

In the Labyrinth of Worship:

**Leonard Cohen:**

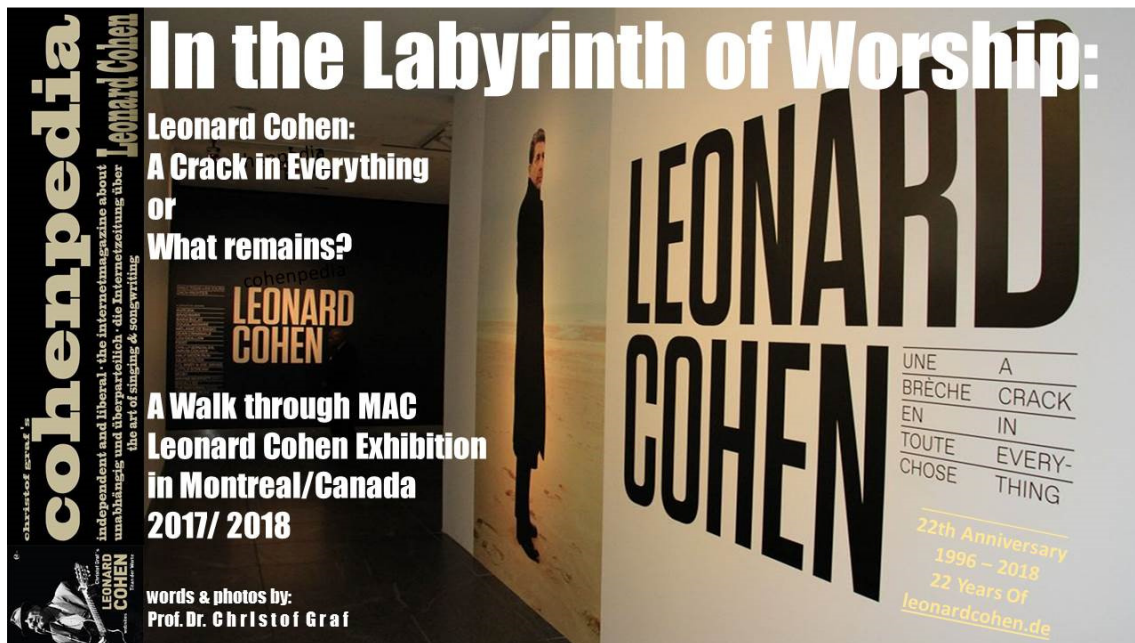
**A Crack in Everything**

or

**What remains?**

A Walk through MAC Leonard Cohen Exhibition in Montreal/Canada

Text & Pics: Prof. Dr. Christof Graf



What remains? Fourteen studio albums and around 150 songs, depending on if you count the cover versions or not? Thirteen books. Depending on if you count the “Cohen Poem” publications or not. Hundreds of poems and two novels? Drawings, artistic computer designs and water colourings? Leonard Cohen wasn’t just a singer/songwriter and poet, Leonard Cohen was very liberal towards many artists. Cohen was also interested in the works of other artists. Cohen was also open-minded towards the film industry, theatre and dance, musicals and photography, which was shown with such wonderful engagements in projects such as the movie “I’m Your Hotel” (1984), the guest appearance in the US TV-series “Miami Vice” (1987) or the musical “Night Magic” (1985). In 1973 he acted as the musical author for “The Sisters of Mercy- A Musical Journey Into the Words of Leonard Cohen.” This was a project which was produced by his then current manager and lawyer

**Marty Machat. The list of artistic engagements of Leonard Cohen is long and multifaceted. Just as versatile as the exhibit that was opened in the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal (MAC) on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017: "Leonard Cohen: A Crack in Everything."**

Two days earlier I had the opportunity to stroll through the exhibition rooms of the MAC with some of the artists and curator John Zeppetelli, for a preview tour. On Wednesday, November 8<sup>th</sup>, an official press conference without a tour was held in the MAC. On the day before that, Tuesday November 7<sup>th</sup> 2017, local time 10:00 AM, curator John Zapatelli invited a dozen journalists to a small press related breakfast event. The tour turned into a commented insight into an exhibit which, in its form, had not yet existed on global scale for an artist of popular music.

For those who live in, are accommodated in, or find themselves as guests in "downtown" Montreal, the MAC is perfectly situated. Many of the downtown hotel chains are not farther than 30 minutes by foot from the MAC, located in 185 Saint-Catherine St W, Montreal, QC H2X 3X5, Canada. I also lived "downtown," in Peel Street. Around 30 minutes away by foot. Peel Street is ideal to discover "Leonard Cohen's Montreal." The morning of November 7<sup>th</sup>, a day after the "Tower of Song" concert, was the coldest day of the second November week, with temperatures around minus four degrees Celsius. The arctic east wind made it feel like minus 10 degrees. However, it was also one of the last clear, sunny days, before temperatures would further plummet towards the end of the week. Snow even fell during the end of the week.



Anyway, I left my accommodations, located on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor, which I described as the "Adlerhorst" of Montreal, and crossed over to Sheerbrooke Street. If I had taken a right turn, past the Ritz Carlton, I would have been on Rue Crescent, a second intersecting street to Sheerbrooke Street, in which one could marvel at the second Leonard Cohen mural. On a side note, that afternoon the mural was officially given to the city of Montreal, in attendance of the authors, Cohen's daughter Lorca and

Robert Kory, who had managed Cohen since around 2006, to celebrate the 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “City of Montreal.” This mural was initially met with incomprehension by the citizens, a local gastronomer told us. Many Montréalaise didn’t understand why the mural wasn’t placed where Cohen lived in the last years, around the “Parc Du Portugal,” near his home. The only connection that existed between the location of the mural and Cohen was that Cohen was once photographed in the Rue Crescent and that he then used that picture as a cover for his live album “Field Commander Cohen.”



A discussion ensued which the city managed to diffuse with the assigning of a second mural, behind the parking lot of the restaurant “Moshe,” close to Cohen’s house. Regardless of these facts, the murals fit into a “picture of an exhibition,” which was opened to the public in this second November week. Regardless of these thoughts, I continued making my way to the MAC exhibition. One of the murals was not on the way.

I didn’t turn right. I crossed Sheerbrooke and made my way along Peel Street to the MAC, until I got to the crossover to Rue St. Catherine. There I took a left and dove into the shopping district, which was just about to greet a new work day. Some stores were still closed, while others were just opening. However, coffee shops such as Starbucks were open 24/7. Past a post office, a tattoo studio and a martial arts school one encountered businessmen and women quickly rushing into their offices, as well as students on their way to their first lecture, as well as the first customers of gift, grocery or book stores, such as Indigo.

At a small, somewhat inconspicuous Starbucks, St.-Catherines Street intersected with Rue Jeanne-Mance and opened up the view to the MAC. The three capital letters M, A and C on the side of the Rue Jeanne-Mance and a yellow banner with Leonard Cohen’s name on it point out that shopping center looking structure is indeed the MAC. Incidentally, behind the MAC one can find the “Place Des



Arts,” on which Cohen performed on the three day Montreal Jazz-Festival, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> of June 2008.

If one walks a few meters around the building, a little bit further in the direction of St. Catherine, the yellow banner is complemented by a large photo motif of Leonard Cohen. On the right side, rather inconspicuously, is the main entrance. Over the entrance hangs a photo, by Michael Putland, akin to the advertisement of the “Listening To Leonard” event.

In the lobby there are information stands and wardrobes, sitting venues and a spiral formed staircase, which leads to the upper level. A three by 5 meter poster motif acts as an invitation to the guests. The motif originated from the video-shooting of “First We Take Manhattan,” produced by Dominique Isserman in Deauville/ France. Cohen is displayed in a grand manner on it. By a multiplier of 2 almost twice as large as the “original.” Next to it his name can be read in large black letters on a white background. A successful entrée for the “journey” into Cohen’s world.

John Zeppetelli sees it the same way: “It’s a sort of beginning of a journey through the life and works of a ‘wordsmith,’ an extraordinary singer/songwriter, whose art affected people in the entire world.” These words served as an invitation, without having asked for one.

Zeppetelli, who had taken up the mantle of the MAC Director in August of 2013, as well as his subordinates began with telling us about the history and preparations, before the art pieces were viewed. During and after the tour Zeppetelli and a few artists were available for a discussion.

During the introductory speech after the reception the first quotes were offered by the organizers, which soon after were published in various media and social platforms, and traveled the world. Each journalist thankfully recorded them with a Dat-recorder, a video camera or a smartphone.



It was the “first large exhibition that honors Cohen’s legacy,” and even if it looks like a type of show that is held after the death of an icon, this exhibition was one that was planned in advance and with Cohen’s blessing while he was still alive. Especially exciting was the news in 2016, when a declaration was made that Cohen was going to bring out a new album. “We were excited to be celebrating a living legend, an active musician, poet and cultural figure who had been active for five decades,” Zeppetelli proudly stated. “We were so looking forward to taking him around the exhibition hall and showing him how relevant and powerful he has been to so many people.”

Even so, Zeppetelli was both surprised and delighted at the same time at receiving Cohen’s approval, since he knew Cohen as being a highly private person who is usually reserved on such projects.

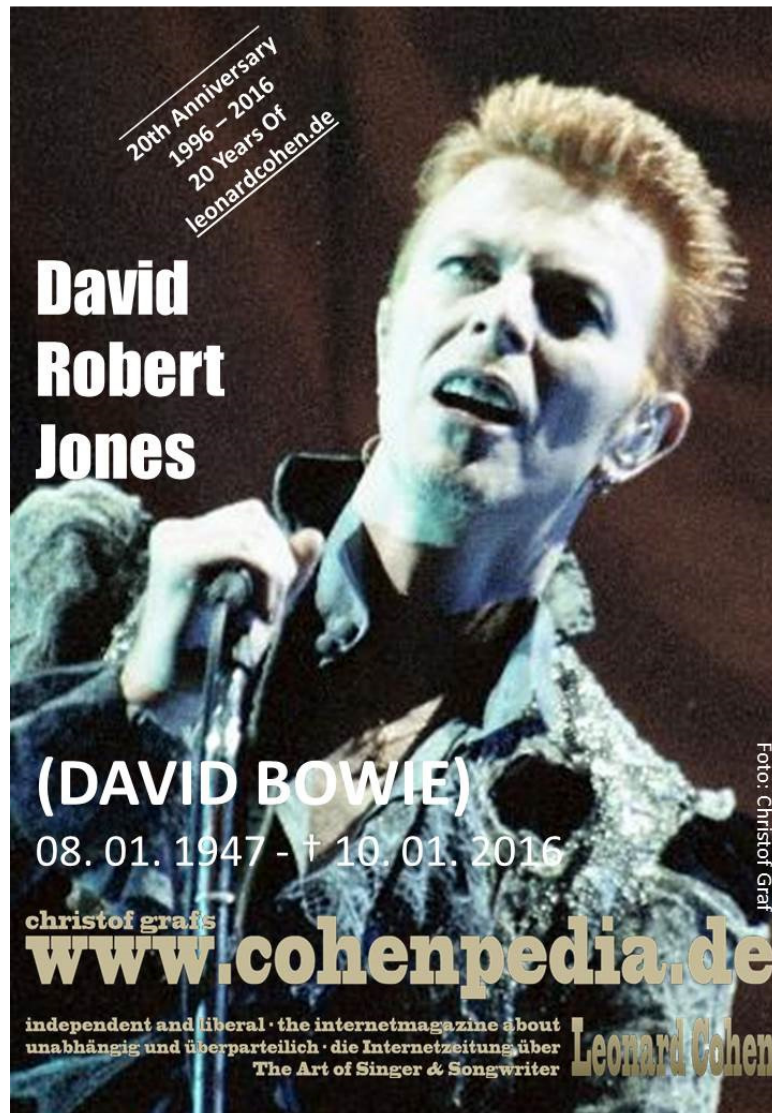
The reason to why Cohen gave his approval through his lawyer and manager Robert Kory was probably, Zeppetelli suggests, “because this wasn’t a hagiography, it wasn’t a collection of fedoras. This show was contemporary art commissions where we invited artists to think about Leonard Cohen’s cultural output, to be displayed in Montreal, the city he came back to – to be buried.”



A conscious decision was made not to have an exhibition like “David Bowie Is,” in which stage costumes and photographs were the center pieces. Some of the representatives of the media had already seen the David Bowie exhibition in London or Berlin.

*(“David Bowie Is,” so the name of that exhibition includes more than 300 objects collected from Bowie’s teenage years through his death last year,” says Brooklyn Museum, in which the exhibition will be from March 2 to July 15. Archivists spent several years organizing and culling from a 75,000 piece collection. Objects include set designs, photography, rare performance videos and stage costumes – like bodysuits from the “Ziggy Stardust” tour in 1972 and a coat designed by Bowie and*

Alexander McQueen for the “Earthling” album cover in 1997. Some artifacts will be new and exclusive to the Brooklyn Museum, including musical scores and handwritten set lists. Bowie’s music will play on speakers and headphones throughout the show. The exhibitions opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2013, becoming the most-visited show in the museum’s history. It has traveled to cities all over the world and has been seen by over 1.8 million people. Organizers say the Brooklyn Museum will be the final stop.”; Note by the author).



No, “a collection of guitars or similar things was not to be shown, nor his gray suits and shirts, which Cohen wore, like a uniform or working clothes, in his five tour years,” stated Zeppetelli.

“Sadly Cohen passed before the opening of the exhibition. The exhibition may now look like somewhat of a remembrance exhibition, but it’s not.” “Most artists were invited and called upon to look into the subject of Cohen’s works while he was still alive. It’s not about reverence, but about reflection and interpretation of Cohen’s art from the standpoint of other artists.”

## **Part 1 Greeting**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUs1u8EfkJQ>

And yes, even though the famous Olivetti-typewriter was displayed, with which Cohen wrote his first works, it's not about impressing hard core collectors with memorabilia. It's about mirroring Cohen's art through new art.

"This show was a contemporary art commission, where we invited artists to think about Leonard Cohen's cultural output, to be displayed in Montreal, the city he came back to – to be buried," to quote Zeppetelli.

But you should probably try and make your own impression, Zeppetelli claimed and extended the invitation to begin the tour. Part of this tour were some of the artists who were constituents to "A Crack in Everything." As the tour – which was still under exclusion from the public – was concluded, Sharon Robinson also visited the exhibition and was available for a small chat.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipKvLfesmpg>

### **Zeppetelli talks in an interview**

"There isn't a concrete order, the exhibition can be viewed without a forced route that needs to be taken, there isn't a chronological sequence," Zeppetelli said. "We can start by going left or right," the curator suggested in the makeshift bistro behind the entrance banner.

Initially we step into the room in which the present artists Mouna Andraos and Melissa Mongiatl presented their "experimental performance installation." "I Heard There Was a Secret Chord is a participatory humming channel that reveals an invisible vibration uniting people around the world currently listening to Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah,'" they convincingly stated.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyyVrUV-MD8>

### **MAC MONTREAL DAILY TOUS LES JOURS Press Review LEONARDCOHEN MONTREAL2017 MAC EXHIBITION**

On the other side of the exhibition rooms on the upper level of the MAC Zeppetelli led us to Candice Breitz's contribution. "The artists' meditation on Cohen's work have resulted in pieces like South African artist Candice Breitz's recreation of Cohen's album I'm You Man, all sung by Montreal men over the age of 65," stated Zeppetelli and led us into a large, dark room, with various life-sized video portraits of these "over 65 year olds."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR0qHYvQvTk>

### **MAC MONTREAL CANDICE BREITZ Press Preview part 3 7<sup>th</sup> November #LEONARDCOHEN MONTREAL2017 MAC EXH**



The entire exhibition “takes its title from Cohen’s song ‘Anthem,’ which contains the famous line ‘There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.’ The song also inspired artist Kara Blake’s piece for the show, an immersive installation called ‘The Offerings.’ The song apparently took Cohen 10 years to craft and is just one example of his many artistic offerings that get inside the beautifully flawed nature of being human,” the artist Blake said herself. “I wanted my piece to present visitors with a sampling of the creativity, wit and insight Cohen has gifted us with.”

Zeppetelli explained during the tour: “To bring those elements to life, Blake pored through decades of archival material, including film and television appearances, photographs and written documents, to craft a portrait of the artist displayed on video screens with Cohen’s velvet-clad voice enveloping the viewer in the darkened room. The piece is a portrait of Cohen wrought out of his own words, letting visitors spend time in what Blake calls ‘his contemplative universe.’”

The longer one spent on the tour, the more apparent multidimensional impressions became, the more apparent depth and diversity became, things that Cohen had left within other artists.

Zeppetelli and over 40 visual artists, filmmakers and musicians from over ten countries managed to create something innovative that had not existed in this form to date. A mixture of a traditional exhibition and a contemporary multi-media show.

“The project’s relevance only seemed to increase as it took shape: Cohen came out with his valedictory masterwork, ‘You Want it Darker,’ and then died the day before the election of Donald Trump – and, as it transpires, exactly a year before the opening of ‘A Crack in Everything.’” “It was like a tectonic shift,” said Zeppetelli. “The poet of love and brokenness disappears and this monstrous figure rises improbably and incomprehensibly into the most important office.” The newspaper that documented that will also be featured in the exhibition. The issue of the NEW YORK TIMES lies in a glass vitrine.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IL4fCiRygg>

#### **MAC MONTREAL CLARA FUREY Thomas Demand Press Preview part 9 #LEONARDCOHEN MONTREAL2017 MAC EXHIBITION**

Something that takes time to get used to, but is in no way less impressive, is the performance of the Canadian Clara Frey. “Her ‘When Even The’ is a cycle of performances inspired by the eponymous poem by Leonard Cohen. In this ninety-minute work, Frey engages in an existential reflection on memory, the passage of time and death – all major themes in Cohen’s work,” Zeppetelli describes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypGyK7Libjs>

#### **MAC MONTREAL CLARA FUREY Press Preview part 4 #LEONARDCOHEN MONTREAL2017 MAC EXHIBITION ACRACKI**

The room that Cohen fans will probably find the most interesting and the one in which they would probably want to spend most of their time in is the one in which the live-videos will be shown. What can be seen are various recordings from official video, DVD and Blu-ray publications from the last five decades. Snippets from TV reports or concerts on the CBC, BBC or even the German station ZDF are also incorporated. Part of these snippets from the last five decades of artistic work include recordings from the 1972 cinema movie “Bird On A Wire,” the only official buyable video “Songs From the Life Of Leonard Cohen,” (1988) or from the 1979 live concert “Rock Pop Special” on the ZDF.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hREvf76zGTA>

**MAC MONTREAL GEORGE FOX Press Preview part 6 #LEONARDCOHEN MONTREAL2017 MAC EXHIBITION ACRACKINE**

If one wants to take a few moments to absorb everything and make use of the seating options, one will notice that at this point almost three hours have already passed. One doesn't want to really leave out anything.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LT2sNuq2dtE>

**MAC MONTREAL GEORGE FOX Press Preview part 12 #LEONARDCOHEN MONTREAL2017 MAC EXHIBITION ACRACKINE**

The Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller are internationally renowned creators of art, who are most famously known for their impressive "immersive multimedia sound installations."

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0\\_slpLfUI4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_slpLfUI4)

**MAC MONTREAL JANET CARDIFF & GEORGE BURES MILLER Press Preview part 7 #LEONARDCOHEN MONTREAL201**

Zeppetelli is especially impressed by the innovative ideas of Tacita Dean, something that is somewhat hard to follow. The presented video in a dark room is simply just boring. However Zeppetelli says: "'4'33' is a 4-minute, 33-second silence 'performed' in three movements – was highly influential in twentieth-century music and very emotional for the choreographer." – Why? "Well, the title plays on the expression 'earworm,' which refers to a song that repeats in one's head. Earworms can be triggered aurally as well as associatively. The film shows a bird literally sitting on a wire and is 3 minutes and 33 seconds long, exactly the same length as that of Leonard Cohen's signature song 'Bird On A Wire.'"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym7EYEDtO8k>

**MAC MONTREAL TACITA DEAN Press Preview part 8 #LEONARDCOHEN MONTREAL2017 MAC EXHIBITION ACRACKINEV**

After Zeppetelli had explained that, we stood in a dark, small room, looked up and listened to birds. Some visitors quickly moved on, while some listened to bird twice, some smirked, some pretended as if they were able to understand the bird while others just shook their heads and quickly moved on into the next exhibition room.

There actually isn't a "next" exhibition room. A type of chronology, how the exhibition is meant to be viewed also doesn't exist at the end of the tour. The decision is up to oneself. Maybe this is a type of

clue on how to deal with Leonard Cohen's works, songs and lyrics. There is no doctrine. The master himself created a "plethora" of word poems which are all open to interpretation. (Is the transformation of water to wine and back again in "You Want It Darker" not a beautiful example for this?) Looking back on my first inspection of the exhibition I am often reminded of room for interpretation. By the way, the MAC has many rooms which can be exited in two directions. Either you let yourself drift or be guided by Zeppetelli, who adds his own accent to this "preview." One room he doesn't want to leave unmentioned is the small room in which Leonard Cohen's "self-portraits" are shown. "He produced hundreds of them," remarked Zeppetelli enthusiastically, as we entered the designated "room." Black and meager in its design, with the focus being on the circa 5 square meter projection of Cohens designs. "A myriad of them have been digitalized and we're showing some of the most, from our point of view, most interesting ones." (Some of them were also shown on the intermission curtain of the "Tower Of Song" concert on the previous evening).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bp\\_6cKnMSI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bp_6cKnMSI)

#### MAC MONTREAL John Zeppetelli talks about Leonard Cohen's Self Portraits Press Preview part 10 #L

Ok, a little bit of the "David Bowie Is" style can also be found in the Leonard Cohen exhibition. "Manuscripts, as well as an exact copy of his work room, where he recorded "You Want It Darker," can also be seen. This replica is based on a shot from his life partners from the 80s, the French photographer Dominique Isserman," Zeppetelli concluded. And he noticed that in line with this unique exhibition, one person who could not be missing was Cohen's longtime co-producer and "collaborator" Sharon Robinson. After Cohen's death she wrote the song "Goodbye Stranger," which can be seen and heard as a type of "making of" video in a for her designated room.



<http://blog.leonardcohen.de/?p=7152>

After over three hours the stroll through the labyrinth of worship of Leonard Cohen in the MAC is completed.



Zeppetelli announced that in the evening, on the shore of the St. Lorenz stream around silo number 5 in the Montreal harbor, there would be a “special feature,” which can only be seen in this week, for about five nights. “One of Montreal’s most iconic architectural structures, will be lit up in Leonard Cohen’s honour. The MAC has commissioned neo-conceptual American artist Jenny Holzer to create a piece consisting of a giant projection of select phrases from Cohen’s poems, songs, and other writings – in both French and English. The projection, named for Leonard Cohen, will be visible as of November 7<sup>th</sup>, coinciding with the first anniversary of Cohen’s death. Jenny Holzer revisits the fine line between the written word and the image, thus transforming the text into the object of observation. The integration of Cohen’s writing into such large-scale work will also offer an alternative perspective on the author’s original underlying meanings and messages. This creation will present a temporary tribute marked by a deep admiration for the Montreal poet on the occasion of the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of his death and the 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his hometown.” – The curator knows how to transport himself into a spiral of admiration when describing his artists. It seems like he hasn’t only memorized the catalogue, but also internalized it. I would eagerly anticipate this walk to the number 5 silos during the constantly sinking temperatures.

With the words “are there any more questions” the curator ends our walk. He is still available for short following interviews. Sharon Robinson arrives as he leaves. She is heartily greeted by Zeppetelli before she makes her way to “her” room, to her participation in the “exhibition.” But that is a completely separate and different – although short – chapter of this walk.



What remains? A crack in everything? Two questions, that after the hour long stroll through the exhibition full of pictures, not by Leonard Cohen, but artists that were engaged with Leonard Cohen's works, still remained. What probably remains is what Leonard Cohen songs are: neither song, nor music, but rather a prayer. What probably remains is that, what Leonard Cohen's lyrics are, an eternal confession of love to the departure of something. Departure always has something to do with remembrance. Leonard Cohen understood this, departing and remembering, not only to web pop music and poems onto a canvas. He drew pictures with words.

"A Crack in Everything," in its sum, is what Cohen drew. The pictures created by his words are still being seen, understood or transfigured by many. A few of his pictures will survive throughout time and will be immortalized. David Bowie managed to do so with his album "Blackstar," with which he bade farewell to the world with. With his hymn "Lazarus" he entered eternity. Cohen imitated him, but in a better way. Just three weeks before his passing he released his epitaph, his requiem, his hallelujah with "You Want It Darker," which through his art will never be silenced.

The quieter Cohen performed his songs, the louder the cheers of his audience. Cohen turned silence into a mystic sound, by turning words into songs and songs into prayers. Cohen became quieter and quieter while preparing his apostles for the moment, in which every word is already written and sung. On November 7<sup>th</sup> 2016 Leonard Cohen's last word was written and sung. The sound of the man, who was always a traveler, who never arrived, cannot be silenced. Today others sing his songs, paint his pictures. Today "A Crack In Everything" is everywhere. All that Cohen left behind is a prayer. During his life he prayed, now others pray for him. With the exhibition "A Crack In Everythin" they pray to Leonard Cohen and practice the after-sound for a godlike world poet, who apparently didn't



only come from Montreal. "A Crack In Everything" helps us find our way through the labyrinth of worship.

p.s.:

P.S.: ... what remains.

Leonard Cohen's last World-Tour-Trademark, the fedora hat sits now on the O in Montreal at Trudeau Airport since November 2017, one year after his death.

Photo : Christof Graf

**In Memory of Leonard Cohen**

**cohenpedia**  
Independent and liberal · the internetmagazine about  
unabhängig und überparteilich · die Internetzeitung über  
the art of singing & songwriting

**# book of memories**  
cohenpedia  
**# Buch der Erinnerungen**



<https://cohenpedia.de/a-gallery-of-moments/>