

July 26 – November 9, 2014

Jean-Jacques Lebel

The Highest of All the Arts is Insurrection

From July 26 to November 9, 2014 the ZKM | Karlsruhe will show a comprehensive retrospective of the work of French artist, writer and activist Jean-Jacques Lebel (*1936) – one of the first to author Political Happenings. According to his friend Man Ray he triggered the association Lebel = Rebel in the 1960s. His actions, installations, sculptures, objects, paintings, videos and texts are in explicit rebellion against the terror of war and psychiatry, against the horror of colonialism, against a culture of self-inflicted stupidity and a society characterized by oppression and racism. Therefore *The Highest of All the Arts is Insurrection*.

In addition to eight large scale installations – shown together for the first time, in an exhibition space of 2000 square-meters – the retrospective also shows some of the most important paintings, drawings and films by Jean-Jacques Lebel. It provides detailed insight into the work of this polymorphic and polysemic artist who lived and worked in close collaboration with the Dadaists, Surrealists and the poets of the Beat Generation.

Lebel's work and influence extend over six decades. His earliest shown piece, a small painting entitled *Medicin Man*, is from 1951. In 2013 he created a labyrinth depicting and denouncing the torture of Iraqi war prisoners by American troops at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad.

In 2014 he produced, specially for the ZKM venue a film installation exploring the ideological and aesthetic link between Nazi approved mainstream commercial cinema and Hitler's and Eva Braun's Home Movies.

Of international fame, described as a "kaleidoscopic artist"

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Location

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Press Conference

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Opening

Fri, Jul 25, 2014, 7 p.m.

Duration

Jul 26–Nov 9, 2014

Press Contact

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– so goes the title of a doctoral thesis on Lebel (Sophie Delage: *Jean-Jacques Lebel. Un artiste kaléidoscopique*. Dissertation, Paris University, 2006) – since his first exhibition (Galleria Numero, Florence, 1955) and starting with his first Happening (Venice, 1960), Lebel has made major contributions to the dynamics of the most lively counter-culture of our time – “Art Actionism”. An associate of Brock and Vostell, Lebel is considered the initiator of Happenings in Europe a few years before Viennese Actionism.

With over 100 public activities, his epochal *Festival de La Libre Expression* (1964 till 1968) and the *Festival International Polyphonix* (from 1979), in which thousands of artists, poets, philosophers, filmmakers, musicians and activists from across the world and in many different idioms participated, Lebel was and remains one of the major impulses of topical artistic as well as political collective actions. His works have been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions in many of the world’s most prestigious museums but, also, in “underground” venues.

Lebel calls for upheaval in countless texts, articles and poems. In his Actions he joined forces with some of the key artists and thinkers of his time. In the *Grand Tableau Antifasciste Collectif*, 1960, Lebel, Errò, Enrico Baj, Roberto Crippa, Gianni Dova and Antonio Recalcati protested the Algerian War and its “police operations, its torturing, its slave-owner-like saber-rattling patriotism hiding behind the Tricolore rag” (Lebel). This collaborative work, measuring five by four meters, depicts the Algerian Djamila tortured by French paratroops and it included the famous “Manifesto of the 121” anti-imperialist tract. . During the Anti-Procès in the Milan gallery Brera, in 1961, twenty policemen cut it down and carted it off. Charged with “offending of Pope John XXIII and state religion”, the painting disappeared into the Milan Questura for 27 years, only to reappear, seriously damaged, in 1988. Lebel’s insurgency has repeatedly provoked strong reactionary responses. Following his Happening *120 minutes dédiées au Divin Marquis* (Paris, 1966) pho-

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tos of which are included in the Karlsruhe exhibition, he was accused of obscenity. His consistent logical reply was "Today, obscenity no longer lies in the sexual realm but in politics".

A Surrealist and friend of André Breton in his youth, Lebel later turned to the poets of the Beat Generation, Ginsberg, Corso, Burroughs, McClure, etc., whose works he translated and published. The exhibition he curated *Beat Generation / Allen Ginsberg*, held last year at the ZKM, along with four other international venues, bears testimony to his comprehensive knowledge of the inner workings of poetry and artistic creativity. As a personal friend of André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Allan Kaprow, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, Lebel was and remains an agent of libertarian ethics as the basis of the social-subversive function assumed by all artists worthy of the name.

With this exhibition, artillery shell cases transformed between 1914 and 1918 by anonymous hands return to Karlsruhe where they originated from. Throughout the course of the war on both French and German sides would sculpt from these shell cases vases, tankards, candlesticks, ashtrays, musical instruments and even opium pipes.

Thus, in the large space of this former Karlsruhe munitions factory, the current home of the ZKM, the exhibition will display all sorts of manufactured and transformed objects such as a reliquary in which a lit candle-stick which could double as a coffee-cup heater in the trenches as the condemned warriors awaited their tragic death by mustard gas, bullet or bomb. Here, Jean-Jacques Lebel underscores the metamorphosis from "instruments of horror" to "instruments of daily life", as is revealed in this exhibition with many such extraordinary examples.

Curator: Bernhard Serexhe

This large-scale exhibition is part of the series on "Global Actionism" conceived by Peter Weibel at the ZKM. In conjunction with the exhibition Beuys Brock Vostell (May 24 –

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November 9, 2014), which opened on May 23 of this year at the ZKM | Museum of Contemporary Art, *Insurrection is the Highest of Arts* offers insights into the long range impact of one of the most influential protagonists of political Actionism in Europe.

This will be the second presentation at the ZKM of his main work, *The Monument à Félix Guattari* – created by Jean-Jacques Lebel as a tribute to his friend and collaborator, French anti-psychiatrist and philosopher Félix Guattari between 1992 and 1994. As of the opening, this giant multimedia installation will be part of the Museum's collection.

Jean-Jacques Lebel will be personally present at the opening.

A comprehensive illustrated brochure in German and English will be published on his occasion.

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