1925b

Curator Gustav F. Hartlaub organizes the first exhibition of Neue Sachlichkeit painting at the Kunsthalle, Mannheim: a variation of the international tendencies of the *rappel à l'ordre*, this new "magic realism" signals the end of Expressionism and Dada practices in Germany.

The short life of the Weimar Republic (1919–33) qualifies more than any other period in the twentieth century for Antonio Gramsci's diagnosis that "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appears." The first five years of the newly founded republic were marked by perpetual economic and political turmoil, by social disorganization and disillusion. Not until 1924 did a relative stabilization of the economy give an elementary (and illusionary) sense of solidity to the democratic culture of the Republic, only for it to be shattered again in 1929 with the world economic crisis, and to be decisively destroyed in 1933 with Germany's embrace of fascism and the rise of Hitler. Even during these "sober" years from 1924 to 1929, comprising the crucial period of Neue Sachlichkeit, most members of the cultural intelligentsia, if not the population at large, perceived themselves as being part of what literary historian Helmut Lethen has called an experimental existence "between two wars."

The term "Neue Sachlichkeit," somewhat inadequately translated as "New Objectivity" or "New Sobriety," was coined by Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, the director of the Kunsthalle in Mannheim, when he announced a forthcoming exhibition of new figurative work by a group of German painters. Initially planned for 1923, the show eventually took place between June 14 and September 13, 1925, and included works by Max Beckmann (1884–1950), Otto Dix (1891–1969), George Grosz, Alexander Kanoldt (1881–1939), Carlo Mense (1886–1965), Kay H. Nebel (1888–1953), Georg Scholz (1890–1945), and Georg Schrimpf (1889–1938). In his announcement of the project, Hartlaub defined Neue Sachlichkeit somewhat lapidarily as work governed by the "loyalty to a positively tangible reality." He was not alone in discerning this new tendency toward realism in German painting. In the same year as "Neue Sachlichkeit" opened, critic and art historian Franz Roh published *Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* (Post-Expressionism: Magic Realism), thereby providing his own label—magic realism—to describe the emerging style. (The success of the Mannheim exhibition meant that Hartlaub's term prevailed.)

From its very inception, Hartlaub, Roh, and other critics such as Paul Westheim recognized that Neue Sachlichkeit was deeply divided: the rift was identified, as Hartlaub wrote, by the opposition between "the right wing of the neoclassicists like Picasso and the left wing of *veristic* painters like Beckmann, Grosz, Dix," that is, by the opposition between *Ingrismus* (named for the early nineteenth-century French painter Ingres) and *Verismus* (realism). These critics also recognized the extent to which the German artists' return to figuration (and its ostentatious departure from Expressionism and Dada) was due, at least in part, to their recent encounters with French and Italian antimodernist precedents. As early as 1919 Westheim had stated in his *Das Kunstblatt*: "Characteristic of Carlo Carrà's work … as indeed of a whole group of young artists, is an idiosyncratic, uncompromising realism (*verismo*), seeking a meticulous hard line which suppresses every trace of the individual artist's manner. In Germany, as is known, Grosz and Davringhausen are following a similar path." And in 1921 Westheim commented on the reverberations of Picasso's "Ingresque" style in Germany, addressing the topic again in September 1922 with a special issue of *Das Kunstblatt* that featured a questionnaire on the "New Realism."

From *manichino* to *machino*

The time and place of the Germans' encounter with *pittura metafisica* are firmly established, being, as is so often the case in the twentieth century, primarily in the pages of a journal. In this instance, it was the Italian publication *Valori plastici*, edited since 1918 by the critic and collector Mario Broglio. The third issue of the journal in 1919 was devoted in its entirety to the work of Giorgio de Chirico, Carlo Carrà, and Giorgio Morandi. It was admired at once by Max Ernst, George Grosz, Georg Schrimpf, and Heinrich Maria Davringhausen (1894–1970) in the Munich gallery and bookshop of Hans Goltz, *Valori plastici*'s German distributor. This encounter led not only to Max Ernst's instant publication of a *metafisica* portfolio of lithographs entitled *Fiat Modes, Pereat Ars* (1919), but also to the first exhibitions of Davringhausen in 1919 and Grosz in 1920 at Goltz's gallery.

The iconography of the metaphysical *manichino* (mannequin) would be dramatically recoded in the hands of the German Neue Sachlichkeit artists to become a *machino*. What had appeared in de Chirico as an allegory of painting's lost capacity to engender

▲ 1919 ● 1908, 1916a, 1920 ■ 1909, 1924, 1944b

figuration, reappeared now in Grosz's work as the "Republican Automaton," that peculiar hybrid between a tailor's dummy and the office robot in which the new identity of the *"civil servant,"* the white-collar authoritarian personality, appeared to be best captured [1]. Walter Benjamin's critique of *neusachlich* literature in the essay "Left Wing Melancholia" describes such types thus:

> *These puppets heavy with sadness that will walk over corpses if necessary. With their rigid body armor, their slowly advancing movements, and the blindness of their actions, they embody the human fusion of insect and tank.*

But even in its Neue Sachlichkeit adaptation, the *manichino/machino* morphology remains fluid, shifting easily from victor to victim. What is an authoritarian automaton in one image, becomes the industrially mechanized or armored body in the next. Or, after 1918, with six million soldiers returning from the war, in image after image we encounter the machinic body as the prosthetic body, the war cripple (as for example in the work of the Cologne Progressives group, like Heinrich Hoerle's *Cripple Portfolio* of 1920 or in Dix's *The War Cripples* [1920]).

The exclusion of photographers from Hartlaub's exhibition and from Roh's study (even though, four years later, Roh would publish the famous anthology of modernist photography *Foto-Auge*) indicates that the discoverers of a "new objectivity" wanted to see its truth-value established first of all with the traditional means of painting. Thus Hartlaub concluded his introduction to the exhibition by stating that:

> *What we are showing is that art is still there … that it is alive, despite a cultural situation that seems hostile to the essence of art as other epochs have rarely been. Thus artists disillusioned, sobered, often resigned to the point of cynicism having nearly given up on themselves after a moment of unbounded, nearly apocalyptic hope—that artists in the midst of the catastrophe, have begun to ponder what is most immediate, certain, and durable:* truth and craft.

That desperate desire for the objectivity of transhistorical truth could also be found in statements by other critics. Writing in *Der Cicerone* in 1923, Willi Wolfradt—once again opposing *Ingrismus* and *Verismus*—argued that both shared "the concept of clarity, the former in a more formal sense, and the latter in a more objective sense. In *Ingrismus* the definition of clarity is derived from antiquity, in *Verismus* it is derived from the machine. And while both might be incompatible worlds, in both worlds it is *objective truth that dominates.*" This opposition between the truth of craft and antiquity, on the one hand, and the truth of the machine on the other, originated, however, in a set of much more fundamental conflicts. First of all in the social schism between an enthusiastic embrace of industrial modernization along the lines of the much vaunted "Americanism" and "Fordism" (the source of endless fashions and cults in Weimar Germany) and a violent and pessimistic reaction against these processes of industrial mechanization and rationalization. This reaction was primarily to be found among the increasingly unemployed and proletarianized middle class, leading to the rise of antimodernist and eventually ethnic and racist ideologies of "returns" to phantasms of pure origins and uncontaminated authenticity. Invoking German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies's (1855–1936) famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), the new ideologues of the conservative right promised a return to preindustrial belief systems, mythical forms of social organization, and artisanal production, thereby laying the foundations for the fascism of 1933.

1 • George Grosz, *Pillars of Society*, 1926
Oil on canvas, 200 x 108 (78¾ x 42½)

This conflict was exacerbated by the opposition between bourgeois concepts of high art and the proletarian needs for a progressive emancipatory mass culture. Not only was the sphere of a supposedly autonomous high culture increasingly precarious (and therefore all the more fetishized), but all the earlier forms of social relations and popular culture had been replaced by a protototalitarian mass culture and media apparatus. Unlike the ▲ Soviet avant-garde, however, which was simultaneously undergoing a very similar transformation from a radical experimental modernist aesthetic to a systematic exploration of what a new postrevolutionary avant-garde culture in a developing proletarian public sphere might mean, the artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit did not face a similarly homogeneous revolutionary society. First of all, the Weimar Republic, as novelist Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) famously stated, came without an instruction manual, indicating that the new democratic culture of the "belated nation" had to be acquired through trial and error. Second, unlike the Soviet Union, the Weimar Republic after 1919—despite its revolutionary aspirations—had been structured as a class society, albeit one in which previously oppressed social strata suddenly found themselves with more economic and political power than they might have ever imagined under the previous regime of Kaiser Wilhelm. Thus Weimar, politically organized around the principles of social democracy, became the democracy not only of a newly empowered oligarchic bourgeoisie, but also of an economically powerless but rabid *petite bourgeoisie* and a proletariat that was perpetually oscillating between revolutionary radicalization and fascist *embourgeoisement*. Ernst Bloch, in his 1935 book *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Heritage of our Times), was the first to argue that Neue Sachlichkeit, rather than revealing a new face of the collective, actually camouflaged an evolved capitalism that had adopted socialist principles, such as a planned economy, collective housing, and an overall sense of equality, but without reneging the primacy of an economy of profit. These universally governing conditions of reification—according to Bloch—generated Neue Sachlichkeit's seduction as much as the vacuity of its representations.

From fragments to figures

The peculiar fact that Neue Sachlichkeit had both former Expressionists (Beckmann and Dix) and former Dadaists (Grosz and Schad) among its key members deserves attention. After all,
• Expressionism had been the moment in which the humanist and pacifist subject staged itself in a histrionics of finality, whereas the
■ Dada artists accelerated and celebrated the demise of bourgeois subjectivity in a grotesque travesty of cultural practices and pretenses. Thus, one might well ask what the motivations of these artists might have been to abandon either the Expressionist aspirations or the Dadaist derisions in favor of a peculiar hybrid of putative objectivity. These extreme ambiguities of transition are particularly evident in a number of key works around 1919–20, such as Beckmann's *The Night* [2], Dix's crucial paintings from the same year such as *The War Cripples*, or Grosz's slightly late *Pillars of Society* from 1926 [1].

The Night is not only a classic example of Expressionism turning *neusachlich*, but even more so of the liberal inability (or refusal) to conduct an analysis of the political situation. Instead, it involves and essentializes—in an act of humanist deflection—the universal catastrophe of the "human condition." While Beckmann's work had clearly acknowledged the tragic experiences of the failed German revolution of 1919, with its brutal murders of Marxist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht among many others, this depiction of a cryptic scene of sado-masochistic mayhem positions the revolutionary worker (possibly a clandestine portrait of Lenin) on the same level of violent perpetration as the fascist *petit bourgeois*. Typically, Beckmann's humanist lament of universal bestiality fails to reflect on the painting's own heavily repressed but fully exposed indulgence in the sadistic scenes it pretends to reveal.

These ambiguities are keyed differently in Dix's most important paintings from the same moment, such as *The War Cripples*, *The Card Players*, and *Prager Strasse* (1920), or in Grosz's *Pillars of Society*. Here the subject is either depicted as the cripple, the physically annihilated victim of the imperialist war, or as the menacing impostor who inflicts the very conditions of physiological laceration and psychic trauma. Both the victor and the victim are mediated through similar iconographic, morphological, or formal devices of deformation, fragmentation, and literal bodily cuts. We witness therefore a dual dismissal in Neue Sachlichkeit's shift toward the fully closed contours and the fully modeled bodies. The first abandons Expressionist angularity, and its radiating ruptures in favor of the figure's newly enforced wholeness. The second literalizes the semiology of cuts and fragmentation from Dada photomontage and collage and redeploys these devices as surgical instruments: either, as in Dix, to lay bare the traumatized prosthetic body and the subject's threadbare existence; or, as in Grosz, to literally slice the lid from the heads of the representatives of the ruling powers of the state, the Church, and the military, revealing their skull's innermost recesses as stuffed with newspapers or grotesque steaming piles of feces. These travesties of the semiological radicality of Cubism articulate the simultaneous bankruptcy of the bourgeois subject as figuration, as much as they recognize that the proletarian subject can not yet be presented as the unified agent of a new history.

The Neue Sachlichkeit artists' inability to assume a position of class identity and agency became the third fundamental reason for the movement's internal rifts. It is not surprising then that they occupied the full spectrum of these contradictions. These ranged from the German adaptations of the Italian antimodernist *pittura* ▲ *metafisica* or the French *rappel à l'ordre* (such as Schrimpf, Mense, Kanoldt) to the radical extensions of Grosz's and John Heartfield's Dada aesthetic toward a new culture of the proletarian public sphere. Or they ranged from the cynical and melancholic attempts by the ex-Dadaist Christian Schad to pose as an Old Master of

▲ 1921 • 1908 ■ 1916a, 1920 ▲ 1909, 1919

2 • Max Beckmann, ***The Night***, **1918–19**
Oil on canvas, 133 x 154 (52⅜ x 60⅝)

portrait painting (even if his portraits for the most part depicted bohemians and aristocrats situated at the margins of the newly established social hierarchy), to the printed typologies of the proletariat produced by Franz Wilhelm Seiwert (1894–1933) and Gerd Arntz (born 1900) in the context of the Cologne Progressives group (Seiwert, writing in the group's journal *A-Z* suggested in 1928 that New Objectivity was neither new nor objective, but rather, the opposite of both). In 1928 Arntz would codesign the pictograms for Isotype, the collectively accessible sign language analyzing the current conditions of social, political, and economic relations in the publications of the radical Viennese sociologist Otto Neurath.

It appears then that these conflicts between high art and mass culture, those of class identity and social relations, were literally acted out in the opposition between a renewed emphasis on the artisanal foundations of artistic production on the one hand and a commitment to the newly emerging apparatus of technical (that is, photographic) reproduction and mass cultural distribution on the other. Not surprisingly, the site where this battle was fought most actively was the portrait, seemingly one of the most venerable pictorial genres (even though it had been decisively deconstructed at the high moment of Analytical Cubism).

▲ 1911

The "objective" portrait, the "human" subject

We find an enormously complex (and numerous) typology of portrait conceptions at the center of Neue Sachlichkeit. Starting with the post-Expressionist portraits of Beckmann, who remained committed throughout his entire oeuvre to the superannuated probing of the self, the artist seems to have been unable to relinquish not only the idea of a humanistically defined, self-motivated

subjectivity, but also the conviction that his was a function to provide privileged forms of knowledge and insight. Schad's *Self-Portrait with Model* [3] brings these tropes of portraiture to a level of ostentatious self-consciousness where they become almost grotesque. In a cold confrontation, he depicts himself in the dress and pose of a Renaissance master (such as the transparent shirt in Bartolomeo Veneto's *Allegorical Portrait* [1507]). But the photographic realism in the depiction of his urbane physiognomy, and the mannered play on the fabric's transparency and the skin's opacity, manifestly contradict all claims to any historical continuity that either the genre and iconography of the self-portrait or the recitation of the most skillful traditions of painting could establish. His dubious female companion (as so often in Schad, she oscillates between prostitute and aristocratic bohemian, transvestite and *femme fatale*) is adorned in this instance with a sadistic cut to her face, undoubtedly inflicted by male property claims, clearly demarcating modernity.

At the other extreme of the spectrum of Neue Sachlichkeit portraiture one would find Dix's almost obsessive derision of the genre. Galvanizing his Expressionist legacy with the acid of caricature, Dix stripped his sitters of all pretenses and staged their subjecthood as either victim or prop of social construction. In his portrait of the journalist Sylvia von Harden [4], the attributes of the New Woman (bobbed hair, cigarette, highly fashionable flapper dress, and drink) are both celebrated and derided simultaneously, most manifestly in the gesticulation of the hypertrophic

4 • Otto Dix, *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden*, 1926
Mixed media on wood, 120 x 88 (47¼ x 34⅝)

hands. This attitude of extreme ambiguity also governs one of the relatively rare portraits painted by George Grosz at the height of his Neue Sachlichkeit phase, the portrait of the writer and critic Max Hermann Neisse [5]. In distinction to Dix's caricaturesque hyperbole, Grosz by that time seems to have cooled his passion for caricature as modernism's countermodel, to which his friend, the historian of the medium Eduard Fuchs, had introduced him earlier in the decade. This intensified ambiguity, however, in which photography and caricature seem to recount their joint historical origins, could not be more appropriate to a quintessential *neusachlich* sitter like the critic Max Hermann Neisse, whose writings would soon thereafter shift from supporting Communist Party poets like Johannes R. Becher to championing the conservative Expressionist, and eventually fascist, Gottfried Benn.

Grosz, who had referred to himself as having "the character of an icepack" had been programmatic in his changing approach to the subject and its representation. Thus he wrote in an essay entitled "On some of my recent paintings" in *Das Kunstblatt* of 1921:

I am trying once again to draw a totally realistic picture of the world.... If one makes an effort to develop a totally lucid and limpid style, one comes inevitably close to Carrà. Nevertheless,

3 • Christian Schad, *Self-Portrait with Model*, 1927
Oil on canvas, 76 x 61.5 (29⅞ x 24⅛)

1920–1929

5 · George Grosz, *The Poet, Max Hermann Neisse*, 1927
Oil on canvas, 59.4 x 74 (23⅜ x 29⅛)

everything separates me from him, who wants to be appreciated in metaphysical terms and whose problematic is totally bourgeois.... Man in my paintings is no longer represented with a deep exploration of his confused psyche, but as a collectivist concept, almost mechanical. Individual destiny has no longer any importance whatsoever.

It has become evident, even if only fairly recently, that in the battle between photography and painting, between the machine and antiquity, the latter lost out. It is most certainly true on the territory of the portrait, where the true genius of Neue Sachlichkeit is August Sander, whose systematic archive of the multiplicity of possible social subject positions was recorded on the verge of the fascism that would annihilate them all. Here the photographic archive is infinitely more relevant to the history of the portrait than any of the above-mentioned painterly attempts to come to terms with the crisis of subjectivity in the twenties. Helmut Lethen has called photography during that period "an instrument of definition," that has generated the "photographic physiognomies of Modernity in which the signatures of the individual have become assimilated to the conditions of technical reproduction."

▲ 1908, 1909, 1925a

FURTHER READING

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