

1. BERT THEIS

POUR UNE PHILOSOPHIE COLLAGISTE

Exhibition 29.03 - 21.09.2025

Guest curator: Marco Scotini / Curator: Charlotte Masse
In collaboration with Bert Theis Archive

Bert Theis: pour une philosophie collagiste is the first major exhibition to highlight the role of collage in the oeuvre of the Luxembourgish artist Bert Theis (1952–2016). Following on from the recent discovery of a series of historical works, which are here presented for the first time, it gathers 200 collages created over the course of several decades from 1980 onwards. By charting the artist's use of collage across a wide variety of media and techniques, the presentation challenges the traditional reading of his oeuvre, which posits a clear divide between his early figurative work and his conceptual practice after 1994.

Theis began experimenting with collage and torn-paper techniques at the beginning of the 1980s, while studying at the Scuola del libro of the Istituto Statale in Urbino. From simple newspaper clippings on paper to complex assemblages of texts, images and watercolour drawings on various media and supports — scissors and glue were Theis's main artistic tools throughout that decade. Documenting this phase of his career, the first part of the exhibition features works that are less known to the public at large, such as *Chaocoll*, *Materialcollages*, *Dia-collages* and *Piccollages*, as well as a series of collages for two poetry books by the Luxembourgish author Robert 'Gollo' Steffen.

Marking the threshold to the next room, *729 (L'art de la peinture)* from 1994 is a book on the history of painting compiled from loose pages painstakingly glued together over the course of a month. Materialising the artist's definitive break with painting, it represents the ideological watershed in his work that would ultimately lead to the *Platforms* and *Pavilions* for public spaces, which are the focus of the second part of the exhibition. Yet throughout this time, Theis continued to utilise collage, mainly in (digital) photomontages, to explore themes of urbanity. Here, familiar works such as the *Aggloville* series (2001–2015) or *Isola Art Centers. Some Hyphotheses* (2008) side with conceptual and architectural projects, as well as with a sound piece on Marcel Duchamp and 'collagist' installations such as *Il Consiglio*.

The central piece of the exhibition is *Parabel vom Wasserbecken*, an unfinished book project from 1986 that was recently unearthed from the artist's archives and published posthumously. Taking the form of a satire on capitalism based on *Equality*, a utopian novel by the US-American author Edward Bellamy (1816–1886) that was widely read in militant socialist and anarchist circles of the time, it evidences the influence of Max Ernst's surrealist-inspired 'collage-novels'. Ultimately, Ernst's use of collage as a means to emancipate from the dominance of meaning can also be said to characterise Theis's *Platforms*, where it is up to the viewers or users to make sense of the work. Expanding on this idea, the exhibition contends that his work around Isola Art Center represents the artist's attempt to extend his collage typology into the physical and social space.

2. Biographies

Bert Theis (1952-2016)

Lived and worked in Luxembourg and Milan. Bert Theis belonged to that generation of artists who emerged at the beginning of the 90's, who approached public space in both an unmonumental and emergent zone with possibilities. He anchored his works to social contexts and relational modalities, without, however, denouncing them as works of art. The works of Bert Theis are always conceived to be put directly into the outdoor spaces of a city, even if the Luxembourg artist has become famous for his participation in many important international expositions, from the Venice Biennale in 1995, 'Skulptur. Projekte in Münster in 1997', Manifesta 2 in 1998, to Gwangju Biennale in 2002 (South Korea). The assumption of a hyperactive society driven by excessive consumption informs the common background of Bert Theis' works. His works attempt to get people to turn inward, towards the spaces, places of rest and platforms for relaxation, capable of temporarily forming small communities of people with explicit reference to idyllic islands, to the utopia of unspoiled land. In Theis' work, the opening towards this vital life assumes a rigorous intellectual utopian condition, and at the same time, that which is more extraordinary than daily existence, and subtly, an irony in the experience.

Publications : Bert Theis. Some Works (g/eng), Hatje Cantz, 2003, Bert Theis. Building Philosophy (f/it/eng), Domaine départemental de Chamarande, France, 2010 and Bert Theis. Building Philosophy- Cultivating Utopia by Mudam Luxembourg, Mousse Publishing, 2019.

Marco Scotini (born 1964) is an Italian curator, writer and art critic based in Milan. He is artistic director of the FM Center for Contemporary Art and head of the Department of Visual Arts and Curatorial Studies at the Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti - Milan and Rome. Scotini has organised several hundred solo exhibitions by artists and collaborated with major art institutions. In 2015, he curated the Albanian pavilion at the Venice Biennale and co-curated three editions of the Prague Biennale, in 2003, 2005 and 2007. In 2024, he was invited by Adriano Pedrosa, curator of the 60th Venice Biennale Foreigners Everywhere, to present his long-term project called Disobedience Archive , in a special edition with 39 selected artists. Marco Scotini is the scientific director of the Bert Theis Archive.

2. Bert Theis, collage as Political Paradigm

Marco Scotini

Exile in time

In 1888, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, a work of science fiction that was to meet with great success, was published in Boston. Shortly after its release, it became one of the bestselling novels of the nineteenth century, second only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. One year earlier, Edward Bellamy, almost in his forties, had submitted the work to the publishing house Ticknor and Company, which had previously released several equally successful titles, such as *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* by Henry David Thoreau, *The Conduct of Life* by Ralph Waldo Emerson and *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. All the literature of the American Renaissance, whose epicentre was New England, saw the light of day under the Ticknor imprint, as it were. But besides having the same publisher, these books shared another factor: Apart from being of great literary value, they carried a genuine agenda of social reform. The particularity of *Looking Backward* was that it was not only popular among readers (including figures like William Morris, Eugene Debs, H. G. Wells, Ebenezer Howard and Peter Kropotkin), but also spawned a political movement with a programme of direct social action (Nationalism). Rather than on a true plot, the remarkable political charge of the book rests entirely on a simple chronological leap (a veritable *exile in time*) as a narrative device to conduct a radical critique of capitalism at the end of the 1800s and its many woes: industrial competition, urban poverty, endemic unemployment and grossly unequal wealth distribution. The protagonist of the novel is Julian West, an insomniac representative of the affluent aristocracy of the nineteenth century, who in 1887 falls into a hypnosis-induced coma and wakes up 113 years later in an imaginary Boston of the year 2000 (with credit cards, telephones, pre-televisions and other futuristic devices). West's total disorientation in the new era is the result not so much of the discovery of what has happened to him, as of the fact that the capitalist social order familiar to him has been replaced by a collectivist utopia of a socialist nature. At the centre of this new system stands a nationalized economy, an *industrial army* of the State that oversees the equitable distribution of resources and profits, the promotion of a common good where each citizen is at the service of the nation, the granting of voting rights to women and the eradication of the need for competition. And, finally, the elimination of class differences. Combining Transcendentalist thinking with socialist leanings, Bellamy's book nevertheless keeps at a distance from Marx's ideas on class struggle, the dialectic of history and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Essentially, rather than proposing the elimination of capitalism, Bellamy envisions its transformation in a humanist sense. A reform, that is, albeit a radical one: the consequence of a peaceful social evolution rather than a revolutionary disruption. If we nevertheless wanted to make out a point of contact in Bellamy that is more explicitly akin to Marxist theories, we might turn to the story *The Parable of the Water Tank*, a short chapter of his subsequent book, *Equality*, published in 1894. In fact, while *Looking Backward* continues to appear as a more narrative than programmatic text, in this sequel, in which he abandons the more fictional aspect to explore the institutions of the possible post-capitalist system, Bellamy aims for a theoretical compensation.

Effectively speaking, in *Equality* — completed after nearly a decade of personal political activism — his critique of capitalism is less compromised, and the author also openly supports the socialist and feminist movements. Considering that, in the book, *The Parable of the Water Tank* is described as a yellowed pamphlet found in the Museum of the Revolution, it is hardly surprising that it should have taken on a life of its own in reality as an actual militant and instructional political leaflet. Not only was the parable separately published in America and Europe from 1907, but the excerpt was also reprinted

200,000 times in Russia prior to the revolution of 1917, just to cite one example. It is a short story that parodies the logic of capitalism in an archaic, pseudo-biblical language. It revolves around the exploitative relationship between capitalists and workers, which here eventually take a positive turn. In the system it describes, the underpaid workers who carry water in buckets to an enormous tank controlled by the capitalist owners realise their situation and, refusing to serve the proprietors any longer, begin to organise the water supply directly and in the interests of all.

With great simplicity, the parable describes a sequence of cyclical crises of capitalism, starting from the relationship between labour force and profit: 'For every bucket of water that ye bring to us, that we may pour it into the tank [...] we will give you a penny. But for every bucket that we shall draw forth to give unto you that ye may drink of it, [...] ye shall give to us two pennies, and the difference shall be our profit.' Thus, an acute need for resources on the part of the workers corresponds to an inability to obtain them. The surplus of production with respect to the consumption that is made possible eventually leads to a crisis of overproduction, which appears as a mystery: 'Doth plenty breed famine?' The outcome is a condition of unemployment that remains stable until the crisis has been surpassed ('the water was low in the tank, for the capitalists did make fountains and fish ponds of the water thereof'). The situation then evolves with new hirings, but also new crises. It continues along these lines until, with the help of agitators, the workers manage to overturn the capitalistic system and to redistribute the product of common labour amongst themselves. 'It is the end of us!', is the capitalists' final statement.

The illustrated parable of profit

It is not clear how and why, sometime in 1986, *The Parable of the Water Tank* became a collage novel by the Luxembourgish artist Bert Theis, although we may safely assume it was for artistic and political reasons. Illustrations of capitalists in nineteenth-century bourgeois clothing with heads of birds of prey, or of working-class people in folk dress with fish-shaped heads, stand out in the form of mustard-coloured silhouettes against landscapes populated with instruments of physics and mechanics, scientific diagrams and Empire-style armchairs.

'Avid birds and parasites (representing the bourgeoisie), fish heads (symbolizing mutism)' are the subjects of this simultaneously political and oneiric bestiary.¹ Incongruous figures, but understandable to all. They have the appearance of assemblages as precise as they are unrealistic. They are cut-out images assembled on the same page from different graphic sources, distant in time and no longer functional, but rendered homogeneous by unusual conjunctions and montages in repeated but continually changing visual constellations. Images that also share in an archaic, anachronistic character, belonging to a pre-photographic past. As if the illustrations and the old German typeface (Fraktur) harked back to the same period as the original text.

Theis's *Parabel* is a grandiose yet unpublished project organised in eleven chapters and defined in all its detail. The version of the text used by the artist, which he collaged into the illustrated book, was taken from a very small German edition that does not fully comply with Bellamy's publication. The translation by Margarethe Jacobi was published by Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt in 1898, just four years after the American release of *Equality*.

The fact that in its conception Theis referenced Max Ernst's *Une semaine de bonté* from 1934 is another aspect that asks to be explored here — not out of philological or antiquarian interest, since this facet of Theis's work, on its own, would change little in terms of its profile. Rather, the relevance of this observation derives from the fact that the collage technique of *Parabel vom Wasserbecken* is not an isolated episode. In fact, collage was

¹ Press release of the exhibition Bert Theis. Zeichnungen Collagen Druckgrafik at Galerie Terre Rouge in Esch-sur-Alzette in 1981. Several motifs from the works shown there would later appear in *Parabel vom Wasserbecken*.

a steady presence in the activity of the Luxembourgish artist, although it seems to have been overshadowed by his works from the 1990s onwards. Now, thanks to the major retrospective *Bert Theis. Building Philosophy – Cultivating Utopia*, held at Mudam Luxembourg in the spring of 2019, much of his activity prior to the 1990s — that is, prior to the production of the pavilions and platforms with which Theis gained international acclaim — has resurfaced. With this change of perspective on his artistic path, collage now appears to be an essential element in his oeuvre, as we will try to explain below.

Theis began the 1980s at the Scuola del Libro of the Istituto Statale di Urbino. Throughout that decade he worked almost exclusively on collages, although the materials were often different, the approaches transforming from work to work, as did the media and the image carriers he employed: *Chaocoll* (1982), *Materialcollages* (1982), *Dia-collages* (1985), collages for the book *dat Iest* by Robert 'Gollo' Steffen (1985), collages for the book *Amerika läit jhust viroan Élwen*, also by Steffen (1987), and, finally, *Piccollages* (1990). In a biographical note published in 1993 in the catalogue of a group exhibition held at Kunschthaus Beim Engel, Theis, with his usual irony, traced his first collages back to when he was four years old. The terse information he provided — in the style of Debord — is worthwhile to cite in full:

1952 born in Luxembourg

1956 collages of materials and disassemblages

1964 serious doubts about the existence of God

(N.B. at around the same time God doubts the existence of B.T.)

1968 doubts about the existence of socialism

1978–1981 student of Anna Recker, Roger Bertemes and Max Ernst

1981–1983 Istituto Statale d'Arte di Urbino, Chaocollages

1981–1985 the usual exhibitions, awards, publications, collections, in Luxembourg and abroad

1986 doubts about the existence of painting

1987–1990 inner emigration, meditation on the question of whether the silence of M.D. is really overrated

1990–1993 outer emigration, Rome, Milan

1991 coming to grips with Michelangelo Merisi regarding shadow, with Claude Viallat regarding form, with Kazimir Malevich regarding essence

1992 study trip to Patmos: the Apocalypse

1993 exhibitions in Milan, Rome, Fiorenzuola d'Arda

The fact that Theis includes the name of Max Ernst among his teachers is already confirmation that the explicit reference to *Une semaine de bonté* in the conception of *Parabel vom Wasserbecken* is not anecdotal, but points to a deeply rooted aspect of his artistic practice. When Ernst made his three collage novels from the late 1920s to the early 1930s — *La femme 100 têtes*, *Rêve d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au carmel*, *Une semaine de bonté* — he wanted to displace the language of images from its authorial matrix. What was at stake was to break free from the slavery of the language, relying on chance and on the unexpected associations that can only arise if we relinquish full control over the image. Ernst's passage from Dada to Surrealism makes him a chief advocate of the ban on writing novels formulated by André Breton in those same years. Collage

novels are not simply stories told with images, but are above all the pursuit of another language that would be able to rid itself of meaning as such. The power of combination (its *enigma*) is undoubtedly the aspect of Ernst's research that truly interested Theis. If we put aside the accentuated oneirism, the attraction to eroticism and the lack of sequential order of Ernst's three collage novels, what remains in *Parabel vom Wasserbecken* is the taste for minutely assembled microcosms, the almost maniacal precision, the practice of incongruous juxtapositions. But above all, there is the attraction to the power of association, the combinability of what has already been done, once it has been freed from the inner censorship of pre-established meaning, the immobility of fixed ideas.

When Theis made *Parabel vom Wasserbecken* he was a political activist who had been enrolled in the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), for which he made the posters for demonstrations in support of social equality and against war. Theis interprets Bellamy's Parable in a strictly Marxist sense and sees it as a guide to class struggle, as is made explicit by the series of notes following Bellamy's text in his pamphlet. In an interview I conducted with him in 2003, Theis remarked that 'the figure of the heroic artist, the solitary genius, is an ideological fake. Actually, both the construction of the work and the construction of its meaning are the result of collective labour'. I believe that his continuing work with collage should be seen in the light of this position. In the sense of a collective effort, to be precise. Not only to utilize and break up images already created previously by someone else, but also to invite the viewer to give a new meaning to the recomposed images, forcing the mind to reassemble its own alphabet in an open game of possible combinations: of attractions and collisions, condensations and shifts. A game with a political matrix, in substance.

Collage as paradigm

A few years ago, concerning the series of platforms that Theis developed from 1995 onwards, I stated that they should not be considered as a simple relational device, but as machines with a theoretical value. The platform, I wrote, 'is a sort of enigma that captures viewers in the hermeneutic circuit of free interpretation regarding the use they want to make of that space, the interests they want to pursue there, the meaning they want to attribute to it. The platform becomes a theoretical activator capable of tracing back spheres of values to types of interest, objectivity to self-affirmation, truth to justification, knowledge to opinion. Meaning is not the ultimate result of a natural epistemology, but the product of social consensus. In this sense, the platform transforms ordinary users into pragmatic philosophers every time.'

Now it seems to me that the mental and perceptive process set in motion by Theis's collages, in spite

of the structural differences between the works called into play, is the same one that is activated by

his platforms. Both types of works share in the same semantic openness, which implies that it is

rather chance that each time completes the function they are called upon to activate. Still, when we

talk about the Theis's collages of more recent years, we refer almost exclusively to the Aggloville

series of 'urban collages', or to the series of photomontages titled Isola Art Centers. Some

Hypotheses (2008), to which we might add other graphic works created for the Isola Art Center collective on different occasions and aimed at promoting forms of community resistance based on processes of urban transformation.

Aggloville, developed from 2001 to 2015, is a series of utopian photomontages assembled from aerial views of Munich, Milan, Paris, Tirana, Turin and Genoa, in which only certain architectural nuclei emerge from the landscape, while entire districts are covered with wild vegetation, resembling an urban jungle. For those involved in the conflicts generated by neoliberal urban transformation and the struggle for the right to the city, the fundamental questions are: Is another city still possible? Is another life in our cities possible? Aggloville visualises these questions by combining different urban fragments: jungle-covered landscapes like those of Congo-Brazzaville, districts and blocks like those of Jean-Luc Godard's Alphaville, imagined pathways like those of Lars von Trier's Dogville, as Theis explained. The type of simulation enacted by the Aggloville collages, which are placed under the modal conjunction 'as if', in such a way as to vindicate the rights of organic nature against real estate speculation, is very close to that of Some Hypotheses. The latter is a proposal for possible settlements of the Isola Art Center collective following the demolition of its headquarters, the Stecca degli Artigiani in Milan, after six years of community occupation. The logo 'OUT' (Office for Urban Transformation) and that of Isola Art Center stand out on the surfaces of improbable buildings, leftover structures, containers or temporary scaffolding, as if the presence of the art centre's activities had disseminated everywhere. In each case, the proposed settlements are precarious, temporary. The political charge of these photomontages has been inherited from the collages of the 1980s.

When, in 1981, Galerie Terre Rouge held the exhibition Bert Theis. Zeichnungen Collagen Druckgrafik, the press release for the show took a forcefully political direction. It stated that the

artist 'considers the works on view in Esch to be provisional experiments, which nevertheless aim at

a radical confrontation with the threats to which the individual is exposed in bourgeois society. His

references are not so much to current events as to the conditions that characterise the existing

society, the censure and manipulation to which people are subjected. The main theme is alienation,

a term that is often used, but one that Bert Theis approaches in a totally personal way, with tools

that are as simple as they are effective. His works also set out to act as a stimulus for those who

have remained silent and impotent in the face of oppression and alienation. Theis does not offer

definitive artistic solutions, but demonstrates that anyone can escape from censorship and control

through precise observation and liberating their own creativity. Bert Theis's reflections are clear and

coherent, and this is true not only of his first drawings, where realistic elements prevail, but also of

his subsequent works, in which he links back to the oneiric images and ideas of the Surrealists,

testing their current political usefulness.' On this occasion, Theis exhibited a number of plates that

were to end up in the project of Parabel vom Wasserbecken and in Golo Steffen's poetry book dat

lest: very terse and precise collages, mounted on the flat, empty surface of the page, as opposed to

the proliferation of media in the works of the Chaocoll series, which originate instead from a sort of

horror vacui.

But what is a collage, essentially? What does it mean, also in historical terms, to operate through

collage? Is it not a space of impurity, of contamination? In practice, does it not imply gluing together

cut-outs that originate beyond the studio, in the street and outside the customary spaces of art? Are

not the images (or objects) always imported from an elsewhere, onto a surface to which they do not

belong? In fact, I cannot help but call to mind Theis's platforms again, though in a different sense.

Does the artist not consider his audiences, his viewers, his audience-specific contexts as the

3. La publication

Bert Theis. Parabel vom Wasserbecken, Luxembourg 1986 – Milan 2025

50 collages, 12 collages de texte, 1 collage de couleur, 1986.

Texte de Marco Scotini

Allemand avec traductions française, anglaise et italienne

Livre : 20 x 14 x 3 cm Etui : 21 x 14 x 3,5 cm, p. 192, édition limitée à 100 exemplaires.

Prix : 350,00€

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Fedrigoni Woodstock Grigio 170gr



4. Programme cadre

05.04.2025 | 14h00 – 17h00 | **MASTERCLASS** | The Future in Layers: A RISO Landscape | par Nadine Rocco | Adultes, adolescents

06.04 – 11.05.2025 (les weekends) | **WALK-IN WORKSHOP** | BY THE BOOK | Adultes, adolescents, enfants accompagnés

10.04.2025 | 14h30-16h30 | **KIDS-CLASS** | BY THE BOOK | enfants 6+

17.04.2025 | 14h30 – 16h30 | **KIDS-CLASS** | Future Landscapes | par Nadine Rocco | enfants 9-12

18.04.2025 | 14h30 – 16h30 | **KIDS-CLASS** | Future Landscapes | par Nadine Rocco | enfants 6-8

01.05.2025 | 16h00 – 17h30 | **ECHANGE/WORKSHOP** | Du Papier au Livre : Un Échange Créatif | par Corinne Clarysse | Adultes, adolescents | FR

03.05 + 04.05.2025 | 10h00 – 13h00 & 14h00 – 17h00 | **MASTERCLASS** | Atelier reliure & livre d'artiste | Adultes, adolescents | FR

06.07.2025 | 16h00 | **BOOK PRESENTATION** | Présentation du livre d'artiste – Parabel vom Wasserbecken de Bert Theis | avec Marco Scotini et Charlotte Masse | EN

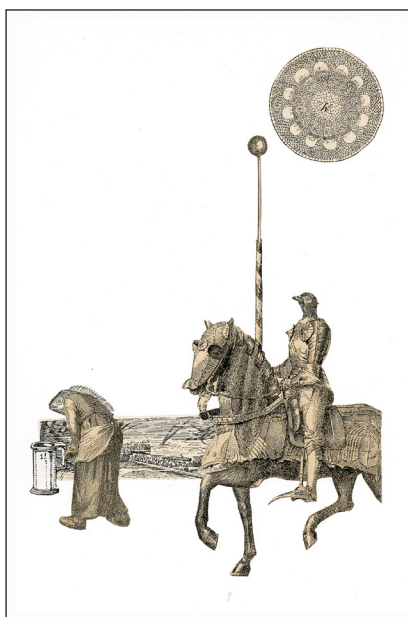
08.08.2025 | 10h00 – 12h30 & 14h00 – 17h00 | **KIDS-CLASS** | Livre – collage | par Joël Leick | enfants 8-12 | FR

09.08 & 10.08.2025 | 10h00 – 13h00 & 14h00 – 17h00 | **MASTERCLASS** | Livre -collage | Joël Leick | adultes et adolescents | FR

Le programme complet est disponible sur www.konschthal.lu/agenda. Vous pouvez également consulter notre programme éducatif sur www.konschthal.lu/education.

5. Visuels presse & crédits

À noter que des prises de vue de l'exposition seront disponibles à partir du 04.04



Bert Theis. *Die Parabel vom Wasserbecken*, collage, 1986, livre publié en 2025



Bert Theis. *Isola (Project) Milano*, collage pour une sérigraphie, 2003



Bert Theis
Isola Art Centers. Some Hypotheses, photomontage, 2008



Bert Theis
Szene aus: *Von Platen jagt das kollektive Unbewusste*,
collage, 1987



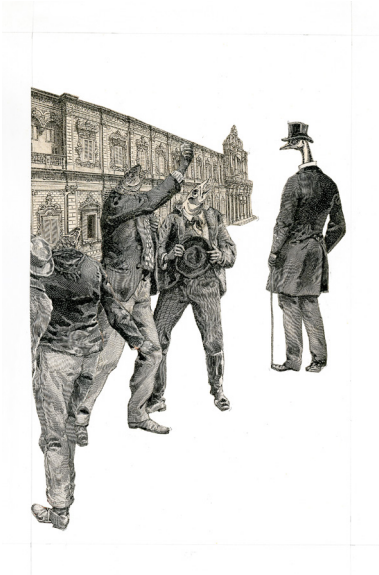
Bert Theis
Die Parabel vom Wasserbecken,
Cover-collage, 1986, livre publié en 2025



Flemms Blues, collage réalisé pour le recueil de poèmes
Amerika läit jhust viroan Elwen (1987, Ed. Op der Lay) de
Robert (Gollo) Steffen



Bert Theis
Isola Art Centers. Some Hypotheses, photomontage, 2008



Bert Theis
Die Parabel vom Wasserbecken,
 collage, 1986, livre publié en 2025



KB Project, collage pour une sérigraphie, 2004

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VEN/SAM/DIM 11:00 - 18:00

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