness and the range of his styles, subjects and approach to art. Kiefer and Baselitz, for example, have both largely maintained a specific style and approach to their art that makes for a more easily digestible viewing experience: one tends to be able to recognize a Kiefer as a Kiefer immediately. Lüpertz went a different route. He'll offer primitivistic, mask-like faces in one work and faceless statue-like figures in another. Some works appear totally abstract, others are rife with recognizable objects and imagery. Thus, in place of Kiefer's ashen, morose surfaces and Baselitz's upside-down, dissolving bodies, Lüpertz, the "Unknown Great of German Postwar Art," gives colors, objects, forms—sometimes expressive and evocative and other times withdrawn and unyielding.



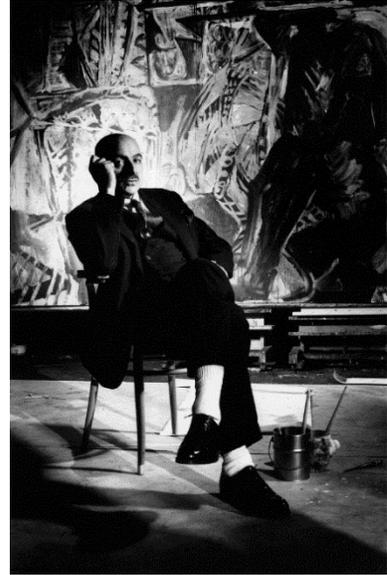
Markus Lüpertz, *Arkadien—Der hohe Berg (Arcadia—The High Mountain)*, 2013, Mixed media on canvas

**STOP 13: Museum Director and exhibition curator Dorothy Kosinski describes Lüpertz's personal style and attitude**

In one small gallery, you'll find wall texts that give you some more information, you'll find also a kind of manifesto that Lüpertz offered once in a question and answer session with an author, which really reveals much more about his thinking. You'll find catalogues for the exhibit, also for you to peruse, and two photo blowups of Lüpertz, and you'll see him in his (what I consider) regalia.

In the 19th century, Baudelaire would have called him the "artist dandy," the Germans talked about some artist figures as the sort of "noble artist," and he definitely, I think, adopts almost a performative presence in the world that's part of his art. When I had the pleasure of spending two days with him here during the installation, he wore his fedora hat, and his beautiful cravat, and his spectator's shoes, his beautiful cane, his elegant goatee, and it's not an act of silliness. He also explained that he's adopting the stance to protect himself, it's like a buffer from the triviality, the white noise of the world. He's an artist and he needs to hold onto that endangered platform in the contemporary world, that's how I would explain it. But you'll see two great pictures of him that gives sense of his dynamism and keen intelligence and forceful presence.

One essential reason that provoked me to embrace this project is a clear question: why is this very famous artist, known all across Europe with many exhibitions and publications relatively unknown in the United States? Perhaps again it goes back to the fact that he's not easy to classify, he's not about a recognizable style that his paintings are challenging, and there are probably also market forces that impact the evolution of an artist's career. But we're proud at the Phillips, in conjunction with our colleagues at the Hirshhorn Museum who are staging simultaneously a Lüpertz project with us, that we can offer an in-depth look at this important artist's career here at The Phillips Collection. Another really wonderful reason to look intensively at Markus Lüpertz's career is another way of celebrating a major gift of works of art a few years back that included many examples of his paintings and sculpture.



*Studio Strümpelstraße, Düsseldorf*  
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