

Press release

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#artcologne

ART COLOGNE prize winner 2023: Walther König

Koelnmesse and the Bundesverband Deutscher Galerien und Kunsthändler (German association of galleries and art dealers) announce Walther König as this year's ART COLOGNE prize winner. This year's ART COLOGNE Award is the first time that a bookseller and publisher has been honoured for special achievements in art education.

Far more than 4,000 exhibition catalogues, monographs, illustrated books and publications on the aesthetics and theory of visual art, architecture and photography have appeared since the publishing bookseller Walther König was founded in 1968, the year of the student revolt. The ART COLOGNE Prize honours König (*1939), whose life's work as a publisher of art and artists' books makes him stand out in a unique way.

A network of nearly all actors of the international art scene, of artists and authors, museums and galleries, collectors, art scholars and friends of cultures, is centred in the book cosmos of Walther König. Walther König knows the entire art business inside and out - and helps it to achieve outward visibility. With his work as a bookseller and publisher, he contributes decisively to enabling a discourse about visual arts at the highest level. He is present in countless cities with his art bookstores and museum shops, and his always up-to-date book stand at ART COLOGNE has also drawn crowds for decades.

The ART COLOGNE Prize for art communication is endowed with 10,000 Euro and is presented annually by Koelnmesse and the German association of galleries and art dealers (BVDG). Like every year, Walther König will be represented in the entrance area of ART COLOGNE with a large book stand.

He will accept the ART COLOGNE Prize on Friday, 17 November 2023 at 10:00 a.m. in the Historic Town Hall in Cologne.

Beginnings and passion

The original founding as Gebr. König Köln-New York shines a light on Walther König's great interest in American art. He was unable to realise his wish to found a book store there following the appropriate apprenticeship. However, his brother Kasper - later director of the Städelschule and of the Portikus in Frankfurt as well as of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne - lived there.

Walther's passion for the book and Kasper's contacts in the American art scene provided the basis for productive cooperation. The tandem venture was successful,



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which was rare at this time: setting up a first sales organisation for American art literature. This was their contribution to the "axis Cologne - New York", which led to a reception of American art in Germany and German art in the USA that has endured to the present day. Thus, for example, Seth Siegelau's Books as Exhibitions could only be acquired through König. Decades later, Peter Weibel, a self-confessed book addict, would say this of Walther König: "He is one of the few people in the world that can show me books I don't already know."

In the prospering gallery scene of the 1960s and 70s, primarily powered by the Kölner Kunstmarkt, the predecessor of ART COLOGNE, the first bookstore of Walther König in the middle of a Cologne shopping boulevard became a meeting point for artists: "When Joseph Kosuth or Carl Andre or whoever came to the Rhineland, they said 'I've brought five catalogues with me. Do you want them?' They received a credit in exchange and bought other books. Gallery owners like Ricke or Zwirner drew the attention of their collectors to us. We were a kind of post office. People left something there and said: 'So and so will surely come by sometime, can you give that to him?'"

Walther König managed his business like a vanity press in this climate. Direct, personal cooperation with the artists was of decisive importance to him from the start. Even today, in the age of digitalisation, an own book serves as the "perfect medium for formulating artistic ideas" - and it is an "investment in the future of the artists". Publishing art books is not only a complex organisational, but also an artistic activity on their part. This aspect culminates in the process of the creation of an artist book.

An artist book is the deviation from the book and sometimes its perfection. The publisher is otherwise never so close to the artist. An artist book is not always a book; it can be an object, a portfolio, a booklet, a box, a concept or an experiment. Artist books are less read than viewed. Their locus is more the display case than the shelf. The often small editions - sometimes even unique items - are hard to sell, sometimes remain with the publisher or the artist for a long time, until a true friend of art takes them home. With König, one does not need to ask for artist books, they can be found in the assortment.

Ernst Brücher, publisher of DuMont, supported Walther König in his early years. The second edition of a series of artist books entitled "Objekte benutzen" (Using objects) by Franz-Erhard Walther appeared in his teaching workshop in 1969. The first edition appeared the year before: a fanfold series with a computer-generated, infinitely variable poem by Alison Knowles. At that time, the edition could only be printed by a special device at Siemens in Munich. The company sponsored the edition, which would otherwise not have been financially feasible.

Walther König and "his" artist books

In conversation with Walther König, the work of the publisher appears like a big adventure full of curious events. Das Museum Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt dedicated a show to Walther König and "his" artist books in the summer of 2022. An (almost) complete list containing more than a thousand titles was created for this occasion. A cross-section in the following (the number of different editions in

brackets):

Page
3/4

John Baldessari (4), Thomas Bayrle (10), Bernhard Johannes Blume (4), Christian Boltanski (9), Jake & Dinos Chapman (2), Hanne Darboven (4), Maria Eichhorn (6), Robert Filliou, Isa Genzken (3), Dan Graham, Jenny Holzer, Ilya Kabakov (9), William Kentridge (8), Maria Lassnig (2), Sarah Lucas, Matt Mullican, Gabriel Orozco (6), Elizabeth Peyton (3), Jason Rhoades, Anri Sala (2), Thomas Scheibitz (10), Thomas Schütte (4), Cindy Sherman, Lawrence Weiner (6), Heimo Zobernig (12).

The frontrunners are Wolfgang Tillmans with 15, Martin Kippenberger with 22 and Jonathan Meese with 26 artist books, which sometimes originated in cooperation with colleagues. The publishing work of Walther König is particularly emphasised by 46 titles by and about Gerhard Richter - including the four-volume "Atlas", which gathers all references and photo sources for the own work of the artist. "Mood" appeared only recently, a flat book designed by Richter with ink sketches and aphorisms.

The nucleus at Breite Straße 93 in Cologne still exists today as a postcard store with a museum shop assortment. Visitors like to look at the ceiling, the entire surface of which was painted by Thomas Schütte decades ago. A broad network of outlets has developed since then.

There is no larger city in Germany without a König bookstore

There is no larger city in Germany without a König bookstore, hardly a larger museum without a König bookstore with a selection of literature and shop items tailored to the institution or the respective exhibitions, like the Kippenberger pencil or the artist book "Findet mich das Glück?" by Peter Fischli and David Weiss.

The name König has become known beyond the art scene through the museum shops. Reproductions, replicas and modern relics (commonly known as merchandising objects) have their own cultural cohesion, just different than that of a book or an exhibition. There are more than 40 König bookstores in Germany - including 16 in Berlin museums alone - not to mention several in other European countries: in Amsterdam, Brussels, London, Milan, Paris and Vienna.

"For Walther, who will have the first bookstore on Mars, I'm certain." This prophecy of John Baldessari is found in a book on the occasion of Walther König's 60th birthday. Until that happens, the heart of Walther König's art book universe is found at Ehrenstraße 4 in Cologne. The multi-storey, red brick building was moved into in 1981 and can't be missed thanks to the four gigantic book objects by Julian Opie on the facade.

A place that attracts not only friends of contemporary visual arts. The large assortment of art history literature of all eras, from all countries and subject areas is the purview of König's wife Jutta Linthe. These are complemented by publications on design and architecture, photography and fashion, philosophy and the science of art. Culture in book form is present (almost) without gaps in its full breadth from Germany and abroad. It is no wonder that the "König (King) on the command bridge" (Udo Kittelmann) has advanced to become the supplier of new releases for countless

international museums and libraries. Son Franz has also long since joined the business management. Walther König's employees are also appreciated by scene connoisseurs like Henner Voss: "Experts surround themselves with whizzes. Each of his employees can spontaneously hold short would-be lectures on art theory, prehistoric cave painting or the 'Museum in a Box' of Duchamp. Never pontificating or condescending, but instead precisely and with unobtrusive courtesy." Just like the boss.

Previous prize winners

Previous winners of the ART COLOGNE Prize (selection): Ileana Sonnabend (1988), Harald Szeemann (1989), Annely Juda (1993), Rudolf Springer (1995), Johannes Cladders (2000), Ingvild Goetz (2001), Nicolas Serota (2004), Harald Falckenberg (2009), Fred Jahn (2013), Rosemarie Schwarzwälder (2014), Günter Herzog (2017), Julia Stoschek (2018) and Monika Sprüth (2022).

Quotes from:

Art & book & friends: ein Album für Wather König. Edition Hansjörg Mayer, Cologne 1999

Kasper König - The Formative Years. ed. Zentralarchiv des Internationalen Kunsthandels, Nuremberg 2014

Note for editorial offices:

Photo material of ART COLOGNE and the award winner Walther König can be found in our image database at www.artcologne.com/press/multimedia/image-database/

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