

Frank Zöllner

De-authentication and Authentication in and by the Contemporary Art Market The Case of Neo Rauch

The ongoing success story of the painter Neo Rauch, born in Leipzig in 1960, has unfolded across the most gripping chapters of the history of German art in the late twentieth century. Indeed, Rauch's life and work have been divided between two art systems that could hardly be more different. When Rauch completed his training in the painting class at Leipzig's Academy of Visual Arts, the Hochschule für Graphik und Buchkunst (HGB), from 1981 to 1990, both Leipzig and the HGB were still part of the German Democratic Republic. The Hochschule was renowned for the solid training it provided and as the focal point of the Leipzig School, whose success was not confined to East Germany. The leading GDR painters of these years were Willi Sitte, Werner Tübke, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Hartwig Ebersbach, Bernhard Heisig and Arno Rink. Neo Rauch studied directly under Heisig and Rink at the HGB, and by the end of the eighties was considered a promising young talent in East German painting, as April Eisman was recently able to show.¹

This first, East German phase of Neo Rauch's career came to an end, of course, in 1990, with the reunification of Germany. In the period that followed, Rauch had to reposition himself within a different art system. This repositioning involved some interesting manoeuvring with regard to the authentication of his oeuvre. In this paper I would like to examine these manoeuvres more closely, reconstruct Rauch's early oeuvre and offer a provisional assessment of the influence of the art market on the authentication of contemporary art.

Neo Rauch is known above all for his monumental paintings of the past decade, but his surviving oeuvre includes works dating back to 1984. These are entirely omitted from the catalogue of Neo Rauch works compiled by the Galerie Eigen + Art, however, and rights to reproduce any such early works are not granted.² Instead, the start of Rauch's oeuvre has been magically reset to the year 1993.³ Autograph works produced before this date have consequently suffered a de-authentication, in the sense that their authenticity is not officially certified. This redrawing of the boundaries of Rauch's oeuvre emerges explicitly in 2000 in the essay »Flurbereinigung« – literally »reparcelling« – by Harald Kunde.⁴ This reparcelling was then definitively validated by the »Randgebiet« exhibition of Rauch's works that ran from December 2000 to August 2001, first in Leipzig and then in Munich and Zurich,⁵ and by another show at the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht in 2002.⁶ In the most recent monographs and exhibition catalogues, meanwhile, even the bibliographical information relating to Neo Rauch's early phase is missing. This restrictive definition of what constitutes Rauch's authentic oeuvre is noteworthy above all because those who have contributed to it include publicly funded museums⁷ that are strictly speaking indebted to a different, namely independent ethic of behaviour.

What is thus considered to be Rauch's »authentic« oeuvre falls, roughly speaking, into three phases, the first commencing, as we have seen, in 1993. Rauch's paintings of this period are characterized by tonal colour fields that are strewn, in seemingly random fashion, with shapes, ciphers, figures and numbers, along with letters that occasionally combine to give the picture its title. Typical of this first phase are paintings such as »Domos« and »Lingua« of 1993, and the tondi »Plazenta« (»Placent«) and »Saum« (»Seam«), which are developed into the figural sphere. Around 1995

Rauch moved into a second phase that saw him generally adopting a brighter tonality and palette and rendering pictorial space and human figures in greater clarity. Examples of this evolution include the paintings »Großküche« (»Canteen Kitchen«) and »Die Kanone« (»The Cannon«).⁸

Rauch's painting entered a third phase shortly after the millennium and is today characterized by monumental formats, by settings and landscapes with a surreal air populated by strange figures who seem to be doing strange things. Rauch's titles frequently suggest to us, as viewers, that we are looking at narratives that can be interpreted. A case in point is »Der Rückzug« (»The Retreat«, fig. 1), an oil-on-canvas painting of 2006.⁹ The multi-figural scene is playing out against the backdrop of a burning manor-house complex on the left and a pavilion on the right. A firing squad can be made out in the left-hand background, and in the foreground a number of people, an animal and a handcart full of petrol drums. The pavilion, which has the air of a dilapidated temple of art, houses a man and a woman who appear to be studying two large-format pictures by Neo Rauch himself, namely his 1993 tondi »Plazenta« and »Saum.« But the real subject of this painting is violence.

In citing »Plazenta« and »Saum,« »Der Rückzug« makes a two-fold reference – probably not without a tinge of irony – to what is deemed the artist's authentic early oeuvre. The viewers inside and outside the picture are looking at the new beginning of Rauch's painting in 1993. Everything Neo Rauch painted prior to this date has to be tracked down with the aid of older exhibition catalogues, the online databases of the international art trade, and the results – kindly made available to me by Paul Kaiser – of the ongoing research project »Bilderatlas: Kunst in der DDR,« which compiles an »atlas of images« of art produced in the German Democratic Republic. With the aid of these tools, researching Neo Rauch's early oeuvre is both possible and highly entertaining, and enables us to see that the early paintings that Rauch produced from 1984 – while still a student at the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig (HGB) – orient themselves towards neo-expressionist protagonists of East German painting such as Bernhard Heisig, his colleague Arno Rink, the Neue Wilden of the eighties, Francis Bacon and other exponents of the »New Spirit in Painting.« Neo Rauch's stylistic references to these artists are manifold, as is only to be expected in an early oeuvre.¹⁰

Amongst these works inspired by neo-expressionism, with their at times somewhat coarse handling of paint, are the tall-format »Die Kreuzung« (»The Intersection«)¹¹ of 1984 as well as the floral still life »Rotblatt« (»Red-leaf«)¹² and »Stadtlandschaft« (»Urban Landscape«) of 1985. By 1987, Rauch's search for a personal style was finding expression in works such as »Die Band« (»The Band«).¹³ Soon afterwards, a tendency towards an alienation of the figural elements of his compositions began to make itself felt, accompanied by loosened ties to objective representation. Rauch's painting as a whole moved slowly in the direction of abstraction and »art informel.« One example of this period of experimentation can be seen in the 1988 oil on masonite »Stilleben« (»Still Life«),¹⁴ which in compositional terms takes up means of classical modernism.

On the evidence of the works that can be traced to these early years, 1990 saw the beginning of a significant shift in Rauch's oeuvre. Although he continued to paint expressive, colourfully



Fig. 1
Der Rückzug.
 Basel-Riehen, Fondation Beyeler

potent canvases such as »Keimlinge« (»Seedlings«) and »Der Gärtner« (»The Gardener«),¹⁵ an unmistakable change in style makes itself felt in works such as »Andere Länder, andere Sitten« (»Other Countries, Other Customs«)¹⁶ and »Kopf an Kopf« (»Head to Head«).¹⁷ Many of these were now executed on paper and already exhibited properties that would become typical of later works, namely an opaque ground and the combination of real-world objects and figures in alien situations with individual letters strewn seemingly by chance across the plane. Tending in the same direction are works from 1991, which are barely distinguishable from those Rauch would produce as from 1993. The best example I know is »Die Erde ist eine kurze Waltz« (»The Earth is a Short Waltz«), a painting in oil on paper of 1991.¹⁸ More or less opaque grounds, muted tones and sign-like ciphers carrying representational associations are characteristic of this and other works produced shortly afterwards. Recognizable human figures also make an increasing appearance between now and 1993.

The strict ruling that only the works he produced as from 1993 are authentic is probably linked with Rauch's switch from the Galerie Schwind in Frankfurt to the Galerie Eigen + Art in Leipzig, marked by an exhibition of his work hosted by the Leipzig gallery that same year. It should also be seen in the light of the heated debates in the nineties over whether East German art – the art practised by Rauch's professors at the HGB, in other words – was actually art at all. It is a fact that art produced in the GDR was almost wholly discredited throughout the entire decade following German Reunification: in June 1990 by Georg Baselitz, for example, who curtly dismissed the East German artists as »assholes« and »propagandists«;¹⁹ in 1993 by the debate as to whether the works of East German artists should be integrated into the Berlin museums; in 1998 by the Art Archive Beeskov, whose mass presentation of products of East German art, although intended as a documentation, was greeted with much anger; and again in 1998 by the controversy over whether Bernhard Heisig, Neo Rauch's former teacher, should be involved in the artistic decoration of the German Bundestag – and so on.²⁰

This conflict undoubtedly reached its climax in 1999 in the Weimar exhibition entitled the »Rise and Fall of Modernism,« which

in the eyes of certain recipients sought to defame East German art, together with the painting of National Socialism, as having sounded the death-knell of Modern Art.²¹ Neo Rauch became directly involved in this bitter controversy, as one of his early works – »Die Kreuzung« of 1984 – was part of the show. He demanded its return and described the Weimar exhibition as a »mass execution« of East German painting.²²

However we may judge the Weimar exhibition and the disputes of the nineties today, the ferocity of the arguments, the often defamatory accusations made at the time, and the irreconcilable positions held by the different fronts allow us to draw three immediate conclusions: First, the debate on art here became a proxy war, one that broke out in place of the political conflicts still unresolved in post-Reunification Germany; Second, the debate fed the suspicion that this was a clash between two contradictory concepts of art. If one was art, the other could not be art – and vice versa; and third, in view of these debates, an artist who wanted to achieve international success would do well to dissociate himself from the art of the former East Germany.

In the case of Neo Rauch, this act of dissociation from those origins has been largely successful. Thus the notion that Neo Rauch has no »real early oeuvre« has become widely rooted in the public perception.²³ Just how problematic and fragile this highhanded exclusion of his early work can be, however, was demonstrated in exemplary fashion by the Rauch retrospective curated by Werner Spies in May 2011 in the Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden. Burda himself owns four works by Neo Rauch, including two large works on paper signed and dated 1992 by the artist, »Flut I« (»Flood I«) and »Flut II« (»Flood II«). According to the official definition, these two works on paper ought not to be counted within Rauch's authentic oeuvre since they predate the magic year of 1993. So as not to offend the prominent collector, however, the organizers resorted to the following trick: in April, just one month before the opening of the show, the galley proofs for the exhibition catalogue still carried the correct date of 1992; in the version that went to print, however, the dating of the two works was given as 1992–1993, even though this is in plain conflict with the signatures they carry.²⁴

The strategies of authentication here collide with the interests of collectors and hence also with the interests of the art market. However, the market also provides the means for a less biased view in the form of online databases that chart what is happening in the world's salerooms. A great many works from Rauch's early career have been sold at auction over the past decade. Of the 111 lots that are listed for Rauch's paintings on the ARTNET platform, for example, 50 date from the period before 1993 and only ten from 2000 onwards.²⁵ Such figures show that works from Rauch's early years still make up a large proportion of his sales at auction. The early works were excluded from Rauch's official oeuvre for the sake of the market, yet – in a strange dialectic – the market undermines the very strategies by which it was to be outwitted.

However, the market reacts with a price differentiation. Rauch's works from 1995 onwards sell for up to five times as much as those produced prior to 1993, while his latest paintings carry a price tag up to ten times higher. This trend is also confirmed by the results

posted by ArtBasel of 2012, where two recent monumental paintings sold for 720,000 euros each and a third for 850,000 US dollars.²⁶ Rauch's early works are bought and sold almost exclusively by collectors within Germany, moreover, whereas his current works attract an international clientele.

If we are to judge by the prices achieved for paintings of this kind, it is the recent paintings that achieve the highest degree of authenticity while other phases of Neo Rauch's oeuvre are less authentic according to their price bracket. In other words, in the final analysis it is the market that determines the authenticity of art. The role that scholarship has to play in this process of authentication, and the extent to which scholarship is itself authentic and credible, are questions that must remain open. Put more precisely, scholarship and scholars are only able to be authentic and hence credible to the extent to which they act independently of the market's protagonists – but this applies not only to contemporary art, with its patent involvement of different interests, but equally to the art of the past.

Notes

- 1 April Eisman: Painting the East German Experience. Neo Rauch in the Late 1990s. In: Oxford Art Journal, 35, 2012, pp. 233–249. – For the translation of this text I would like to thank Karen Williams, for helpful suggestions April Eisman and Paul Kaiser, for his invitation to the CIHA2012 congress Johannes Nathan.
- 2 Eisman 2012 (note 1), p. 243.
- 3 Neo Rauch. Ed. by Hans Werner Holtzwarth. With texts by Wolfgang Büscher/Harald Kunde/Gary Tinterow. Cologne 2010, pp. 68–70 and 448. See also the official homepage: http://www.eigen-art.com/index.php?article_id=145&clang=0.
- 4 Neo Rauch. Exhb.cat. Sammlung Deutsche Bank Frankfurt. Ed. by Deutsche Bank. Frankfurt a.M. 2000, pp. 8–12.
- 5 Neo Rauch. Randgebiet. Exhb.cat. Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig/Haus der Kunst München/Kunsthalle Zürich. Ed. by Klaus Werner. Leipzig 2000.
- 6 Neo Rauch. Exhb.cat. Bonnefontenmuseum Maastricht. Ed. by Bonnefontenmuseum Maastricht. Ostfildern-Ruit 2002.
- 7 Neo Rauch – Begleiter. Exhb.cat. Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig/Pinakothek der Moderne München 2010. Ed. by Hans-Werner Schmidt/Bernhart Schwenk. Ostfildern-Ruit 2010.
- 8 See the illustrations in: Neo Rauch 2000 (note 5), pp. 42–47.
- 9 Neo Rauch 2010 (note 7), p. 16.
- 10 Neo Rauch 2000 (note 4), p. 8. – Neo Rauch 2010 (note 3), pp. 68–69. – Eisman 2012 (note 1), p. 236–237. – Some early publications with pre-1993 paintings by Neo Rauch are: X. Kunstaussstellung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik Dresden 1987/88. Ed. by Ministerium für Kultur der DDR/Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR. Dresden 1987, p. 78. – Leipzig, Warschau, Wien, Berlin. Arbeiten aus 4 Kunsthochschulen. Künstlerwerkstatt im Bahnhof Westend. Ed. by Karl-Hofer-Gesellschaft/Hochschule der Künste Berlin. Berlin 1988, pp. 27–31. – Neo Rauch. Ed. by Galerie am Thomaskirchhof. Leipziger Schule. Malerei/Grafik/Fotografie. Lehrer und Absolventen der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig. Ed. by Städtische Galerie Schloß Oberhausen. Ludwig Institut für Kunst der DDR. Leipzig 1990, p. 147. – Neo Rauch. Bilder. Ed. by Galerie Schwind. Frankfurt a.M. 1991. – Neo Rauch. Ed. by Galerie Alvensleben. Munich 1993. – Neo Rauch. Kunstpreis der Leipziger Volkszeitung. Ed. by Herwig Guratzsch. Leipzig 1997.
- 11 Junge Kunst im Auftrag. Jugendobjekt »Bildkünstlerische Ausgestaltung der Jugendhochschule Wilhelm Pieck«. Ed. by Zentralrat der FDJ. Potsdam 1986, p. 28.
- 12 Lempertz, 04.12.2010, Lot no. 00507, URL: <http://www.arcadja.com/auctions/en/estimates-auctions-records-artworks-images/> [23.09.2012].
- 13 Kunsthalle der Sparkasse Leipzig, URL: <http://www.digitale-sammlung.de/liste.php> [23.10.2012].
- 14 Dorotheum, 25.11.2009, Lot no. 171, URL: http://www.kunstmarkt.com/pages/mag/marktberichte_grossbildansicht.html?berichtid=198556&bildid=198770&bk=013_16 [23.09.2012].
- 15 Private Collection, to be published in Bildatlas – Kunst der DDR (forthcoming). Information Paul Kaiser, Dresden, 20.05.2012.
- 16 Ketterer, 09.06.2012, lot no. 267, URL: <http://www.kettererkunst.de/kunst/kd/details.php?obnr=112001167&anummer=393> [23.09.2012].
- 17 Van Ham, 31.05.2006, Lot no. 515. <http://www.van-ham.com/datenbank-archiv/datenbank/neo-rauch/kopf-an-kopf.html> [23.09.2012].
- 18 Phillips de Pury & Company, 29.02.2008, Lot no. 417, URL: <http://phillipsdeputy.com/auctions/lot-detail/NEO-RAUCH/UK010208/417/10/1/12/detail.aspx> [23.09.2012].
- 19 Art. Das Kunstmagazin, 6, 1990, pp. 54–72.
- 20 Paul Kaiser: For eyes only. Unbefugtes Betreten? Der Weimarer Streit um die DDR-Kunst als Legitimationsfalle und Identitätsproblem. In: Der Weimarer Bilderstreit. Szenen einer Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation. Ed. by Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar. Weimar 2000, pp. 297–303. – Volks Eigene Bilder. Kunstbesitz der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR. Ed. by Dokumentationszentrum Kunst der DDR. Berlin 1999, pp. 9–15. – Eisman 2012 (note 1), p. 243.
- 21 Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne. Ed. by Rolf Bothe/Thomas Föhl. Exhb.cat. Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar. Ostfildern-Ruit 1999. – Weimarer Bilderstreit 2000 (note 20).
- 22 DER SPIEGEL, 21, 1999, 24.05.1999.
- 23 Tim Ackermann: Neo Rauch verdient Geld mit realem Sozialismus. In: DIE WELT, 18.04.2009, review of the dual exhibitions Neo Rauch 2010 (note 7).
- 24 Neo Rauch. Exhb.cat. Museum Frieder Burda Baden-Baden. Ed. by Stiftung Frieder Burda/Werner Spies. Ostfildern-Ruit 2011, pp. 60–61.
- 25 <https://www.artnet.com/price-database/> [28.06.2012].
- 26 Swantje Karich: Anbau ist Umbau ist Beständigkeit. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 16.06.2012, p. 39 (Männer mit Flugzeugen, US\$ 850,000).

Photo credits

Basel-Riehen, Fondation Beyeler: 1.