

## John Young | BONHOEFFER IN HARLEM

by Sylvia Dominique Volz

*Quite early on I decided to do some works as a tribute to Dietrich Bonhoeffer.*

*It will be an abstract tapestry, based on the stained glass window found at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York.*

*The Abyssinian Baptist Church is where Dietrich Bonhoeffer discovered black gospel music in 1930, and discovered a genuine connection to the marginal and oppressed blacks of New York. Through this experience, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany with the understanding to defend the “marginalized, the vulnerable, and the oppressed.”*

*The colour scheme of this tapestry is quite loud and celebratory – these colours were taken directly from the stained glass in the Harlem church. This tapestry will be like listening to black gospel music in St. Matthäus.*

*I have also included pictures of a series of drawings celebrating the life of Bonhoeffer, they are chalk drawings on blackboard paint on paper, I will be doing eight of them, and they will be framed.*

John Young, June 2008

April 9, 2009 marks the 64th anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s execution by the Nazis. A few days later, on April 13, Easter Sunday, the exhibition *Bonhoeffer in Harlem* will open in the place he was ordained a minister in 1931, St. Matthäus in Berlin-Tiergarten.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran theologian, proponent of ecumenism, peace activist, and one of the central figures in the German Resistance against Hitler and Nazi racial ideology, was born the sixth of eight children in Breslau on February 4, 1906. After his father, a professor for psychiatry and neurology, accepted a position at the university in Berlin, the family moved to Berlin-Grunewald in 1912. In 1923, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began studying theology in Tübingen, and continued his studies in Berlin in 1924. It was there that he first encountered the theology of Karl Barth, who alongside Adolf von Harnack would become one of his most influential teachers. He received his doctorate in 1927 with a dissertation entitled *Sanctorum Communio* (The Communion of Saints). Despite a promising academic career, Bonhoeffer decided to train as a minister, and spent 1928 as the vicar at the German evangelical-Lutheran church in Barcelona. After returning in 1929, he wrote his Habilitation. The next year, still too young to be ordained, Bonhoeffer accepted a one-year fellowship at *Union Theological Seminary* in New York, upon the advice of his church superior Max Diestel, a representative of the Protestant ecumenical movement *World Alliance*. There he experienced the impact of the Great Depression, racial problems, and at Abyssinian Baptist Church the open protestant movement of the *social Gospel*, which left a deep impression upon him. This church, founded in 1808 and one of the oldest and

largest African-American congregations in the US, had developed since the early twentieth century into an important religious, social, and political institution in the struggle against racism (and remains so today). Pastor Adam Clayton Powell, who led the church during the time of Bonhoeffer's stay in New York, played a key role in the expansion and organization of the Abyssinian Baptist Church since taking office in 1908. Bonhoeffer's experience of the social and political discrimination against blacks in American society would form the basis for his later passionate struggle against Nazi ideology. During this period, Bonhoeffer also began to engage with ecumenism, towards which he previously had taken a rather critical stance. After his return, he was finally ordained at St. Matthäus in Berlin-Tiergarten on November 15, 1931.

The whole Bonhoeffer family was very disturbed by the Nazis' coming to power on January 31, 1933. In a radio lecture the next day for *Berliner Funkstunde*, a Berlin radio station, Dietrich Bonhoeffer formulated a clear critique of the Nazi principle of the *Führer*, and as a result the broadcast was interrupted. He also experienced the discrimination against the Jews quite directly: his brother-in-law Gerhard Leibholz, the husband of his twin sister Sabine, as well as his friend and colleague Franz Hildebrandt, were both of Jewish origin.

From the passing of the Non-Aryan Law of April 7, 1933 to his own execution, Bonhoeffer fought for the church to take a critical position and decisive ecumenical action against the violation of human rights. He joined Martin Niemöller, one of the founders of the *Jungreformatorische Bewegung* (Young Reformationist Movement), and founded along with him and others *Pfarrernotbund zum Schutz der bedrohten Amtsbrüder jüdischer Herkunft* (Ministers' Emergency Association for the Protection of Threatened Colleagues of Jewish Descent). Bonhoeffer also worked abroad to persuade Europe to take a critical stance towards Germany, for example during his year and a half in London (1933-1935), during which he exchanged views about the situation in his homeland in particular with his friend George Bell, the Anglican Bishop of Chichester.

After his return in April 1935, Bonhoeffer took on the role of training ministers for the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church), which emerged in 1934 as an oppositional Protestant movement against the Nazi controlled *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (DEK), at Predigerseminar Zingst, later moving to Finkenwalde. In 1937, it was closed by the Gestapo, but Bonhoeffer was able to continue his work illegally, now camouflaged as *Sammelvikariat*, until March 1940, at first in Köslin und Groß-Schlönwitz bei Schlawe and in 1939 moving to Sigurdshof. At the start of June 1939, he accepted an invitation to the US, but ended his stay prematurely after just a few days. Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin to face his responsibility and stand by his brothers and sisters in their struggle during difficult times. In the fall of 1940, Bonhoeffer joined the

resistance circle around his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi (his sister Christine's husband), General Hans Oster as well as Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, using his international ecumenical connections. His participation caused a profound conflict for Bonhoeffer, for he saw his participation as a fundamental violation of the basic principles of Christian faith. On the other hand, he saw his inaction and failure to take responsibility as implicating him in a guilt that would be impossible to undo. This obligation to act is explored extensively in his *Ethics*. Officially working for Nazi counterespionage, he undertook travels across Europe in 1941 and 1942, using his contacts to encourage the Allies to support the Resistance.

In January 1943, Bonhoeffer became engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer, and on March 13 and 21, the resistance's two failed attacks against Hitler took place. On April 5, Bonhoeffer was arrested due to files found in Dohnanyi's papers, and imprisoned in Berlin-Tegel Army Prison. Although escape was possible, he refused in order to not further endanger his family. On October 8, 1944, Bonhoeffer was brought to the cellar prison of Prinz-Albrecht-Straße in Berlin-Mitte, and moved to Buchenwald Concentration Camp on February 7, 1945. After the Gestapo found counterespionage papers in Zossen, Hitler finally condemned Bonhoeffer and other participants, including his brother Klaus, to death on April 5, 1945. Three days later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was brought to Flossenbürg Concentration Camp, where he was executed on April 9, 1945.

The Melbourne Chinese/Australian artist John Young came up with the idea behind *Bonhoeffer in Harlem* while visiting St. Matthäus together with Alexander Ochs in late November 2007. The gallerist and artist have worked now for several years together; in 2003, Ochs presented Young's first solo show in Berlin, *Three Propositions*. Young is one of today's most important Australian artists.

Ochs had invited the artist, whose works have also been shown regularly in exhibitions in Hong Kong, Melbourne, Sydney, and Nanjing, to do research for their next project together. This was to become part of the exhibition series *Berlin Reflections*, which Ochs developed along with several Chinese artists and explores an intercultural artistic engagement with Berlin and its history. While visiting St. Matthäus, the two spoke about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his ordination here, his life, his texts, his struggle, and his fate. Young was impressed by the simplicity and the balanced, clear structure of the church interior. Two additional things in front of the church's main portal also attracted his attention: on the one hand, the bronze Bonhoeffer memorial plaque by Johannes Grützke and on the other a large yellow star that had been hung to announce the coming Christmas season. A smaller version of this star, which Young later

purchased for his children at a Berlin Christmas market, would later accompany him on his return to Australia, and repeatedly reminded him of the image of St. Matthäus and Bohnhoeffer as a person. In the immediate wake of this visit, a desire grew in the artist to dedicate an exhibition to this outstanding personality and the church of his ordination.

Back in Australia, Young began to develop his concept. During his stay in Berlin, a decisive political transformation took place at home. After nine years in office, the conservative-neoliberal government was replaced by the Labor Party, with a more liberal-left orientation. Tellingly, just before taking office, the new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, with whom the artist is also personally acquainted, wrote an extensive article entitled *Faith in Politics* about the meaning of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for politics today. In his spirit, Rudd argued for the need of today's society to return to a life based on ethics.

Young continued to engage with Bonhoeffer. He read about the time spent by the theologian with the residents of Harlem, about his deep sympathy for the people he came to know at Abyssinian Baptist Church. For Young, who himself comes from a bi-ethnic background, intercultural approaches have always played a central role from the very start of his artistic career. Born in 1956 in Hong Kong as Young Zerunge, he was sent by his parents to Australia in 1967, where he was to be educated, protected from the reverberations of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in Hong Kong and the then unforeseeable consequences. He then remained in Australia. The loss of his cultural-ethnic identity and the problematic of grounding identity in transcultural contexts are repeatedly thematized in his work. In his well-known *Double Ground Paintings*, which in a collage-like way combine digital print techniques and painting, different motifs of Western and Eastern visual traditions intersect. The close affinity to Bonhoeffer, which results from the artist's own history, he explains as follows: "All my projects to today are transcultural, or at least had something to do with the condition of crossing cultures. The more I looked into them, the more I felt disowned by the original culture that one has crossed from, and the more futile I felt about asking questions about identity in cross-cultural situations. Hence I moved my questioning from identity to looking at people who had done tremendous good because they were in cross-cultural situations, and of course, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is significant in this respect."

But not only Bonhoeffer's experiences in Harlem play a decisive role here. The artist also emphasizes the fact that he interrupted his second US stay to face his responsibility in Germany, as well as the deep discord that arose within him due to his participation in the Resistance. In Young's view, this ethical conflict, in an abstract form, is equally applicable to problems resulting from the confrontation of very different cultural values: "When you are crossing cultures, you

are in the middle, and you can see both sides, so you are put in a conflictual or a paradoxical situation where something is right and wrong at the same time, depending on which cultural perspective you are looking from.”

The exhibition *Bonhoeffer in Harlem* consists of three work complexes. The first part is a portfolio of eleven conceptual works: eight of these are chalk drawings on blackboard painted paper, the three remaining works are digital inkjet prints. The works located on the walls of the nave refer to important biographical data and beliefs of Bonhoeffer, starting with his birth, his childhood, his time in Harlem, the resistance, up to his arrest and ultimate execution at Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945.

It is initially surprising that the chalk drawings are actually works on paper, since they look like blackboards. Indeed, the supports are covered with blackboard paint. Using almost only white chalk, noted here are dates, sites, and textual phrases, sometimes only vaguely legible, because smudged by hand. We can read words in German and in English, and Chinese calligraphy also emerges from the dark backdrop.

This evokes associations with the blackboards of Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), with which he presented his *Richtkräfte einer neuen Gesellschaft* (Directive Forces of a New Society) in the 1970s. But Young, like Beuys, is also referring to the chalkboard drawings of the philosopher, anthroposophist, and epistemologist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), who in his numerous lectures held in Europe used chalkboards to communicate his ideas and visions of social reform with the help of multi-colored drawings. At the initiative of a listener, beginning in 1919 the boards were covered with black cardboard before the start of each lecture, in order to save the chalk drawings and texts for later generations.

Young values the didactic character of these “works” dating from the years 1919 to 1924: around 1100 are still extant today. Although transferred to a different support, they evoke in the beholder the original context of the blackboard and the schoolroom, and directly confer their didactic impact. According to Young’s view, the significance of Steiner’s drawings lies in our need for a spiritual perspective in the midst of today’s materialistically oriented world. Steiner’s highly complex thoughts and visions are presented to the audience with the help of drawings. “It was good that he used such a didactic medium like chalk on blackboard to make you feel these values which he illustrated are emphatic and necessary.” The board becomes paper, the paper in turn is visually elevated to the status of a chalkboard. This media transformation, which in Steiner’s case first grew out of a conservational necessity, becomes part of the concept for both Beuys and Young. Alongside the aforementioned slates, Beuys also used blackened wooden boards that he inscribed with chalk. Young, in contrast, like Steiner, uses paper, but not

industrially prefabricated cardboard. He undertakes the coloring of the paper itself, he “Westernizes” a genuinely Chinese material and makes this procedure a conscious act. The paper takes on a smooth surface, like the board, making the deception perfect. As in Beuys, the works are not only a didactical means of communication, but also an autonomous work of art. By way of their character as boards, an immediacy is shared, the act of inscription is constantly present. At the same time, they evoke fugacity, especially in the places where the writing is blurred, as in *Politics* (emblemized by the yellow handprint) or *The Othered* and *Prison*, where the name of Bonhoeffer’s execution site, Flossenbürg, surfaces like an evil premonition from the dark.

But Young’s access to the board pictures can also be explained from a very different context: as a child, his father had him learn the highly complex art of Chinese calligraphy. As is customary for children, they first practice the signs using a brush and water on a smooth stone. Since the water soon evaporates, the signs need not be “erased.” This technique is practiced until the written signs can be made perfectly. Only then is the child allowed to use ink instead of water. This system, learned from his father, also lies at the foundation of these drawings. The words can be erased and created anew, reassembled or changed, until the “right tone is found.” Using different words in three different languages and cultures, Young collects different voices and uses them to explore the trans-cultural approach: “In these drawings, there are many voices, and these voices may be from different cultures, different passions – all trying to think around the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” In so doing, the artist expressly emphasizes that he did not want to imitate Bonhoeffer’s handwriting. It is Young’s own writing that is used here to lend the voices a form or the right tone.

Thematically even more closely linked to Bonhoeffer’s period in Harlem is the large format silk tapestry, in countless colors, that hangs in place of the crucifix as an altarpiece at the center of the church. This work’s process of conception and creation plays a key role for the whole project. Young had already been thinking for some time about designing a rug that in its colors and structure looks like a church window. In developing the Bonhoeffer project, this idea now took on concrete form. The execution of a design in tapestry in and of itself is not new to the artist. In 2007, he already had a rug woven for his exhibition *Walden in China*, held at the state library in Nanjing. But this work is a more figurative representation, in the tradition of Young’s realistic works. In contrast to this, the Bonhoeffer tapestry stands in the tradition of the abstract series he has been making since 2005, *Naïve Sentimental Paintings* and *The Day after Tomorrow*.

As the foundation for this concept, the artist decided to use the windows of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, the place that left such a lasting impression of Bonhoeffer during his one-year

stay in New York. But the decision to use the windows of the church built in 1922 presented quite a different problematic for Young: “When I first saw the stained glass colors, the purples and greens, I felt very distant from it. I could not imagine how I can design something with that palette. It was a black aesthetic which was as alien as Chinese opera to Western ears. I could not affect the color relationships, the taste of it, to make a design. I had to work against myself and what I was familiar with.” Young saw himself confronted with an aesthetic that in its color composition was foreign to his own, familiar aesthetic. In a metaphorical sense, it was difficult for him to overcome cultural boundaries on an artistic level. But this problematic led him directly back to Bonhoeffer. He saw the overcoming of precisely these limits as the theologian’s message to him as an artist, his ethical call: “It occurred to me that this was precisely what Bonhoeffer may have wanted me to do: to see the other. And not only to see the other, but try to be the other. In other words, to make art not from the point of narcissism, but hopefully from empathy.” Herein lies the significance of the project for the artist: the process of his own transformation as an artist corresponds to the ethical transformation that Bonhoeffer demands of humanity.

We encounter the transcultural aspect in yet another sense as well. According to the Chinese understanding of authorship, which runs through Young’s entire oeuvre, is the notion of the artwork as the product of several participants (and never one alone). In this sense, the artist makes no secret of the fact that he employs assistants in his studio, who are responsible for a certain portion of the production. In the sense of these shared authorships, Bonhoeffer can ultimately be understood as a co-author, and this can especially be seen in the drawings. In the tapestry, this aspect is equally striking, for the execution of the artistic design requires several “co-producers.” Jürgen Dahlmanns, a rug designer and owner of the company Rug Star (Berlin), thus had to examine Young’s concept for its technical practicability and develop a concrete blueprint for the rug weaver. He then sent this blueprint to his partner, the rug weaver Dolma Lob Sang in Nepal, who runs a small company with several employees. Interestingly, as we later found out, she is the daughter of a Tibetan monk who lives in exile in Nepal, cut off from her homeland, a parallel to Young’s own story. At the end of a long production chain, she was finally responsible for the material realization of the carpet. In this way, the work combines very different cultural interpretations, from Young’s original conception to its final execution in Nepal.

In recent years, the work of contemporary artists with the medium of stained glass in sacred space has been a special focus of attention. After Markus Lüpertz’ designs realized in 2005 for St. Andreas in Cologne, Gerhard Richter and Neo Rauch also turned to this subject. Richter’s

abstract, 113 square meter large window in the southern nave of Cologne's Cathedral, comprised of ca. 11,000 stained glass squares, was dedicated in August 2007. At the end of that same year, in Naumburg Cathedral three round arched windows showing figurative scenes on a red background followed, based on designs by Neo Rauch.

In Young's tapestry, in contrast—and this is the decisive difference to the positions above—the medium of stained glass is subjected to a different kind of transformation. Just like Richter's windows, here too computer generated abstract images serve as the foundation for the tapestry. But the starting point here are real existing objects, that is, the windows from the Abyssinian Baptist Church. He adopts the color of the windows, in altered form, for his artistic design, which ultimately finds its expression in a medium that can hardly be any less like the original material of glass, picking up on the millennium of tradition of tapestries.

Tapestries are a fixed part of artistic creation, not only in China, but also in Europe: think here of the tapestries from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that played a significant role not least in a sacred context. In a startling way, the artist succeeds in uniting two media entirely opposite in character, yet both ancient crafts, in one work. In so doing, the two retain their original character. The tapestry is recognizable as such, but with the technically impressive use of color and the oscillating quality of the silk, unmistakably echo the glow and the transparent materiality of the Harlem stained windows.

The third work complex in this exhibition are two abstract paintings (oil on canvas) that visibly take up the motif of the carpet. Seen in technical and artistic terms, they also stand in the tradition of the aforementioned abstract series that Young has been developing since 2005.

Like the tapestry, these works are based on a complex technique. The starting point here is Young's reflection on the role that technology plays in our lives today. Each day, the artist compiles around 1000 photographic images from various sources: the Internet, CDs, his own photography, video images, etc. At the end of the day, he has his computer rearrange these images overnight into abstract images with the help of filters and presets that he defined beforehand. He then selects one or two of these newly generated images, enlarges them, and transfers them with oils to canvas. "This way of abstracting images is interesting to me as with anything today, our sense of choice has gone exponential in the twenty-first century, whereas people in the early twentieth century may have one thousand abstracted drawings they make to paint from in a life time, we can have this overnight. Hence it is our sense of possibility and choice which have changed in the process of art making." Young even catches himself seeking out familiar patterns in the computer-generated images, i.e., he selects those that remind him of



something that familiar from his training as an artist, for example Western abstract works of the twentieth century or Chinese ink drawings. “We are at the moment looking at computer imagery still through the lens of photograph, much like in the early twentieth century we looked at photography through the eyes of nineteenth century genre painting,” he concludes. The exhibition’s two paintings, *Bonhoeffer in Harlem I* and *II*, were made using this technique. Young had his computer as a kind of “co-author” generate images based on photographs of the church windows that he took from the Internet; he chose two of the resulting images and then transferred them to canvas. If we compare this to earlier abstract works like *Walden I* and *II* from 2006, we clearly notice an increased degree of abstraction. While the landscapes in these earlier works can still be glimpsed, the Harlem works seem to stand more strongly on their own. This is primarily due to the striking empty parts of the paintings, new in Young’s oeuvre, where the visual support—the canvas—comes to the forefront. These parts were already cut out or covered in the computer image. If we consider the complete canvas images, we see that Young removes the illusory sculptural quality from the abstract images with the help of these voids, flattening them. In so doing, he tries to return the beholder to a feeling for the surface of the work, now again visible and graspable. Despite the abstraction, the Harlem church windows are still present in the work. The materiality that Young opposes with the unpainted raw canvas relativizes this transcendental quality, and thus creates a balance.

In his works for *Bonhoeffer in Harlem*, the artist John Young succeeds in spanning a great distance in both thematic and artistic terms. Starting with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in whom central terms like transculturality, ethical commitment, and responsible action are combined, we are presented with political developments that begin in the Third Reich, continue through Young’s history of his own identity, and end with the Nepalese exile of the rug maker Lob Sang from Tibet. This thematic complexity finds its artistic expression in three different work groups, in which Young plays with various media and materialities and subjects them to processes of transformation: paper becomes blackboard, glass becomes silk or canvas. In the combination, we are presented with an iridescent image, a shifting between light and dark, opacity and transparency, being earthly and Christian spirituality. The board drawings emblemize repression and death, but the tapestry as well as both abstract works disperse the severity of these works, and in so doing Young leads us back to light and hope.