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Neo Rauch's Purposive Ambiguities

Robert Hobbs

Awarded the prestigious Van Gogh Award for European Contemporary Art in 2002, Neo Rauch has become known for his large-scale, mysterious paintings of the past decade. Instead of solving conundrums, this Leipzig artist heightens them by relying on intuition and, sometimes, actual dreams as his guides. Although these works might appear to be open to solution, their incommensurable realities, shifting perspectives, and radical disjunctions resist easy access.[1] At first Rauch's canvases appear to be disarmingly familiar since they rework aspects of German romanticism, East German socialist realism, and Leipzig mannerism. However these works recombine these known stylistic traditions in such distinctly new ways that they form intriguing conundrums. As the artist has stated, "it is better not to dissect imagination since power resides in its continued mystery."[2] In consideration of this initial inscrutability and its affinities with such traditional mysteries as alchemy and the Kabbala, which Rauch has only informally studied, the following discussion will consider how his fecund imagination recasts salient elements of the German tradition in a distinctly new manner and leaves firmly entrenched ways of seeing floundering in the wake of competing ideologies.

These ongoing ambiguities are a decisive feature of his art and certainly one reason it is able to overstep the limits of ideological certainty. In doing so, this artist goes beyond even the sustained dialectics employed by the former East German artists Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke after their escapes to the West in the mid-twentieth century. No longer subject to the constraints of Communism, these two painters learned to look at established ideologies with jaundiced eyes and create in their work ongoing sets of oppositions that render unilateral views problematic. Richter, for example, has exacerbated tensions between reality and abstraction in his simulated nonobjective paintings and blurred figurative pieces, while Polke has restructured differences between high art and kitsch so that they appear as competing sign sys-

1 The essay on Neo Rauch moves beyond Martina Weinhart's observation that "the keen industriousness that prevails in many of Neo Rauch's pictures does not issue in unity, no more than the pictures as a group constitute a unity" to consider Rauch effort to break away from overriding ideologies. Cf. Martina Weinhart, "The Will to Knowledge: Models for the Reception of soviet Art in the West Boris Groys and Max Hollein,

ed., *Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalin Era* (Hatje Cantz and Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt: Ostfildern-Ruit, 2003), p. 137.

2 Neo Rauch, interview with the author, Leipzig, June 6, 2002.

3 Aleksander Morozov, "Socialist Realism: Factory of the New Man" in *Dream Factory Communism*, p. 73

tems. Both artists' incisive avoidances of past ideological conditioning have resulted in sophisticated parodies and indirect criticisms of Cold War absolutes.

Before unification Neo Rauch had worked in a generalized expressive-impressionist style, which the GDR, like the Soviets before them, frowned upon it because it leveled for formalist reasons the hierarchies of subject matter essential to socialist propaganda.[3] After unification, Rauch moved in a new direction by gradually developing a style in which the expressive-impressionist approach of his late 1980s work was relinquished in the '90s for multi-perspectival views. Then, in the late '90s he combined in the same works references to comic-book imagery and socialist-realist conventions, thus leveling differences between the two. Later, in 2003/2004 he began adding to this complex mix of styles figures in eighteenth-century dress, which refer back to Leipzig's grandeur as a center for arts and letters when its citizenry included Johann Sebqastian Bach, who lived and worked in the city, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who studied there.

In order to come to terms with the inconsistencies posed by a unified Germany, which joins together capitalists and socialists, Rauch has embraced as personal role models several individuals noted for their ability to cope with contradictions in their lives and thought. They include Richard Scheringer (the grandfather of his wife, the painter Rosa Loy) and the two writers Ernst Jünger and Julien Green.[4] A soldier during World War I, Scheringer lived through an extraordinary series of changes, some of which he had initiated and others he simply endured. After the war, he served in the clandestine army known as the Schwarze Reichwehr, which existed in defiance of the Versailles Treaty (1919). Later he participated in a failed putsch and was put in jail where he subsequently converted to Communism. During the militarization of Germany in the 1930s, he was rehabilitated as an officer in the Third Reich, where his old army comrades, imbued with esprit des corps, became so adept at covering up his Communist sympathies that he was assigned during World War II to the eastern front. There he found himself in the ironic situation of fighting his ideological brethren, the Red Army. One of Scheringer's long-term friends was the well-known conservative writer Ernst Jünger, who has also become a crucially important figure for Rauch since he managed to bridge in his many writings such conflicting positions as insisting on the dominance of technology while fiercely maintaining the rights of subjectivity and wishing to be a military hero in the midst of battle while aestheticizing the shock of war, thereby distancing himself from it. Rauch's third exemplar, Julien Green, an expatriate American in Paris who has been lauded as a major French author, contended with the far different allegiances of Catholicism and homosexuality that he regarded as holding both his spirit and body hostage. While none of these men found the conflicts assailing them easy, all three achieved an enlarged understanding of the world and its contradictions that has made them resistant to easy categorization. For this reason they have served as important role models for Rauch.

4 Rauch, interview with the author, Leipzig, June 6, 2002; July 25, 2003; January 9, 2004; and May 22, 2004. In all of the interviews, Rauch referred to Ernst Jünger; in the three latter meetings he stressed the importance of Julien Green; and in the last one he described in detail Richard Scheringer's quixotic life.

To understand why the residual tensions affecting the former East Germany continue to have an impact on Rauch's art, it helps to look at formative events from his childhood. In 1960, when he was only six weeks old, his parents – both beginning art school students – died in a train accident. Years later Neo Rauch may have felt the need to realize his father's unrealized dream of becoming an artist since he too decid-

ed to attend the Leipzig Academy.[5] Brought up by his maternal grandparents, he had been constantly exposed to his parents' youthful art efforts, which were ceremoniously hung throughout the house. In addition to living with their work, he had spent hours gazing at the strangely compelling images in the periodical, *Neue bildende Kunst*, which continued to be delivered for several decades after his parent's death.

During Rauch's earliest years the magazine was a key tool for disseminating the goals of the first Bitterfeld Weg Conference (1959), which attempted to bring East German art closer to its Soviet precursor by creating a proletarian art. To a child, the theatrics of socialist realist propaganda could have seemed the wondrous stuff of dreams, which in fact they were, since they had little connection with the current world that they purported to depict and everything to do with molding a future proletariat.[6] Over time, Rauch internalized these images and transformed them in his art into a series of strange encounters.[7]

Rather than fulfilling the Bitterfeld Weg's social contract by glorifying an emerging proletariat, Rauch's work since 1997 has redirected its blatantly ideological approach to characterize the East German situation in a re-united Germany and to symbolize by extension the difficulty of integrating the country's pasts into the present. Because he creates instinctively, relying only on a host of small sketches and personal interpretations of old master works but not on elaborate a priori programs, we can safely assume that his reworkings of Bitterfeld Weg goals were not consciously drafted attempts to overturn its program. Instead they were intense responses to his changing world. In this art, which has made him famous, Rauch invokes a number of Germany's traditions while emphasizing the basic truisms of socialist realism[8] and subjects them to the perspective of a later time period, so that instead of robust youths we are presented with middle aged workers, rather than positive heroes we find a far less exalted cast of players, and in place of social jubilation we discern matter-of-fact figures. Time is slowed down in his art rather than hastened up, and dynamism is intermixed with stasis. Moreover, this artist's work heightens contradictions rather than resolving them; it views the future as retrograde rather than the Soviet's Bright Way; and it reveals the Bitterfeld Weg dream to be only a superannuated daydream – not reality.

Although Rauch's art reveals a need to revisit the Bitterfeld Weg style imposed on mid-twentieth-century East Germans in order to discern it as one among a number of Germany's many cultural legacies leading to the present, his references to this socialist realist style is more complex than first appearances would suggest. These allusions reveal an important aspect of his artistic process since this imagery from its inception has been regarded by outsiders as a particularly egregious form of kitsch because of its blatantly cloying idealism. Socialist realist kitsch has provided Rauch a particularly apt weapon in his acknowledged attack on modernism. Either consciously or not, his use of it has undermined a basic thesis of Clement Greenberg's most memorable early essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), which has been reprinted and referenced so often that it is without question one of the best known twentieth-century critical articles exploring the differences that separate vanguard modernism from popular taste. In this essay Greenberg puts down kitsch for being too easily understood and counters it with the difficulty of avant-garde work that forces viewers to rethink art's dynamic role in society rather than regarding it like

5 Rauch, interview with the author, May 22, 2004.

6 For an excellent discussion of Soviet socialist realist art as unrealistic dreams far removed from the everyday world, see Boris Groys and Max Hollein, ed., *Dream Factory Communism*, especially Boris Groys' essay, "Mass Culture," pp. 24 and 26.

7 Even though the programmatic and propagandistic Soviet socialist realism, which had been initiated in the 1930s, ended with Stalin's death in 1953, it was resurrected in East Germany in the late 1950s. Determined to demonstrate their steadfast allegiance to the Soviet Union while signaling their disdain for West German capitalism, assiduous German Communist officials at the time worked to transform this section of the Eastern Bloc into a model socialist regime. Believing that the working class had already proven itself capable of heading up the state and the economy, these German officials turned their attention to a desultory culture, which, in their view, needed to demonstrate its competence and allegiance to Soviet values. As in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and '40s, German artists and workers, beginning with the first Bitterfeld Weg conference, were asked to visit factories in order to depict and document the growth of the socialist state. Although the ideals of this conference were seriously questioned five years later at a second meeting because they provided artists little opportunity for individual expression, they represented the GDR's official policy to its end.

8 For an excellent summary of these truisms, cf. Morozov, pp. 75ff.

9 John O'Brian, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* vo. 1 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 5–22.

kitsch as an easily understood aesthetic.[9] In this way Greenberg polarizes the world into vanguard and kitsch camps. Veering away from Greenberg's strictures, Rauch's art embraces kitsch without pandering to its inane simplicities. His art is a complex and demanding type of anti-modernism, which undermines the high/low polarities described in "Avant-Garde and Kitch." In Rauch's paintings, then, Bitterfeld Weg kitsch is quoted out of context and placed in compositions notable for distinct breaks in the narrative so that his socialist-realist figures cannot easily be aligned with other personages appearing in these works. In this way he prevents viewers from invoking established allegories pertaining to any single tradition that might provide a relatively easy recourse to established meaning. At the same time, he ratifies one of modernism's long-term enemies – popular culture – as a relevant subject for high art, thereby demonstrating that a kitsch subject matter does not necessarily result in a debased content when it is discerningly employed in concert with the mysterious signs and highly personal symbols that work together to make his work so enigmatic and engaging.

In addition to countering Greenberg's modernism, Rauch's evocation of the mid-twentieth century Bitterfeld Weg style enables him to posit a number of other discontinuities between the past and the present. Responsive not only to East Germany's recent past but also Germany's romantic heritage and his own special interests, Rauch's art appears to set up narratives between these different realms even though it actually establishes disconcerting breaks between them. In many of his paintings far-reaching and compelling juxtapositions between figures from different times seem to imply connections, which are then left open ended, forcing viewers to conjecture that the lack of sync between these possible worlds rather than their resolution may be the artist's preferred subject. Many of his works incorporate both casual and oblique references to primal material – the sine qua non of creation, also known as the Philosopher's Stone – that assumes the shape of indeterminate organic forms like enlarged drips of tar, making them particularly haunting images of creative potentiality. Although this material might serve as a metaphoric glue to join together the collaged and disparate elements from different times comprising this work by suggesting the creative potential of the many past Germanys coming together to create a viable new one, it seems instead to commemorate unrealized potentiality – a favorite Rauchian theme – and perhaps an oblique comment on Germany's present situation.

In his art, then, Rauch takes a number of different German traditions from art and popular culture that range from exulted natural landscapes to the prosaic byways of the present. Instead of celebrating nature, as Caspar David Friedrich might have done, the land in Rauch's art has been industrialized and transformed so that networks of cables replace roots, forests come in conflict with buildings, and the changing seasons punctuate strange harvests of cultural artifacts and post-industrial detritus. The paintings are both traditional and innovative in their radical juxtapositions, incisive wit, and far-reaching overview of life as a disparate, yet informed welter of conflicting situations, vying customs, and uneven spaces that evidence the historical and psychological disjunctions that contradictorily separate and integrate East and West Germanys, its past traditions, and, by implication, the rest of the contemporary world. As such, they employ the post-Cold War German landscape and its

changing seasons as a stage for the ongoing play between belief and skepticism that are signal characteristics of the late twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium.

Besides being extremely susceptible to the changes of seasons that are often reflected in his work, Rauch continues to be intrigued with the classic comic books that he and his son Leonard collect. He points out that his choice of hues often can be related to these comics, which he enjoys studying for their schematic elements and color range rather than for their narratives. The collection focuses on the work of three renowned illustrators: Edgar P. Jacobs, known for his characters Blake & Mortimer as well as TanTan; Hannes Hegen whose *Mosaik* magazines were familiar to East German boys when Rauch was growing up; and the more recent Daniel Clowes whose *Eightball* series, influenced by Japanese woodcuts, focuses on small-town America. In defending the popular culture origins of his color, Rauch will compare specific comics to paintings,[10] and the affinities are certainly compelling, going beyond these comparisons, one might note similarities between the distinct hues appearing in his work and those found in the Cold War-era, post-industrial landscape of Leipzig and its environs.

10 Rauch, interview with author, June 6, 2002.

In addition to contributing to the particular range of colors in his art, Rauch's sustained study of the visual syntax of these comics provides clues to the purposive disparateness of his work beginning in the late '90s since comics' individual frames, which function like films when viewed in sequence, seem strangely incongruent and even mystifying when considered separately as Rauch is accustomed to do. Because he usually works on several paintings at the same time, his images might be viewed as isolated components of a distant comic strip, a connection, which would suggest either the existence of an overarching narrative or a need for one, even though in this art – as in life – no definitive solution exists.

Rauch's paintings allude to a range of traditions and concepts without resolving them into an easily assembled whole. In his works Rauch multiplies allusions to the past and present so that viewers are encouraged to contemplate both the art and its major subject, Germany's many cultural traditions, as a host of competing legacies that include restaging medieval hierarchies of saintly and secular figures in terms of a charged postmodern world, rethinking romantic evocations of nature in terms of pointedly post-industrial landscapes, and reworking Bitterfeld Weg socialist-realist idealism with a view to an increasingly capitalist universe. In Rauch's art viewers are presented with the possibility of conceptualizing Germany as a plurality of times and events rather than a single dominate thread, a multiplicity of traditions rather than a solitary lineage, and a realm of possibilities rather than a predetermined path. In this art aspects of Germany's past and present as well as its Cold War-era east/west divisions are selectively taken into account so that this culture – like the world at large – can be viewed as a manifold of potentialities and intensities. Neither surreal nor hyper-real, this art is remarkable for its interplays of types and conventions as well as its ricocheting references that circulate both inside and outside it to discern the confounding and questionable role that the many layers of the past can potentially play in the creation of the present and future.

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