

## The art dealer who can't see: 'I always thought someone would find me out'

Influential Berlin gallerist Johann König's new memoir details how blindness taught him how to recognise good art



Johann König stands beside an artwork by Kathryn Andrews. König damaged his eyes when he was 12 and started his own gallery at 21. Photograph: Theresa Kottas-Heldenberg/Dpa / Alamy

### Philip Oltermann in Berlin

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**W**hen gallerist Johann König sold his first artwork at the tender age of 21, he had a secret he only reluctantly shared with his buyer. Severely sight-impaired as a result of a freak accident in his teens, König could barely make out the contours of the painting he was exchanging for €4,500.

“How serious can you take someone who can’t see the artwork they are trying to sell you?” König told the Guardian at his office inside his gallery, a converted brutalist church in Berlin’s Kreuzberg district. “That fear was always in the back of my mind. I always thought someone would find me out.”

But in what he calls his “coming out” memoir, published in Germany this month with the title *Blind Gallerist*, König argues his disability has been key to the success he has enjoyed since, encouraging him to develop a distinctly personal idea of what makes good art, and enabling him to navigate an industry that can bedazzle and lead people astray with flashy exteriors.

Born in Cologne in 1981, König grew up in art world royalty. His mother Edda was an actress and illustrator previously married to filmmaker Wim Wenders, his father Kasper a curator whom *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has dubbed “the inventor of Germany’s post-war avant-garde”.



The cover of Johann König's new memoir, *Blind Gallerist*. Photograph: Supplied

His uncle Walther is a leading seller and publisher of art books, painter Gerhard Richter was the best man at his parents' wedding, and Andy Warhol and David Hockney were regular visitors at his childhood home.

But an accident when he was twelve cut Johann König's access to the visual business that had made his family's name. Playing with fishing weights and the gunpowder from a starter pistol in his teenage bedroom, he accidentally caused an explosion which severely damaged both his eyes.

Going blind did not mean the world around him went black, however. "In truth you mostly see a dark rusty brown, a mix of red, brown and black, little craters that appear to be moving", he writes in his book.



Johann König is listed as one of the hundred most influential people in contemporary art despite being barely able to see it. Photograph: Dpa Picture Alliance/Alamy Stock Photo

“Your vision is as if you want to gaze out from the inside of your body and hit an impenetrable layer. You see as if your vision has been locked inside your body”.

Against the advice of his family, König started his own small gallery in Berlin when he was only 21, specialising at first in concept art and sound installations. His breakthrough work, by Danish sculptor Jeppe Hein, consisted of a motorised metal ball that wrecked the gallery’s interior as soon as a visitor entered the exhibition space.

Following a cornea transplant in his left eye in 2009, König’s vision improved dramatically, though his relationship with visual art remained wary. “At first, I was incredibly drawn towards strong pictures”, he said. The first show he put on after the operation was a large-scale work with bright, unmixed acrylic paints by artist Katharina Grosse.



Danish sculptor Jeppe Hein’s 360° Presence was first shown at the König gallery in 2002 and was considered a breakthrough for König. Photograph: König Gallery

“But I remained sceptical”, König said. “There are some pictures which are incredibly tempting but make promises that they can’t keep. They wear themselves out in their beauty.

“After my operation I saw really significant works, like Duchamp’s urinal or a Picasso, and they felt so marginal. Sometimes being able to see isn’t that great after all, or at least not for me.”

In recent years, König’s eyesight has deteriorated again as the endothelial cells that line the inner surface of his cornea have failed to regenerate. Next month, he is trying out glasses that project footage from a minuscule camera straight behind the cornea.



Part of the König gallery’s interior in St Agnes church. Photograph: Roman März

His gallery, housed since 2015 in St Agnes church, designed by modernist architect Werner Düttmann in the 1960s, has nonetheless established itself as one of Germany’s most influential addresses in the art world, with a roster of artists that includes Turner Prize winner Helen Martin, an annual turnover of €20m and a new London outlet, opened last year inside a garage in Marylebone.

As if to compensate for their disability, König writes in his book, blind people are often capable of an unusual degree of inner concentration and heightened perception.

Critics have praised the 37-year-old’s ability to spy the art world’s vanities and make them work to his advantage. The gallery, which lies almost exactly on the geographic centre point of the German capital, has hosted fashion shows as well as art exhibitions, and sells clothes as well as “souvenirs” made by its artists, photogenically curated on König’s Instagram feed.





St Agnes church was designed in the 1960s by modernist architect Werner Düttmann. Photograph: Hisao Suzuki

In the wake of Britain's vote to leave the EU, König's gallery released a collection of hoodies in the bright blue colours of the EU flag, but with one yellow star missing from the circle.

Within weeks, the "EUnify Hoodie" became ubiquitous in Berlin's hippest galleries, and in February this year even 73-year-old veteran diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger was seen wearing one during the opening of the Munich Security Conference.

In the run-up to May's European elections, German politicians from the centre-left Social Democrats, the Greens, the pro-business Free and even Angela Merkel's centre-right wore EU hoodies in campaign posters.

However, Johann König now worries that his gallery's stunt may end up undermining its original intention. "We wanted to use our reach with young people to remind a younger generation that you cannot take borderless travel and peace in Europe for granted", he said.

"But when a leading politician wears our EU hoodie in a television ad, that sort of kills the hipness factor in an instant".