



Günther Uecker
Reflection and Prayer Room in the
Reichstag Building

Düsseldorf artist Günther Uecker designed the Reflection and Prayer Room for the German Bundestag in 1998–99. With sparing architectural and sculptural means, he created a space that invites meditation and contemplation in the immediate vicinity of the lively activity taking place in the parliamentary plenary chamber. An opening in one of the walls lights the space indirectly from outside, an effect that recalls the mystical aura of an early medieval crypt and contrasts strongly with Sir Norman Foster's light-filled architecture elsewhere in the building. Across from this is another opening, identical in size, through which visitors enter the chapel from an antechamber. Thus the earthly and divine realms – the former in the shape of visitors, the latter in the form of light – arrive in the space from opposite directions.

The light illuminates only the altar and the wall behind it, enhancing the mystical atmosphere by separating light from dark, day from night. Taking his cue from theological tradition, Uecker devised a room for spirituality, a space that encourages a dialogue among various religions. The edge of a raised section of floor runs from west to east. Using this line as orientation, worshippers can face both eastwards, as favoured in Christian practice, or southwards, in the direction of Jerusalem and Mecca, whence the light enters the chapel. Illuminated display cases in the antechamber house liturgical implements belonging to a number of religions. The central case contains Uecker's *Book of Job*, an artist's book produced in the printing studio of Har-El in Jaffa, Tel Aviv, using the complex terragraph process.



The simplicity of the space is underscored by the clear-cut boldness of its furnishings – an altar of sandblasted granite, a specially designed chest organ, chairs, benches and seven wooden panels leaning against the walls. Uecker explains that 'the altar marks the centre of an imaginary cross formed by seven panels installed in the space'. The panels stand on the floor and are not attached to the walls, suggesting that they might be removed at any time and taken on a journey. In this way, they evoke humanity's essential homelessness on earth and the transience of our existence. On them, Uecker used nails, paint, sand, ash and stones to generate images that give compelling expression to archetypal human experiences. Two of the panels have a covering of sand and are pierced from the rear by stones. The artist drove the stones through the wood so powerfully that the front of the panels splintered at these points, indicating that the legendary locus of Jewish,

Christian and Muslim revelation – the desert, suggested by the sand – has been violated. In a similarly forceful way, hundreds of nails penetrate the surface of the collaged cross-shapes on the two panels leaning against the wall behind the altar, which stand for the crosses on which the two thieves were crucified on either side of Christ at Golgatha. The 'wounds' inflicted by the nails allude tellingly to the cruelty with which the message of reconciliation propagated by various religions is ignored in the world outside the chapel. The two crosses on these panels, and the sand indicative of the desert, conjure up the world of the Bible, that region in the Middle East in which divine promise and despair at its disregard live cheek by jowl.



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Uecker does not end on this painful note. He has the nails detach themselves from the crosses and spread upwards like a cloud or bird. In this way he establishes a link to the Resurrection panel on the right-hand wall, in which all earthly things seem to have been left behind in a dynamic mass of nails thrusting outwards from the white ground like a cosmic cloud of 'dancing stars'. The ash and earth on the two panels in the dark area of the chapel allude to human mortality. These panels again make use of sand, stones and nails, but the nails here have a shielding, protective function: they seem to hold back the stones, recalling Christ's admonishment 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone' (John 8:7). In other words, the stones should not be used for punishment and reckoning which must await divine Last Judgement. Time seems to stand still in both these panels, yet stirrings of movement can be made out here too, in the sand. With traces of ash, earth,

sand and paint flowing in a kind of circular motion across all seven panels, without beginning or end, people in the chapel find themselves amid the infinite stream of time. Not least for members of parliament, the chapel offers a space for meditation, reflection and self-examination, a place not far from the hectic political activity in the plenary chamber, a place in which they can take pause and think things over. Wolfgang Thierse, former President of the German Bundestag, has said: 'In a place like this politicians are entirely themselves, not holders of office or elected representatives: here, as created beings they face their maker. Obligations deriving from party membership recede into the background and awareness increases of the limits and hazards of political activity. Where could such a place be more appropriate than at the heart of our democracy, in Parliament?'



Günther Uecker was born in Wendorf (Mecklenburg) in 1930 and attended the art academies in Berlin and Düsseldorf, before joining the Zero group in the early 1960s. He had already begun to use nails as his principal material, often painting them white, driving them into panels or rotating discs in regular arrangements. He created serial structures in this way and achieved optical kinetic effects through a subtle play of light and shade. Soon expanding his activities to include stage design and large installations, he began to employ such plain materials as linen, wood, sand and ash, emphasising their materiality and investing them with a symbolic charge. Increasingly, his installations and other artistic work came to address the existential threats to which humanity is exposed in the modern age and to call for greater respect for human values. In 1996 he showed the installation *Fall* in the German Bundestag in remembrance of the pogrom in Germany on the night of

9 November 1938. In the installation *Zeichen und Schriften* (Signs and Writings), which he presented in the Bundestag's Paul Löbe Building in 2002, he wrote messages of peace from the Bible and the Quran on two pieces of cloth, one for the Bible, one for the Quran, and hung the cloths opposite each other. Splintered wooden stakes appeared between them, symbolising violation and destruction.



Art at the German Bundestag
Günther Uecker

