Points of No Return: *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* at 100*

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Die Neue Sachlichkeit opened at the Kunsthalle Mannheim one hundred years ago, on June 14, 1925. Curated by Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub—the institution's director since 1923—the exhibition featured more than one hundred paintings and works on paper by thirty-two artists, all but two of them based in Germany. A subtitle proposed the show's basic periodization: *German Painting Since Expressionism* (Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus). If the artists on view, variously committed to figure painting, were not Expressionists, neither, for Hartlaub, did they stand "against Expressionism."[1] Rather, they produced work in response to new conditions: "hostile" ones, the curator said, that threatened art's very existence, from recent war and hyperinflation to the dislocation of art's traditional skills, media, and institutions over the preceding decades. Heterogeneous in both style and background, the artists did not cohere as a movement so much as harmonize on the timely refrain "art is still there," as Hartlaub put it. From its outset, then, the term Neue Sachlichkeit, which quickly transcended its initial context, stood for a kind of historical continuity ("since," "still there") in the wake of what seemed, to many Germans, like the end of the world.[2] At the same time, the term promised development, something "new." And, as critics then and since have noted, it also heralded a "return" to artistic conventions understood as pre-modernist. The Neue Sachlichkeit's layered historical

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1. G. F. Hartlaub, "Zum Geleit," in *Ausstellung "Neue Sachlichkeit": Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus* (Mannheim: Städtische Kunsthalle Mannheim, 1925), n.p. The exhibition traveled throughout Germany; its roster changed slightly at each stop. Hartlaub oversaw only the subsequent two displays (in Dresden and Chemnitz).

2. There has never been a consensus on the proper English translation of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Art history usually favors "New Objectivity," but *Sachlichkeit* has also been rendered as other terms, such as "sobriety" and "practicality." Many English-language writers, including myself, simply retain the German. In what follows, when referring to Hartlaub's exhibition, I use italics; when referring to the tendency in general, I use roman letters. On Neue Sachlichkeit's untranslatability, see David Midgley, *Writing Weimar: Critical Realism in German Literature 1918–1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 7; and Andrew Hemingway, "'*Sachlichkeit* Is in the Air?' Neue Sachlichkeit and Precisionism Compared," *Kunst und Politik* 23 (2021), p. 97.

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position did not abet a strictly reactionary project, however. Instead, the term and the art it designates articulated a set of timely inquiries: What did it mean to continue or to return, to be modern or contemporary?[3]

Hartlaub broaches the issue of continuity in his short essay for *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*'s exhibition pamphlet. Whereas many critics had announced Expressionism's demise—owing to its apparent institutionalization, commercialization, or inwardness—Hartlaub insisted that the movement was not dead.[4] In fact, it lived on in the representational pictures that he had, already by 1923, grouped under the name Neue Sachlichkeit. If the new work indicated Expressionism's survival, Hartlaub argues that aspects of the Neue Sachlichkeit were also "present in the old," that is, that it had germinated during the Wilhelmine period, if not earlier.[5] "So much of the past," Ernst Bloch would later write, "has not yet come to an end."[6] Hartlaub's framing makes sense. Some artists in the exhibition, like Max Beckmann and Alexander Kanoldt, belonged to the Expressionist generation and, in Mannheim, exhibited work produced as far back as 1911. Younger artists, from George Grosz to Georg Schrimpf, were in distinct ways formed by Expressionism's distorted figuration and vaguely left-wing politics. Hartlaub's claims for continuity likely stemmed, too, from professional concerns (the Kunsthalle had assembled an impressive Expressionist collection) and, more to the point, from his art-historical studies, conducted formally with Franz Wickoff and Heinrich Wölfflin and informally in correspondence with scholars such as Erwin Panofsky. Endowed with art-historical awareness and a humanist impulse, Hartlaub conceived the Neue Sachlichkeit as a form that could recognize its unstable position in time.

The Mannheim exhibition showcased diverse classes of objects and characters, a mixture appropriate to Hartlaub's sense of timeliness as well as to what critics including Bloch—born across the river in Ludwigshafen—identified as Germany's belated or unfinished modernization.[7] Artists chose subjects such as factories and villages, coquettes and clergy, office workers and artisans, natural and human-made things. They employed a mix of materials (from linseed oil to tubed paint) and references (from medieval panels to Cubism).[8] The erstwhile Dadaist and communist Georg Scholz seemed to acknowledge the work's weak

3. On the question of continuity in art's then-recent historiography, see Edgar Wind, "Introduction," in *A Bibliography on the Survival of the Classics*, vol. 1, eds. Hans Meier, Richard Newald, and Edgar Wind (London: Cassel & Co. and the Warburg Institute, 1934).

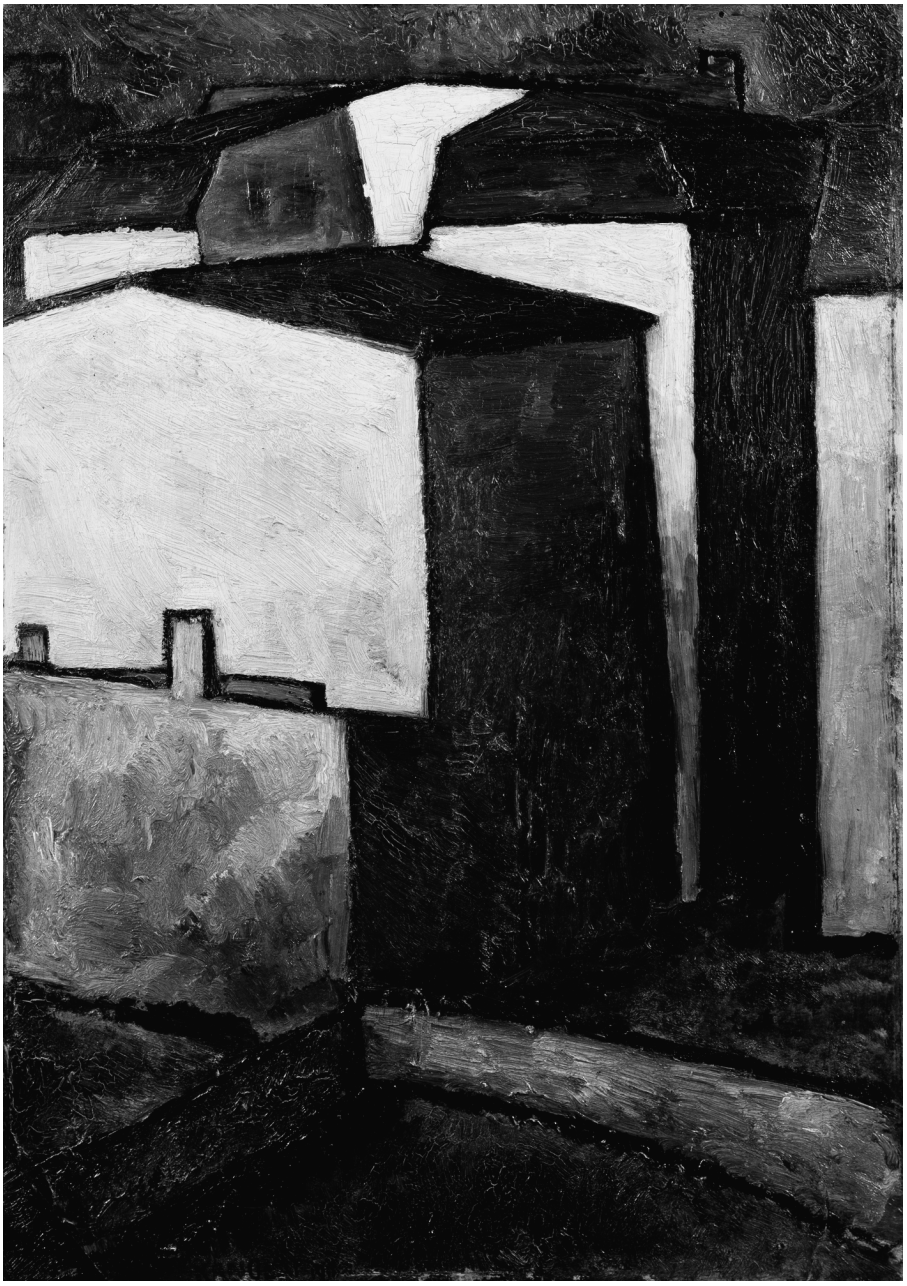
4. See Joan Weinstein, *The End of Expressionism: Art and the November Revolution in Germany, 1918–19* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

5. Hartlaub, "Zum Geleit," n.p.

6. Ernst Bloch, "Non-Contemporaneity and Obligation to Its Dialectic," in *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990 [1935]), p. 144.

7. Ludwigshafen was, to Bloch, "the most genuine hollow space of capitalism." In late-1920s Mannheim, a wealthier city, the "bourgeoisie moved into courtly pleasure, had its good concerts, chatted in the boxes." "Ludwigshafen–Mannheim" (1928), in *Heritage of Our Times*, p. 191.

8. See Bruce F. Miller, "Otto Dix and His Oil-Tempera Technique," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74, no. 8 (October 1987), pp. 332–55.



Alexander Kanoldt. Stone Desert. *1911.*

connection to genre or style, writing in 1924 that painting involves "handcraft" and the "unconscious," individual "experience" and "basic [compositional] law."[9] A good painter synthesizes these characteristics, Scholz added, "contrasting objects invented by the imagination and represented veristically (or subjectively) with those constructed in perspective . . . and objectively represented." Scholz's contributions to *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* included a landscape painting that describes a lightly industrialized provincial town. The viewer activates the scene, taking the position of an absent figure, at bottom left, who has abandoned a hat, bottle, bucket, and rake, all cloaked in shadow. The painting seems to refer to late-nineteenth-century naturalism—a tendency that turned an empathetic eye and a faithful brush on

9. Georg Scholz, "Die Elemente zur Erzielung der Wirkung im Bilde," *Das Kunstblatt* (1924) (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1978), pp. 78–79.

Georg Scholz. Landscape near Berghausen. *1924–25.*

changing landscapes and the people who worked them—or to the gentler, *Heimat*-oriented painting of artists like Hans Thoma, the longtime director of the Karlsruhe academy that Scholz attended.[10] Yet one critic, reviewing *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, perceived Scholz as inhabiting "a completely different *Kunstwollen*" than the naturalists, one defined not by passive identification with the worker but by an active attempt to "rebuild the landscape" in dialectical response to its industrial degradation, on the one hand, and, on the other, its utopian reimagining.[11] Through selective accuracy, the critic wrote, Scholz obtains an "inner truthfulness," mediated by the fallible but unalienated skill that separates human artists from "soulless precision machines."

Hartlaub understood his artists to be working through a resonant contradiction: "striving after the new and unexpressed" while also protecting against aspects of modernization.[12] Staged in a mutually transformative relationship with earlier aesthetic, social, and technical conventions, their work modeled a present moment that was pushing unevenly against the pressures of what felt like an accelerating or, alternately, an imploding history. Germans had weathered years of mechanized warfare, revolution and counterrevolution, and technological rationalization, not to mention the proliferation of abstract painting and art in numerous other media. At the same time, the country was experiencing a persistence of the old regime, or what Bloch called its "non-contemporaneity"—its uneven development in social, material, and, one might add, artistic terms. Hartlaub ends the exhibition essay by acknowledging not just his but also the artists' historical intervention. They "have begun to ponder what is most immediate, certain, and durable": the qualities of "truth and craft" (*Wahrheit, Handwerk*).[13] Introduced as both exigent and timeless, the painting of the Neue Sachlichkeit appears as a modern-art tendency predicated not on rupture but on continuity—though a continuity responsive to external, sometimes asynchronous rupture.

Contemporary Middle-Class Art

Hartlaub had written about postwar figuration as early as 1922, when the journal *Das Kunstblatt* solicited thirty-odd responses—from curators, art historians, critics, literary writers, and painters, most of them German—to what the modernist-

10. See Karlheinz Rossbacher, *Heimatkunstbewegung und Heimatroman: Zu einer Literatursoziologie der Jahrhundertwende* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1975). *Heimat* often betrayed nationalist motivations, but often, too, it signaled romantic anti-capitalism from a socialist perspective.

11. Unattributed, "'Neue Sachlichkeit': Grundsätzliches zur Ausstellung in der Mannheimer Kunsthalle," *Pfälzer Tageblatt*, July 31, 1925, in MARCHIVUM, Stadtarchiv Mannheim, Bestand Kunsthalle, Ordner "Die Neue Sachlichkeit, 1925, Zeitungsausschnitte" (2012, folder 86, page 13). The curator Hans Curjel distinguished Scholz from the naturalists in terms of technique; see "Zur Entwicklung des Malers Georg Scholz," *Das Kunstblatt* (1923) (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1978), pp. 263–64.

12. Hartlaub, "Zum Geleit," n.p.

13. Ibid.

inclined editor Paul Westheim termed the "new naturalism" of recent figurative painting in Europe. Flanked by reproductions of work by André Derain and Georges Braque, Hartlaub's reply named the war and the brief, subsequent revolutions as preconditions for an "inevitable reaction" to tradition in art, comparable to that in politics.[14] But he also situated this "living" art as a reciprocal engagement with painting of the past decades, from Expressionism to the art of the nineteenth century (Romanticism, the Nazarenes). Hartlaub did not use the term Neue Sachlichkeit—not until the following year—but his account rhymes with texts on painting that had employed the base word, *Sachlichkeit*, by Beckmann, the curator Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, and others. *Sachlichkeit* was central, too, to a 1920 book by the curator Ludwig Justi, who attributes the quality to mid-nineteenth-century paintings by Biedermeier and Romantic artists such as Carl Spitzweg and the early Adolph Menzel, as well as the following generation of realists and naturalists, such as Thoma and Wilhelm Leibl. The characteristics that Justi associates with the older conception of *Sachlichkeit* resonate with articulations of the "new" version: the realistic presentation of everyday objects, "factual accuracy," and skilled "craftsmanship" (*Handwerk*).[15]

It is likely that Hartlaub borrowed *Sachlichkeit* from these colleagues and that all of them imported it from fin-de-siècle German design theory. Modernist readers would have found the word throughout *Style-Architecture and Building-Art*, a 1902 treatise by Hermann Muthesius, later a founding member of the Deutscher Werkbund.[16] To Muthesius, *Sachlichkeit* connoted a version of functionalism: an art targeted to people's "own needs—simple, matter-of-fact, and reasonable."[17] Art should incorporate scientific techniques and new materials, he added, providing examples of *sachlich* items such as "railway terminals and exhibition buildings."[18] The people whose "needs" Muthesius considered were not of the ruling class, to whom prior art and architecture had mostly been devoted, but rather the German middle classes that had grown and mutated throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. *Sachlichkeit*, in essence, marked "contemporary middle-class art."[19] As the scholar Frank Trommler argues, the term's class character ultimately suited the Werkbund's liberalism and its early initiatives for aesthetic, social, and national reform. *Sachlichkeit*'s formal simplicity, Trommler writes, helped artists

14. G. F. Hartlaub, response in "Ein neuer Naturalismus? Eine Rundfrage des Kunstblatts," *Das Kunstblatt* 9 (September 1922), p. 390.

15. Ludwig Justi, *Deutsche Malkunst im neunzehnten Jahrhundert: Ein Führer durch die Nationalgalerie* (Berlin: Verlag von Julius Bard, 1920), pp. 114–15.

16. Muthesius's title resounded in the title for the exhibition that followed *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* at the Kunsthalle: *Types of New Building-Art*. See G. F. Hartlaub, ed., *Ausstellung Typen neuer Baukunst* (Mannheim: Kunsthalle Mannheim, 1925).

17. Hermann Muthesius, *Style-Architecture and Building-Art: Transformations of Architecture in the Nineteenth Century and Its Present Condition*, trans. Stanford Anderson (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center, 1994 [1902]), p. 53.

18. Ibid., p. 79.

19. Ibid., p. 100.

and designers to "denounc[e] the succession of [modern artistic] styles as camouflage for the constant need of the capitalist market for variation."[20] An expression of romantic anti-capitalism and a canny business practice, the term introduced the balanced tone that Hartlaub would echo two decades later.

Yet Muthesius's aesthetic sensibility—which mandated "the elimination of every merely applied decorative form" in design and architecture—did not necessarily translate to the paintings Hartlaub exhibited under the banner of Neue Sachlichkeit. Some of them abjure ornament and excess; others are quite exaggerated. Whereas old *Sachlichkeit* had a relatively defined aesthetic purpose and material context, the Neue Sachlichkeit came to signify less a coherent artistic program than a cultural sensibility or an epistemology.[21] Like old *Sachlichkeit*, though, the new tendency earned associations with the middle classes, whose members often served Neue Sachlichkeit artists as portrait subjects, patrons, or both; many of the painters, trained in applied as often as fine arts, joined that class's ranks themselves through work in para-artistic fields such as advertising and teaching, their professionalization a response, in part, to diminishing markets after the war.[22] By the late 1920s, Germans used the term to describe not just painting but also journalistic prose, straight photography, and even the austere architecture that Muthesius had theorized (and that can be seen illustrated in paintings by Grosz and Anton Räderscheidt)—media that were thought to record the present in a "cool" or "sober" manner appropriate to consensus middle-class tastes.[23] What had originated, for Hartlaub, as a sign of art's security instead grew to support Westheim's 1925 claim that fine art had been displaced by other forms, like "cinema, sport, technology."[24] A song from a 1928 musical revue mocked (*Neue*)

20. Frank Trommler, "The Creation of a Culture of *Sachlichkeit*," in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930*, ed. Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 477. Alois Riegl had emphasized precisely the historical character of ornamentation that Muthesius, it seems, hoped to overcome. See *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, trans. Evelyn Kain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992 [1893]), p. 3.

21. Fritz Schmalenbach extends Hartlaub's comments, connecting *Sachlichkeit* to a broader "attitude": "It was not the 'objectivity' of the new painting which the term was intended in the first place and above all to formulate, but something more universal underlying this objectivity, and of which it was the expression, a revolution in the general mental attitude of the times, a general new *Sachlichkeit* of thought and feeling." "The Term *Neue Sachlichkeit*," *The Art Bulletin* 22, no. 3 (September 1940), pp. 162–63.

22. See Matthias Eberle, "Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany: A Brief History," in *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s*, ed. Sabine Rewald (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006), p. 23; and Robin Lenman, "A Community in Transition: Painters in Munich, 1886–1924," *Central European History* 15, no. 1 (March 1982), pp. 3–33.

23. On the "cool" middle-class habitus, see Helmut Lethen, *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). On the class's "white socialism," as indexed by Neue Sachlichkeit literature, see Lethen's *Neue Sachlichkeit 1924–1932. Studien zur Literatur des "Weißen Sozialismus"* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1970). On problems with Lethen's analysis, see Carl Gelderloos, *Biological Modernism: The New Human in Weimar Culture* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), pp. 17–18.

24. Paul Westheim, "Die tote Kunst der Gegenwart (II)," *Das Kunstblatt* (1925) (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1978), pp. 146–47.

Sachlichkeit's imprecision and ubiquity among young, urban consumers; its chorus, for example, identified "*Sachlichkeit* floating in the air." The concept—like the middle class itself, diffusely composed of upstart office workers, an established bourgeoisie, craftspeople, doctors, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, and arguably artists—had become vaporous.[25] Hartlaub admitted as much to Alfred H. Barr Jr. in a 1929 letter. The term "is much misused today," the German curator wrote, "and it is high time to withdraw it from currency."[26]

It is along these lines—Neue Sachlichkeit's imputed affiliation with the middle classes on the one hand, its descriptive imprecision on the other—that it received criticism in the late 1920s and early '30s from critics on the left. The charge leveled by Georg Lukács against Expressionism in 1934 seems applicable to its successor: that the artists' "bourgeoisification" and lack of a positive ideal, or its utopian abstraction, could render even the most critical art affirmative and the most naturalistic art fraudulent.[27] Lukács then calls out Neue Sachlichkeit directly, framing it as an evolution of Expressionism that is so "apologetic, and leads so clearly away from the artistic reproduction of reality, that it can find a place in the fascist inheritance" alongside artistic tendencies including Romanticism (but not naturalism).[28] It is worth noting, though, that other critics on the left had imagined productive possibilities for *Sachlichkeit*. Writing in the Communist Party's journal, *Die Rote Fahne*, in 1928, Alfréd Kemény distinguished between a "new" and a "revolutionary" *Sachlichkeit*. The former was a paean to past art and a "naïve imitation of the technique of photography" that helps "bring to a halt the rushing stream of history" that is "pushing capitalism towards its downfall."[29] But against this "salon art" emerged a *Sachlichkeit* represented by vanguard artists like Grosz:

25. On the constitution of the middle classes, see Larry Eugene Jones, "'The Dying Middle': Weimar Germany and the Fragmentation of Bourgeois Politics," *Central European History* 5, no. 1 (March 1972), pp. 23–54; and Thomas Childers, "Inflation, Stabilization, and Political Realignment in Germany 1924 to 1928," in *The German Inflation Reconsidered: A Preliminary Balance*, Gerald D. Feldman, Carl-Ludwig Holtfrerich, Gerhard A. Ritter, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982).

26. Quoted in Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed., *German Painting and Sculpture*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1931), p. 13. Four Neue Sachlichkeit painters featured in this MoMA exhibition: Beckmann, Dix, Grosz, and Schrimpf.

27. Georg Lukács, "Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline" (1934), in *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 84. It should be noted that Lukács, like other critics such as Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Bertolt Brecht, only refers either to Neue Sachlichkeit generally, as a broad cultural tendency, or to its manifestations in mediums other than painting (e.g., literature).

28. Ibid., p. 112. On issues with such claims, see Olaf Peters, "On the Problem of the Continuity of New Objectivity Painting During the Consolidation of the Third Reich: The Case of Rudolf Schlichter 1930–1937," *History of European Ideas* 24, no. 2 (1998), pp. 93–112.

29. Durus (Alfréd Kemény), "Zwischen 'neuer' und revolutionärer Sachlichkeit" (1929), in *Die Rote Fahne: Kritik, Theorie, Feuilleton 1918–1933*, ed. Manfred Brauneck (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1975), p. 365. For the English, see Alfréd Kemény, "Between 'New' and Revolutionary Objectivity" (1929), in Fowkes, *Communism and the Avant-Garde in Weimar Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), p. 371.

social critics and activists who wielded objectivity to reveal political asymmetries and historical flux. Kemény identifies a third group, too, whom he views as neither affirmative nor militant. He calls them "exceptions, transitional phenomena"—"artists who vacillate between '*Neue Sachlichkeit*' and proletarian-revolutionary art." While he cites Scholz and Schrimpf as exemplary practitioners, the category could well admit many fellow participants in Hartlaub's exhibition whose work vacillated in form and motivation. (Several reviews of *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* attacked it from the right, after all, criticizing the art's pedestrian subject matter, its inconsistent technique, and its formal experimentation.)[30]

The formal instability of recent European figuration prompted its most ambitious critical assessment in German, also a century old this year: *Post-Expressionism: Magical Realism—Problems of the Newest European Painting*, a book by the Munich-based critic Franz Roh. Like Hartlaub, Roh studied with Wölfflin and first implemented his titular terms in 1923 (in an essay on the landscape and peasant painter Karl Haider).[31] Roh's book analyzes a cohort of European artists, many of whom featured in *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, and situates their work in developmental relation to Expressionism—from which the new paintings "retained" certain qualities "in order to incorporate them into new forms"—as well as to Impressionism, upon which Expressionism had performed similar maneuvers over the preceding thirty years.[32] What unites the disparate strata of post-Expressionist painters is their ability to foster a "new morning clarity," Roh writes, to make familiar scenes unfamiliar, as if by magic.[33] "We know this world," but now we "see it with new eyes." The critic had earlier observed that in Schrimpf's work, "the old experience shows itself again."[34] For Roh, this temporal toggle betrayed both the artist's approach to his referents and the source of his magic: "Despite the new, extremely detailed focus on things, he only wants to work from memory . . . which is where the magic of this 'Realism' may come from."

Magical realism and Neue Sachlichkeit carried different connotations, the one metaphysical and the other scientistic, but they were not necessarily opposed.

30. One critic, for example, chided the anti-humanist implications of artworks that lavished so much attention to the outlines of things. Unattributed, "Kunsthalle Mannheim—Ausstellung: Die neue Sachlichkeit," *Badischer Beobachter, Karlsruhe*, July 14, 1925, in MARCHIVUM, Stadtarchiv Mannheim (folder 86, page 15).

31. See Franz Roh, "Zur Interpretation Karl Haiders: Eine Bemerkung auch zun Nachexpressionismus," *Der Cicerone* 15 (1923), pp. 598–602. See also Christian Fuhrmeister, "Hartlaub and Roh: Cooperation and Competition in Popularizing New Objectivity," in *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic 1919–1933*, eds. Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2015).

32. Franz Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus—Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1925), p. 69. In the spirit of Wölfflin, Roh includes in an appendix a two-column scheme that compares Expressionism and Post-Expressionism; see *Nach-Expressionismus*, p. 119.

33. Ibid., p. 24.

34. Franz Roh, "Georg Schrimpf und die neue Malerei," *Das Kunstblatt* (1923), p. 268.

Roh himself advised readers not to put too much faith in the term "magical realism" and elsewhere called it "magical rationalism."[35] To him and certain contemporaries, "magic" and "rationalism" formed a kind of dialectic. Also in 1925, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski argued for the universal complementarity of magic and science; both, he writes, rely on "confidence in the power of reason."[36] Beyond displaying broad developments in human cognition, Malinowski's magic, like Roh's, mobilizes recursion. It is, to Malinowski, "a living force . . . [it] moves in the glory of past tradition, but it also creates its atmosphere of ever-nascent myth."[37] Roh's description of Schrimpf points to a similar capacity: an ability to synthesize past reflection and immanent creation. Magical-realist painting stakes out a "dialectical double position," Roh writes, sustaining tension between categories such as "realism" and "idealism," "abstraction" and "empathy," "structureless sensualism" and schematic "reification."[38] This last pairing, Roh writes, prompts a "connection to the political," though it is only articulated by form. "Art cannot guide us as far as practical action."[39] Instead, it leads us along a "detour of apparent freedom of purpose."

As a newly appointed museum director, Hartlaub had balanced a comparable sense of artistic autonomy with a practical view of conditions in Germany. Plotting *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* in 1923—amid hyperinflation, French annexation, and flailing efforts to consolidate the republic—he explained to the dealer Karl Nierendorf that, to ensure institutional support for the exhibition, they would need to "act with art and cultural policy in mind."[40] This meant, in part, that they should not include the most acerbic work by left-wing artists like Grosz and Otto Dix. The following year, Hartlaub made his political concerns public, chiding these artists—whom he termed "verists" for their apparent commitment to the truth—in print for their cynicism. He targeted the verists' lack of "moral distance" from society and equated their destructive attitude with that of their right-wing

35. Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus*, pp. 67–68. See also Andrew Hemingway, "Franz Roh's *Nach-Expressionismus* and the *Weltanschauung* of the Weimar Republic," *German Studies Review* 40, no. 1 (May 2017), pp. 267–88. The commensurability of the terms had been prepared in texts such as Hans Tietze's *The Methods of Art History*, which posited the titular discipline as a synthesis of aesthetics (*Gesetzwissenschaft*) and factual science (*Tatsachenwissenschaft*). See *Die Methode der Kunstgeschichte* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1973 [1913]), p. 2.

36. Bronislaw Malinowski, "Magic, Science and Religion" (1925), in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1948), p. 1.

37. Malinowski, "Magic, Science and Religion," p. 63.

38. Impressionism and Expressionism signaled, to Erwin Panofsky, that apparent poles such as "idealism" and "naturalism" in fact formed a "dialectical antinomy." *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968 [1924]), p. 126.

39. Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus*, p. 90.

40. G. F. Hartlaub, letter to Karl Nierendorf, July 24, 1923, quoted and translated in Inge Herold, "The New Objectivity: A Centennial," in *Die Neue Sachlichkeit: Ein Jahrhundertjubiläum*, eds. Inge Herold and Johan Holten (Mannheim: Kunsthalle Mannheim, 2024), p. 327.

opponents.[41] Later, in 1931, despite his reservations about the term Neue Sachlichkeit, the curator reiterated its moderate impetus, claiming it to be a bulwark guarding liberalism from communism and fascism—political platforms given to what he called "romantic, not entirely *sachlich* utopianism."[42] *Sachlichkeit*, to Hartlaub, had come to embody "the mother of progress."[43] He cited Nietzsche to bolster this progressive narrative, but, where the curator seemed to insist, at this point, on art's tempered progress, the philosopher had decades earlier criticized the Germanic tendency to hypostatize historical development. Objectivity—a correlate of *Sachlichkeit*—"subdues" the past, Nietzsche had written, and thereby "has nothing to do" with "truth or justice," which is never as subdued as it might look.[44]

Periodical Rhythms

Germanic thinkers of the prior few centuries often narrated history as a series of ups and downs and aimed to present the past "as it really was."[45] By the 1920s, however, Germans had entered what Ernst Troeltsch called a "crisis of historicism": Grappling with the fracturing constitution of contemporary history, scholars either rejected the prevailing historicist method as inappropriate at a time of rapid and uneven change or reasserted its preeminence as an expression of much-needed continuity.[46] Similar discussions propelled art history.[47] Already

41. G. F. Hartlaub, "Zynismus als Kunstrichtung?" (1924), in Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland 1918–1933* (Hannover: Fackelträger-Verlag Schmidt-Küster, 1969), p. 241. Grosz charged liberals like Hartlaub with their own brand of cynicism; see "Statt einer Biographie" (1925), in *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus*, p. 245.

42. G. F. Hartlaub, "Sinn und Unsinn der 'Neuen Sachlichkeit'" (1931), two lectures, manuscripts in Deutsches Kunstarchiv, Nuremberg. Hartlaub, Gustav Friedrich, I, B4/4, quoted in Karoline Hille, *Spuren der Moderne: Die Mannheimer Kunsthalle von 1918 bis 1933* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), pp. 85–86. Although Sachlichkeit here opposes Romanticism, by 1931—and even more after 1933—artists such as Kanoldt and Schrimpf were tagged with variations on the term New German Romanticism. See Curt Gravenkamp, *Die Deutsche Neuromantik in der Malerei der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: Kunstverein, 1931); and Justus Bier, *Neue Deutsche Romantik* (Hannover: Kestner-Gesellschaft, 1933).

43. Hartlaub, "Sinn und Unsinn der 'Neuen Sachlichkeit.'"

44. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 91. See also Peter Osborne, "A Sudden Topicality: Marx, Nietzsche and the Politics of Crisis," *Radical Philosophy* 160 (March/April 2010), p. 25.

45. See Georg G. Iggers, "Introduction," in Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); and Lukács's critique of "bourgeois thought" in "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1923]), p. 157. Lukács considered among the "really important historians of the nineteenth century" two art historians: Alois Riegl and Max Dvořák (153).

46. See Ernst Troeltsch, "Die Krisis des Historismus," *Die neue Rundschau* 33 (1922), p. 573. Ten years later, the phrase provided the name for a book by another theologian-historian, Karl Heussi.

47. Among other disciplines: The philosopher Ernst Cassirer and philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner divided not just history but, respectively, processes of cognition and biological evolu-

at the end of the nineteenth century, figures such as Wölfflin and Alois Riegl formed theories of art's relation to epochs that called up skewed shapes (spirals, screws, lapping waves) and that implicated the present in their studies of the past.[48] Although they rarely addressed contemporary artistic production in their writings, their ideas on art from prior centuries and its dynamic relations to social and cultural history betrayed engagement with recent artistic forms and techniques. Increased access to travel, photographic reproductions, and foreign publications broadened the scholars' purviews and complicated their timelines; likewise those of younger critics and artists, who absorbed and amended theories from the elder scholars, whose work they read and lectures they attended. Many writers of the 1920s questioned the idea that art expressed the unity of a particular time and place—that "every tendency is tied to a generation," as Hartlaub argued in the *Neue Sachlichkeit* text—but, rather than reject correlations between form and time, many tried to reformulate them.[49] If two of Roh's mentors, Wölfflin and Hermann Nohl, privileged *Weltanschauung* as an analytic, for example, in *Post-Expressionism* Roh himself sought to expand the heuristic, tying contemporary painting to both present-day modes of thought and the artists' first- and secondhand experiences of the past.[50] Roh makes implicit reference in the book to Wölfflin's concept of history, framing the post-Expressionist "reaction" of Neue Sachlichkeit as not regressive but diachronic—part of an "enormous spiral" that loops "across arcs of development," looking to the past as it swings to the future.[51]

Earlier in *Post-Expressionism*, Roh points to the rapid succession of styles in recent European art as evidence of art's non-synchronous nature. A "late Impressionist work from 1920," he writes, "can contain elements of other spheres

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tion into successive, if sometimes overlapping, "stages" (*Stufen*). See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1*, trans. Steve G. Lofts (London: Routledge, 2021 [1923]); and Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human: An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Millay Hyatt (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019 [1928]).

48. See Alois Riegl, "Late Roman or Oriental?" (1901), in *German Essays on Art History*, ed. Gert Schiff (New York: Continuum, 1988), p. 187; Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (New York: Dover, 1950 [1915/1929]), p. 234; and Max Raphael, *Das schöpferische Auge*, ed. Patrick Healy and Hans Jürgen Heinrichs (Vienna: Gesellschaft für Kunst und Volksbildung, 1993), pp. 18–19. See also Whitney Davis, "Succession and Recursion in Heinrich Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History*," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2015), pp. 157–64. The spiral—referenced by Wölfflin and Raphael, among others—appeared as a figure of cultural history earlier, as in Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. and ed. Jason Taylor and Robert Miner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020 [1725]).

49. Hartlaub, "Zum Geleit," n.p. On other shapes of art history sketched in the 1920s and '30s, see Tristan Weddigen, "Wölfflin in the Hispanic World," *Studies in the History of Art* 82 (2020), pp. 69–108. Weddigen writes about Wölfflin's reception in, primarily, Latin America, where Roh's magical realism soon caught on, too. Both writers had their work translated into Spanish and published in *Revista de occidente*, the journal founded by José Ortega y Gasset.

50. See Hemingway, "Franz Roh's *Nach-Expressionismus*," pp. 269–271. See also Herman Nohl, *Die Weltanschauungen der Malerei: Mit einem Anhang über die Gedankenmalerei* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1908).

51. Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus*, pp. 97–98.

somehow experienced as contemporary."[52] The art historian Wilhelm Pinder outlined a complementary narrative, trading analyses that assumed linear stylistic developments for those based on the individuated experience of the artist and viewer as well as the variable durations of artists' lives. Art, he wrote in 1926, reveals history's "multi-layered reality."[53] If there Pinder employed a spatial metaphor, he had used a temporal one in 1922, writing for *Das Kunstblatt*'s survey of the "new naturalism," in which he observed of recent figure painting that it implied history's "periodical rhythm."[54] Pushing past Riegl and Wölfflin, Pinder understood art to destabilize the concept of homogeneous or natural time—to splay history into crooked lines attached to biological and phenomenological loci. By way of illustration, he made a hypothetical comparison of two uncaptioned pictures, one by Franz Marc from 1914 and one by Max Liebermann a decade later, guessing that most viewers would assume that the latter—produced by an older artist, in an "older" style—had been painted first.[55] The biological basis of Pinder's method, which introduced heredity to art-historical analysis, corresponded to his racist nationalism, but his aversion to temporal homogeneity chimed with anti-capitalist critiques from the left.[56] In *History and Class Consciousness*, for example, Lukács argued that the technological rationalization in postwar German factories aimed to produce a fixed temporality, which in turn had undesirable consequences: Time "sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things' . . . in short, it becomes space."[57]

Erwin Panofsky, meanwhile, aimed in the 1920s to account for the impact of new experiences of time on the study—or the science—of art. Around mid-

52. Ibid. p. 4.

53. Wilhelm Pinder, *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas* (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1926), p. 2.

54. Wilhelm Pinder, response in "Ein neuer Naturalismus?," p. 370.

55. Pinder, *Das Problem der Generation*, p. 32. Similar ideas were adapted to sociology; see Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations" (1928), in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952). The public confusion that followed the Kunsthalle in Hamburg's acquisition of Marc's abstract *Mandrill* (1913) led Panofsky to observe the split temporality engendered by creation and reception. Viewers could not *yet* "see" the painting. See David Summers, "Meaning in the Visual Arts as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside*, ed. Irving Lavin (Princeton: Institute for Advanced Study, 1995), p. 13.

56. Bloch based his own theory of non-contemporaneity, in part, on Pinder's. See Frederic J. Schwartz, "Ernst Bloch and Wilhelm Pinder: Out of Sync," *Grey Room* 3 (Spring 2001), pp. 54–89. Where the latter followed individual lives, Bloch described collective modes of production and social types. The idea that time could not be properly fixed or measured owed in part to Bergson, whose work animated the writings of some German art historians; see Max Raphael, "Henri Bergson's Writings" (1911), in *The Invention of Expressionism: Critical Writings 1910–1913*, ed. and trans. Patrick Healy (Amsterdam: November Editions, 2016).

57. Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," p. 90. Germanic writers from Marx to Sombart and Hilferding to Adorno and Mandel sometimes sought similar figures to describe the shape of capitalist development—a system given to non-synchronicities, booms, and busts, and to the absorption, refinement, and then perceived abandonment of past techniques.

decade, he asked "whether it makes any sense at all to assimilate art-historical observations into a temporal course of events." Observing modern art's pluralism, he observed the separation of "historical (cultural) time" from "astronomical (natural) time," that is, the time of artistic production and reception and time as dictated by the cosmos—a view indebted not just to Germanic art theory but also to new ideas about time that derived from the theory of general relativity.[58] In *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Panofsky frames artistic shifts as both internal and developmental: Change happened either because certain techniques were exhausted and then replaced or because new problems arose that could only be addressed by new solutions.[59] Yet, while, to Panofsky, art would change along with thought and culture, it also demonstrated continuity. In an earlier book, *Idea*, he had argued that Western art's duty had long been to "reduc[e] the visible world to unalterable, universally, and eternally valid forms, thus renouncing that individuality and originality in which we are accustomed to see the principal criterion of artistic accomplishment."[60] Panofsky had in mind art of earlier centuries that synthesized systems of meaning for its audiences; much painting of the Neue Sachlichkeit performed a similar synthesis, playing the eternal and contingent, originality and repetition, off one another. To Roh, the art marked an "attempt to touch on a more general, deeper foundation" that evaded the preceding modernist idioms—those that forced identification with cultures understood as noncoeval (the European Middle Ages, say, or the contemporaneous Global South, as with Expressionism) or those that sought to enact an absolute break with any (art-) historical tradition (as with Dada). The new painting showcased a "renewed interest in the past," Roh believed, yet it mediated history through the conditions of a capitalist present: the "existence of the world of objects in general."[61] No matter how "sober" the paintings may appear, they retained "an uncanny quality" because of the way the specificity of their production clashed with the uneven aesthetic and material developments around them.[62]

Two early paintings by emblematic Neue Sachlichkeit artists help to demonstrate the tendency's strange historicity. Georg Schrimpf's *Swineherd* (1923) shows a boy and three pigs in a sparsely detailed and unnaturally lit rural landscape. The

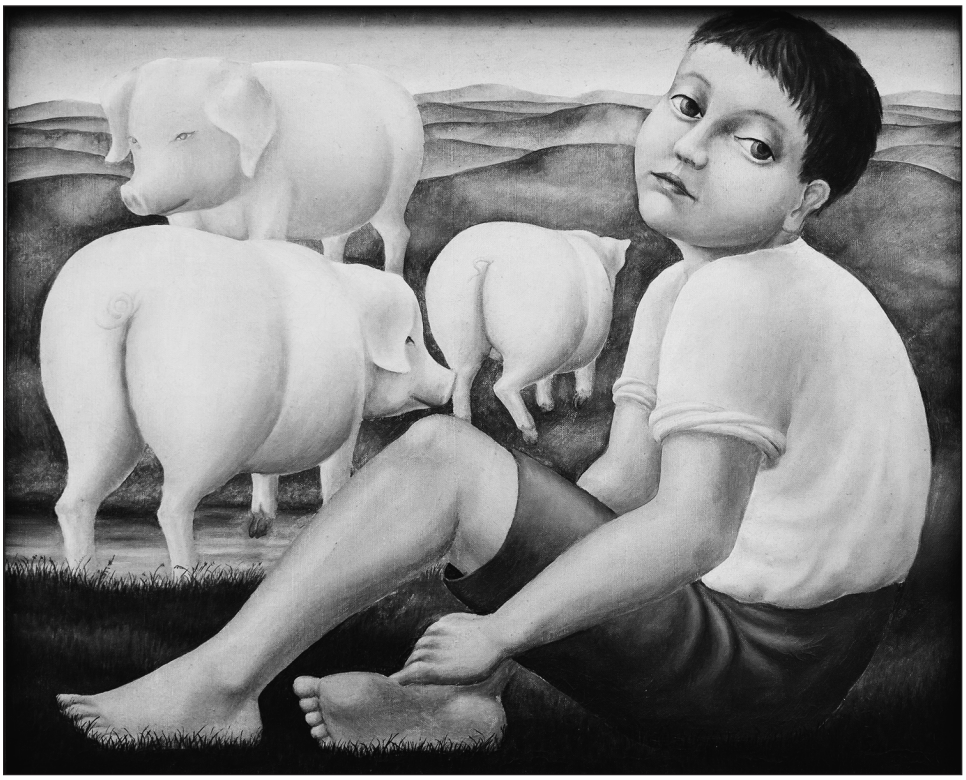
58. Erwin Panofsky, "Reflections on Historical Time" (1927), trans. Johanna Bauman, *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Summer 2004), p. 694. See also Megan R. Luke, "The Ghost and the Rock: Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Shape of Time," *Art History* 46, no. 1 (2023), pp. 136–37. To Georges Didi-Huberman, Panofsky aimed to "eradicate the impurity" of time, whereas Aby Warburg aimed to exacerbate it. "Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time," trans. Vivian Rehberg and Boris Belay, *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2003), p. 281.

59. Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991 [1927]), pp. 47–48. See also Erwin Panofsky, "On the Relationship of Art History and Art Theory: Towards the Possibility of a Fundamental System of Concepts for a Science of Art" (1925), trans. Katharina Lorenz and Jas' Elsner, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (Autumn 2008), pp. 43–71; and Daniel Spaulding, "Panofsky's Antinomies," *Journal of Art Historiography* 25 (December 2021), pp. 1–31.

60. Panofsky, *Idea*, p. 4.

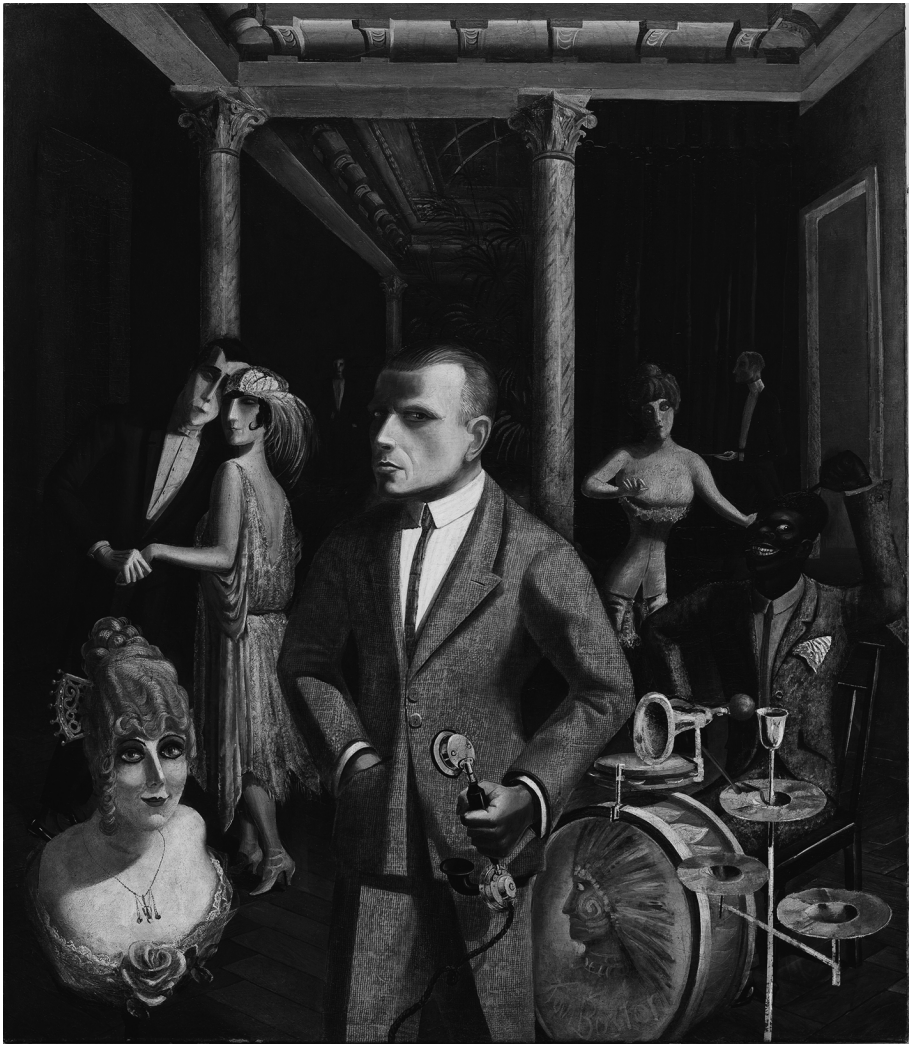
61. Roh, "Zur Interpretation Karl Haiders," p. 601.

62. Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus*, p. 30.



Georg Schrimpf. Swineherd. *1923.*

boy's gaze fixes on the viewer, lending immediacy to a pastoral scene, the style of which refracts French modernism through Nazarene primitivism. Otto Dix's *To Beauty* (1922), by contrast, presents a stereotypical scene of Weimar-era nightlife. A man—the artist—wears a textured suit, holds a telephone receiver, and stands in a club outfitted with Corinthian columns and palm fronds. The ceiling retreats steeply, thrusting the figure toward the viewer, who is unmoored by the composition's misleading spatiality, from its skewed perspective to the indeterminate location of a club-goer at bottom-left. She shares the room with another lone woman, a blissful couple in contemporary dress, two stiff waiters, and a drummer on the right: a Black man painted as a minstrel-show-like caricature. His drumhead features an illustrated profile of a Native American wearing a feathered headdress, the two figures together seeming to mock German fealty to US culture. The painting thus signifies modernity in both its content (nightlife, fashion, Americanism) and its style, a pastiche of formal and technical methods of fine art and satirical illustration, if not any official strains of modernist painting.



Otto Dix. To Beauty. *1922.*

What Schrimpf, for his part, pictures could be modern, too: a testament to the contemporary recognition of "old" social types and techniques persisting into the present, even the future. Schrimpf's early cohort of artists and anarchists in Ascona and Munich imagined a postwar Germany based not on frantic modernization but on the reanimation of pre-industrial modes of production and forms of social organization.[63] Art, they believed, would play a central role. The anarchist theorist Gustav Landauer advocated for an art rooted in handcraft as a model for unalienated labor; the journalist and politician Kurt Eisner proposed that such art would resist exchange value and help to topple capitalism.[64] The Bavarian Soviet Republic, which Schrimpf supported, would have given way, Eisner wrote, to "a return to earlier, healthy artistic conditions."[65] Like other postwar revolutions, the Bavarian Soviet soon met a violent show of force from paramilitary troops. In this context, Schrimpf may paint an abandoned future, his boy looking out at a German present defined not by anarchist agrarianism but by hyperinflation (though also home to a still sizable and politically significant peasantry).[66] Where Dix contrasts his own specificity with the generalized social types at the club, Schrimpf situates his subject along divergent timelines and endows him with multiple identities.

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has referred, in these pages, to the painting of the Neue Sachlichkeit and the European "return to order" as "historicist images": "the illusory creation of a unity and totality, which *conceals* [the work's] historical determination and conditioned particularity."[67] Comparing interwar painting to work of the preceding avant-garde, Buchloh found the latter to mostly place its particularity on the surface, materializing the fragmented social and epistemic conditions that helped to produce the work. Schrimpf, it would seem, practices historicism, abstracting history into a linear recession behind a "primitive" youth (a figure that, in historicist scholarship since Herder, marked epochal beginnings).[68] But the pic-

63. See Wolfgang Storch, ed., *Georg Schrimpf und Maria Uhden: Leben und Werk* (Berlin: Charlottenpresse Frölich & Kaufmann, 1985).

64. See Weinstein, *The End of Expressionism*, pp. 164–65, 182; and Allan Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria, 1918–1919: The Eisner Regime and the Soviet Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 107.

65. Kurt Eisner, "The Socialist Nation and the Artist" (1919), in *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, ed. Rose-Carol Washton Long (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 180.

66. See Werner T. Angress, "The Political Role of the Peasantry in the Weimar Republic," *The Review of Politics* 21, no. 3 (July 1959), pp. 530–49.

67. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981), p. 54.

68. See Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972 [1936]), p. 307. Late-nineteenth-century German painting often equated children and "primitives" in Africa; see Sabine Wilke, "Romantic Images of Africa: Paradigms of German Colonial Paintings," *German Studies Review* 29, no. 2 (May 2006), p. 289. Neue Sachlichkeit artists rarely made paintings that evoked German colonies, but some of them, such as Georg Scholz and Wilhelm Schnarrenberger, made commercial images that did. See Herbert Tannenbaum, "Gute Zigarren-Packungen," *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* 23, no. 7–8 (April–May 1920), pp. 75–82.

ture's uncanniness, per Roh, opens as much as it conceals, suggesting an image invested in modernity and historicism alike, in both continuity and rupture, uneven and rapid change—that is, in a crisis of historicism more than its affirmation.[69] In 1936 the nationalist historian Friedrich Meinecke argued that historicism privileged "*individualizing* observation" against "a *generalizing* view of human forces in history."[70] Dix is both observer and observed in *To Beauty*; Schrimpf's swineherd is too, but the artist balances the figure's individuation—the contingency of his relationship to the viewer, whose gaze he meets—with situational abstraction.

Considered against the ongoing activities of state-building, Schrimpf's painting of a light-skinned youth can still play into a selective vision of the past that would be characteristic, later, of National Socialism.[71] (Not to mention that Neue Sachlichkeit, in its earlier days, was practiced and theorized almost exclusively by white Christian men.)[72] Where Dix amplifies the incongruity of the Black, Indigenous, and even female figures in German life—they look imagined, remote, their appearance upsetting the unnatural order of things—Schrimpf naturalizes his subject, integrating the boy into the grass, which bleeds into his feet, and the hills, whose gentle curves his body shares.[73] In naturalizing the boy's presence while destabilizing his historicity, Schrimpf hints at the "timeless" quality that

69. Nicholas Baer has recently argued that German Expressionist and avant-garde cinema of the 1920s figures or rather intervenes in this crisis: *Historical Turns: Weimar Cinema and the Crisis of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024). Nikos Pegioudis has stressed the "evolutionary—rather than revolutionary—nature of those avant-garde groups" in Weimar Germany, that is, how the "radical" artists of the 1920s largely articulated their positions by extending reformist ideas from the Wilhelmine period: *Artists and Radicalism in Germany, 1890–1933: Reform, Politics and the Paradoxes of the Avant-Garde* (Leiden: Brill, 2025), pp. 20–21.

70. Meinecke, *Historism*, p. lv. It is important, for Meinecke, that historicism formed out of art history and aesthetics, namely out of Winckelmann and Lessing (and their distaste for contemporaneous art) (238).

71. Ibid., p. 307.

72. Some women artists, such as Grethe Jürgens and Hanna Nagel, entered the Neue Sachlichkeit fray later, as did some Jewish artists, such as Felix Nussbaum. Marta Hegemann painted figures and exhibited with Neue Sachlichkeit artists (including her husband, Anton Räderscheidt) but was not typically tied to the term in print. Luise Straus-Ernst, a Jewish art historian and the first wife of Max Ernst, wrote about the Neue Sachlichkeit in Cologne, but other important women critics of the period, such as Gertrud Alexander and Lu Märten, rarely, if ever, addressed the tendency directly. See Luise Straus-Ernst, "Raum und Wandbild—Köln 1929," *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* 32, no. 7 (June 1929), p. 195; Marsha Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Dorothy Rowe, *After Dada: Marta Hegemann and the Cologne Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); and Herold and Holten, eds., *Die Neue Sachlichkeit.*

73. People of color rarely appear in Neue Sachlichkeit paintings (more often in works on paper, including by Rudolf Schlichter and Heinrich Maria Davringhausen), but there are many portraits of Jewish subjects. See James A. van Dyke, "Erasure and Jewishness in Otto Dix's *Portrait of the Lawyer Hugo Simons*," in *ReNew Marxist Art History*, eds. Warren Carter, Barnaby Haran, and Frederic J. Schwartz (London: Art Books Publishing Ltd., 2013).

Hartlaub found in the more conservative wing of the Neue Sachlichkeit, the artists whom he dubbed classicists. Yet the painting also suggests contingency: not only the conditions of hyperinflation and counterrevolution but, given the agricultural setting, German conceptions of land at home and abroad. The 1920s were a time of anxiety over the shrinking peasantry and of persistent colonial revisionism, a rewriting of the recent past that turned Germany's colonial actions—including the mid-1900s genocide of the Nama and Ovaherero people in southwest Africa and the Maji Maji Rebellion in the east—into experiences that would inform new modes of capitalism and governance at home.[74] Colonial violence had aimed to protect the German agricultural interests and property in Africa that served to extend and secure the placid landscape that Schrimpf's boy inhabits; pre-industrial production in the colonies was not a model for an industrialized or an anarchist future but rather a haphazard (and soon thwarted) project of expropriation and slaughter.[75] Although it is unlikely that Schrimpf had Africa on his mind, his boy's glazed stare transforms him into a vessel for a colonial unconscious resigned to overseeing the post-colonial nation behind him.

Melencolia II

Pictures like Schrimpf's can read as melancholy. The art historian Beate Reese describes the condition in terms that recall Walter Benjamin's 1931 diagnosis of writers associated with the Neue Sachlichkeit, whom he characterized as suffering from "left-wing melancholy": an attitude of resignation and a tendency to sublimate social concerns into benign literature.[76] In attributing melancholy to the painters—who were working through pressures on their medium and markets—Reese also detected a condition akin to what Sigmund Freud observed in some of his patients in 1917, in the midst of the war: a "painful dejection," a "cessation of interest in the outside world," that Freud traced to the loss of an unknown object.[77] The melancholic "knows *whom* he has lost, but not *what* he has lost in him." Painter-veterans of the 1920s such as Dix and Carl Grossberg tellingly appropriated Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514),

74. See Dominik J. Schaller, "'Every Herero Will Be Shot': Genocide, Concentration Camps, and Slave Labor in German South-West Africa," in *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial, and Memory*, ed. René Lamarchand (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), pp. 52–53.

75. See Angress, "The Political Role of the Peasantry," pp. 532–34; and Itohan Osayimwese, "Introduction: Seeing and Building German Colonialism," in *German Colonialism in Africa and Its Legacies: Architecture, Art, Urbanism, and Visual Culture*, ed. Itohan Osayimwese (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 3–4. The people of southwest Africa were known for their advanced cattle agriculture; Schrimpf's boy, by contrast, tends a few pigs.

76. See Beate Reese, *Melancholie in der Malerei der Neuen Sachlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998), pp. 131–70; and Walter Benjamin, "Left-Wing Melancholy" (1931), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 304–7.

77. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), pp. 244, 245.

a print that suggested to viewers from Benjamin to Panofsky and Fritz Saxl the artist's inability to reconcile craftsmanship and science at a moment of mechanization.[78] Hartlaub became fixated on the print, too, and wrote to Panofsky for insight; in 1928, to mark the four hundredth anniversary of Dürer's death, the curator organized a show at the Kunsthalle Mannheim that paired reproductions of the old master's work with art by Dix, Grosz, and the Karlsruhe artist Karl Hubbuch, among others.[79] In the catalogue, Hartlaub notes Dürer's disjointed relationship to the present day. On the one hand, industrialized Mannheim bore little resemblance to the artist's Nuremberg. On the other, not only did modern artists copy him, they possessed a "very unromantic and unsentimental positivism"—something like a *Sachlichkeit*—that resonated with Dürer's "relationship to the living art of our day" and demonstrated the artist's "posterity."[80]

If, to Hartlaub and others, the Neue Sachlichkeit extended aspects of Dürer's project, to the art historian Alfred Neumeyer there was a more complete formal transformation over time. In the painting of the Neue Sachlichkeit, he wrote in 1927, "space is identical neither with measure as in Dürer nor with volume as in Michelangelo. Rather, space is an optical impression of the atmosphere filled with light and air," in other words a subjective and unstable registration.[81] Neumeyer, another student of Wölfflin's, sees that contemporary artists have synthesized a variety of preceding formal tactics. While he posits this as evidence of a comprehensive historical break, however, his teacher often understood formal transitions and historical returns as more uneven or incomplete processes. In a 1922 preface to an edition of his *Principles of Art History* (1915), Wölfflin summarized a portion of his argument: "It is certain that history never returns to the same point," he wrote, "but it is just as certain that, within the total development, certain self-contained developments may be distinguished, and that the course of the development shows a certain parallelism."[82] He traced such parallels between the Baroque and the late Wilhelmine period, as did Benjamin between the Baroque and early Weimar, both writers conceiving the periods as transitional in the histories of capitalism

78. See Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Dürers "Melencolia I": Eine quellen- und typengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1923); and Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019 [1925/1928]). On Grossberg's reference to *Melencolia*, see my "Grossberg's Realism: Art, Industry, and the New Processes of Life," in *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* (forthcoming).

79. The responses from Panofsky are included among Hartlaub's papers at the Deutsches Kunstarchiv, Nuremberg. Hartlaub, Gustav Friedrich, I, C–119. The later version of Panofsky and Saxl's *Melencolia* study, written with Raymond Klibansky, refers in multiple footnotes to Hartlaub's suggestions but always discounts them.

80. G. F. Hartlaub, *Ausstellung Dürer und die Nachwelt* (Mannheim: Kunsthalle Mannheim, 1928), p. 9.

81. Alfred Neumeyer, "Zur Raumpsychologie der 'neuen Sachlichkeit'" (1927/28), in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1977), p. 296.

82. Wölfflin continues by noting that the "problem of periodicity" is "important, although it cannot be dealt with merely from the standpoint of the art historian." *Principles of Art History*, p. viii.

and art.[83] Roh, meanwhile, chose a different epochal cognate to the present: "the early Italian Renaissance, and then the period of Leonardo and Dürer."[84] Rather than formal or material congruence, Roh made epistemological and spiritual analogies. Like the 1920s, he wrote, the Renaissance was a time "when, in addition to original productivity, there was a need for immediate, rational clarification of the artists' inner findings."

The attention paid in those years to Renaissance artists such as Dürer and Matthias Grünewald was attributable to not only formal and thematic but also nationalist concerns in Germany.[85] The Neue Sachlichkeit represented to some observers and practitioners a pointed resuscitation of earlier German methods and, in turn, a form of expression proper to the recently consolidated and modernizing nation. Even if the tendency had been conceived as international—*Das Kunstblatt*'s survey, Hartlaub's original artist list for Mannheim, and Roh's *Post-Expressionism* all featured a few artists from other countries in Europe—it did not gain much significance outside of Germany.[86] The Neue Sachlichkeit's provincialism reflected cultural bias as well as political and economic conditions. Hartlaub's intention to include French artists in *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* remained unfulfilled, for example, in part because of circumstances outside of his control: ongoing trade and military conflicts with France.[87] Nevertheless, the curator came to promote modern art's national character, stressing in the catalogue for Mannheim's subsequent exhibition, *Types of New Building-Art*, that Germans should resist artistic and technical influence from outside, namely from the capitalist Americans and communist Soviets.[88] But, it seemed, there was little to work

83. On Wölfflin's treatment of the Baroque and its resonances with early-twentieth-century politics and capital, see Evonne Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism (1845–1945): Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Gurlitt, Brinckmann, Sedlmayr* (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2015), pp. 100–117. For Benjamin's Baroque, see his *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*.

84. Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus*, pp. 8–9.

85. On the Renaissance artists' receptions in the 1920s, see Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 143–56; and Ingrid Schulze, *Die Erschütterung der Moderne: Grünewald im 20. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: E. A. Seemann Verlag, 1991). Wölfflin singles out Grünewald and Dürer as evidence of the multiple synchronicities available to art history: The two artists differ in "imaginative type" but "re-unite in a common style." Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, pp. viii–ix.

86. Pablo Picasso, for example, remained part of Hartlaub's plan until close to the exhibition's opening. See the list of artists for "Ausstellung 'Neue Sachlichkeit'" (n.d.), in MARCHIVUM, Stadtarchiv Mannheim, Bestand Kunsthalle, Ordner "Die Neue Sachlichkeit, 1925, A–K" (2012, folder 84, pp. 20–21). Some recent exhibitions, like the centennial in Mannheim, have sought to showcase the term's international reach. Already in the mid-1920s, artists in France and Italy had taken notice of the Neue Sachlichkeit painters. See Carlo Carrà, *Georg Schrimpf* (Rome: Editions de "Valori Plastici," 1924). Kurt Pfister argued that, whereas French painting drew on the medium's traditions, German painting was "inclined to substitute radical intellectual theories for pictorial realization." "Die neue Sachlichkeit in der bildenden Kunst," *Premiere*, no. 2, n.d., in MARCHIVUM, Stadtarchiv Mannheim (folder 86, p. 147). Roh discounts such positions in his book, that is, the idea that the new art is "planned by critics and only later realized . . . that theory exists before creation." *Nach-Expressionismus*, p. 8.

87. See Schmalenbach, "The Term *Neue Sachlichkeit*," pp. 161–65.

88. See G. F. Hartlaub, "Die Aufgabe," in *Ausstellung Typen neuer Baukunst*, p. 3.

with. Mannheim's local artistic traditions, Hartlaub emphasized, were "relatively sparse."[89] Similar comments were made of Germany at large. A nation barely older than the artists themselves, it had fallen behind its European peers.[90] "Whereas in France it was [to late-nineteenth-century artists] a matter of closing-off the great school" of academic painting, wrote Oswald Spengler, "in Germany it was a case of catching up with it."[91]

Spengler saw some advantages in belatedness, though, praising nineteenth-century German artists who turned a lack of French sophistication into a positive attribute. Caspar David Friedrich, Wilhelm Leibl, Hans Thoma, and others joined their French colleagues in Paris to study the old masters; although the German work looked perpetually "out of season" compared to the French, the former group's relative cultural distance from the pillars of art history enabled them to look with fresh eyes and to synthesize what they saw. "[J]ust as [Friedrich] Hebbel tried to squeeze all the problems from *Hamlet* to [Ibsen's] *Rosmersholm* into one dramatic type," Spengler wrote, "so [Adolph] Menzel, [Wilhelm] Leibl, and [Hans von] Marées sought to force the old and new models [of] Rembrandt [van Rijn], Claude [Lorrain], [Jan] Van Goyen, and [Jean-Antoine] Watteau, [Eugène] Delacroix, [Gustave] Courbet, and [Édouard] Manet—into a single form."[92] In turn, they achieved something that artists such as Courbet could not: a "renewal" of the material, or a "reawakening," in Spengler's words, channeled through an authentic and unique "re-experience."[93] Spengler's art history, melancholic and *völkisch*, holds little water; he streamlines the artists' methods as well as the relations between art and nation, and nation and nation.[94] Still, his relativistic concepts of historical morphology—which "inwardly

89. Hartlaub, "Die Aufgabe," p. 3.

90. See Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, p. 106; Helmuth Plessner, "Die Legende von den zwanziger Jahren," *Merkur* 16, no. 1 (January 1962), pp. 33–46; and Reinhart Koselleck, "Three *bürgerliche* Worlds? Preliminary Theoretical-Historical Remarks on the Comparative Semantics of Civil Society in Germany, England, and France," in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

91. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926 [1918/1922]), p. 289.

92. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, pp. 289–90. Not just in art but in industry and economics, too: Ernest Mandel, among others, emphasizes how "relative latecomers" to industry, such as Germany and the US, were better able to adopt new technologies at the end of the nineteenth century and thus overtake France and Great Britain; ditto West Germany and Japan after World War II. "Uneven Development," in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 559.

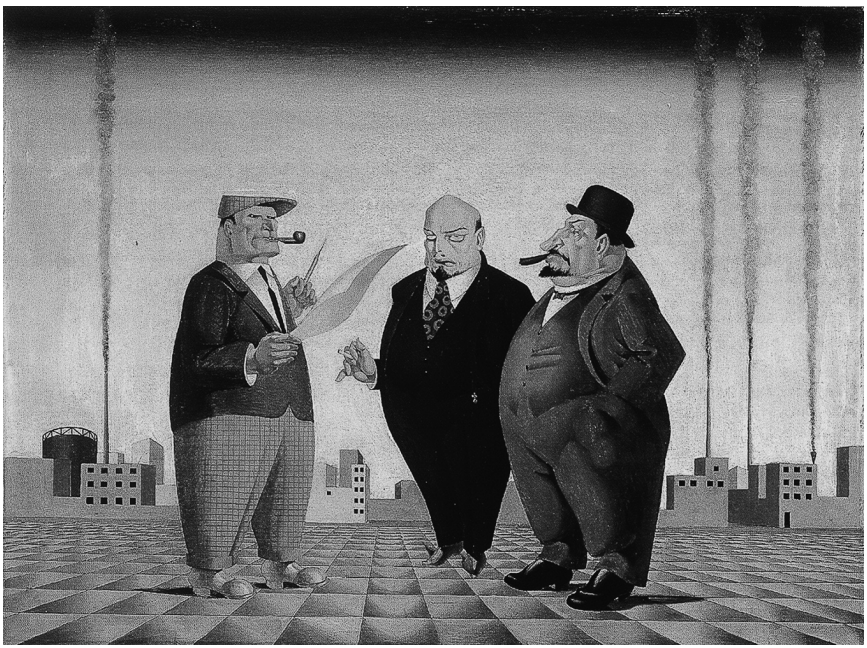
93. Writing on the Chemnitz *Neue Sachlichkeit* exhibition, a critic invoked Gustave Courbet's *Stone Breakers* (1849), then housed in nearby Dresden, and suggested that the "new Realists" of the day needed to both re-mobilize Courbet's critical thrust and employ new artistic means, like those gleaned from Expressionism. The critic found some *Neue Sachlichkeit* paintings, like Kanoldt's, to fail to dig beneath the surface. T. Z., "'Neue Sachlichkeit'. Ausstellung in der Kunsthütte," *Chemnitzer Tageblatt und Anzeiger*, December 20, 1925, in MARCHIVUM, Stadtarchiv Mannheim (folder 86, p. 111).

94. On the national-racial foundations of Spengler's art history, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 72–76. Joseph Leo Koerner's writing about Philipp Otto Runge's reception of Raphael reads like an account of Spenglerian "re-experience." See *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion, 2009 [1990]), pp. 63, 69.

binds together the expression-forms of all branches of a Culture"—and re-experience help to clarify Neue Sachlichkeit's historicity in the context of German art history.[95] Where the Romantics, a century earlier, had extracted and fixed art's historicity—each artist believing their genius to stem from their capacity for detecting the particularity of distant epochs—Neue Sachlichkeit artists treated these past epochs as loose materials, close at hand but fugitive, not so much catching up as flashing by in magazines and galleries, in the studio and at the barricade.

And, where the pre-revolutionary Romantics aimed, in Spengler's view, to renew a culture in its golden years, Neue Sachlichkeit artists worked amid a counter-revolutionary situation diagnosed as terminal, an apparent point of no return for figurative painting, the bourgeoisie, "the West." Yet, while some of their work thematized the experience of a kind of end of history, some demonstrated art history's dynamic capacity to defer any claims to an end. Other works, like Scholz's 1922 painting *Of Things to Come*, posit these two approaches as antinomic. Scholz presents caricatures of three figures: an anonymous US banker, the finance minister Walther Rathenau, and the industrialist Hugo Stinnes. The men stand in a dystopian industrial environment in which an Albertian checkerboard recedes toward cartoonish smokestacks. (The artist recombined these elements across his work of the early 1920s, objectifying the signs of his painting as reusable parts.) Figurative and abstract, playful and severe, modernist and quasi-academic, the scene yokes the modern instru-

95. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, p. 6.



Scholz. Of Things to Come. *1922.*

mentalization of the land and the workforce to a project at the origin of European modernity and its taming of space, Renaissance humanism. With clarity and criticism, it tracks modernity's *longue durée*—tracks the vanishing point, or lack thereof, of the purportedly civilized values that structure European capitalist modernity, a phenomenon that was reaching, or had reached, what seemed, to many after World War I and amid high inflation, its breaking point. If Scholz's Dada peers would have relished the breakup circa 1920, already by 1922 many such artists instead seemed to want to hold modernity and tradition in abeyance.

Eternal Returns

So-called returns to figuration have garnered attention in Western museums and scholarship over the past decade-plus, with exhibitions and texts devoted to the return to order in 1920s European art; mid-century figure painters whose reputations faltered in their own time for social, political, or aesthetic reasons; and active artists who filter (post-)modernist artistic strategies and contemporary social concerns through historical painterly idioms.[96] Taken together, and in light of the preceding historiography, these twentieth- and twenty-first-century tendencies suggest that accusations of "return" are unstable and dependent on contingent concepts of development; that figurative painting has no uniform look or motivation; and that it is not necessarily a sign of reaction. As Hal Foster writes, abstraction, once considered representational painting's successor, "now appears, in art museums as well as in college surveys, as a historical interlude, and in artist studios as just one more option among countless others, including all manner of figuration."[97] Neue Sachlichkeit itself has "returned," so to speak, at a time when morphological comparisons structure many conversations about politics—where analogies to the German 1920s and '30s have only accelerated since 2008—and about art.[98] Not unlike then, politicians and commentators today often enlist art as a cultural warrior, its basic forms tied publicly and unproblematically to ideologies. Figurative painting, in part because of the apparent immediacy of its meaning, fields reflexive criticism in the West from both the Right (for its portrayal of non-normative subjects, whose artistic and social representation rankles reactionary viewers) and the Left (for its affirmation of the art market and the Western art world's cynical identity politics).[99]

In early 2025, the Somali-Australian artist Hamishi Farah was commissioned to make a painting for an exhibition at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt

96. Still-living Neue Sachlichkeit alumni were critical of the new figurative painting (e.g., Chuck Close) when asked about it in 1973; see Julia Bulk, "The Reception of New Objectivity in the 1960s and 1970s," in *Otto Dix and the New Objectivity* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2012), p. 100.

97. Hal Foster, "Modernism in a Non-Melancholic Key," *October* 186 (Fall 2023), p. 197.

98. The Neue Sachlichkeit has received ample institutional recognition in recent years, including a large exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 2022 and centennial shows beginning in 2024 at venues including the Kunsthalle Mannheim and the Neue Galerie, New York.

99. See Larne Abse Gogarty, "Figuring Figuration," *Art Monthly* 465 (April 2023), pp. 6–10.

(HKW) as part of the Transmediale arts festival. The piece Farah submitted was "deemed inappropriate," however, perhaps by design, and excluded from the show.[100] Oil on linen, it portrays a man who is bald and Black with a blank expression, wearing a blue peacoat, staring at the viewer, and set against a solid, off-white backdrop, like a passport picture or a photographic portrait by Thomas Ruff, the latter as distant a point of reference for Farah as Leibl would have been for Scholz. The subject here is Joe Chialo, a member of the center-right Christian Democrats who served as Berlin's culture senator from 2023 until his resignation in May 2025.[101] Farah adapted the image from the cover of Chialo's memoir, *The Fight Continues* (2022), lightening the colors of the background as well as the subject's skin and coat and modeling each surface separately, creating a kind of composite image (like Scholz but subtler).[102] The portrait's frontality, its elimination of context and style, and its representational fidelity recall state portraiture more than the Neue Sachlichkeit, but it deploys a strategy common at least to the tendency's verists: letting the image of a controversial figure or event reveal (if to a specialized viewer) a constellation of German biases.[103] What rendered the painting "inappropriate" was not its form or content but rather its context, as the writer Tobi Haslett elaborated in a talk at the HKW in February. To Haslett, Chialo "represents the cutting edge of culture-industry repression in this country," largely because in late 2023 the then-senator proposed adding a clause to contracts for public arts funding that would force all recipients to affirm the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, which labels speech against Israel or Zionism as anti-Jewish hatred.[104] The clause did not last. Under pressure, Chialo admitted it could constitute a "restriction of artistic freedom."[105]

100. See Alex Greenberger, "Painting of Controversial Berlin Politician Was 'Deemed Inappropriate' by German Festival, Artist Says," *Artnews*, February 5, 2025, online. Several artists had pulled out of the 2024 Transmediale festival owing to Germany's support for Israel.

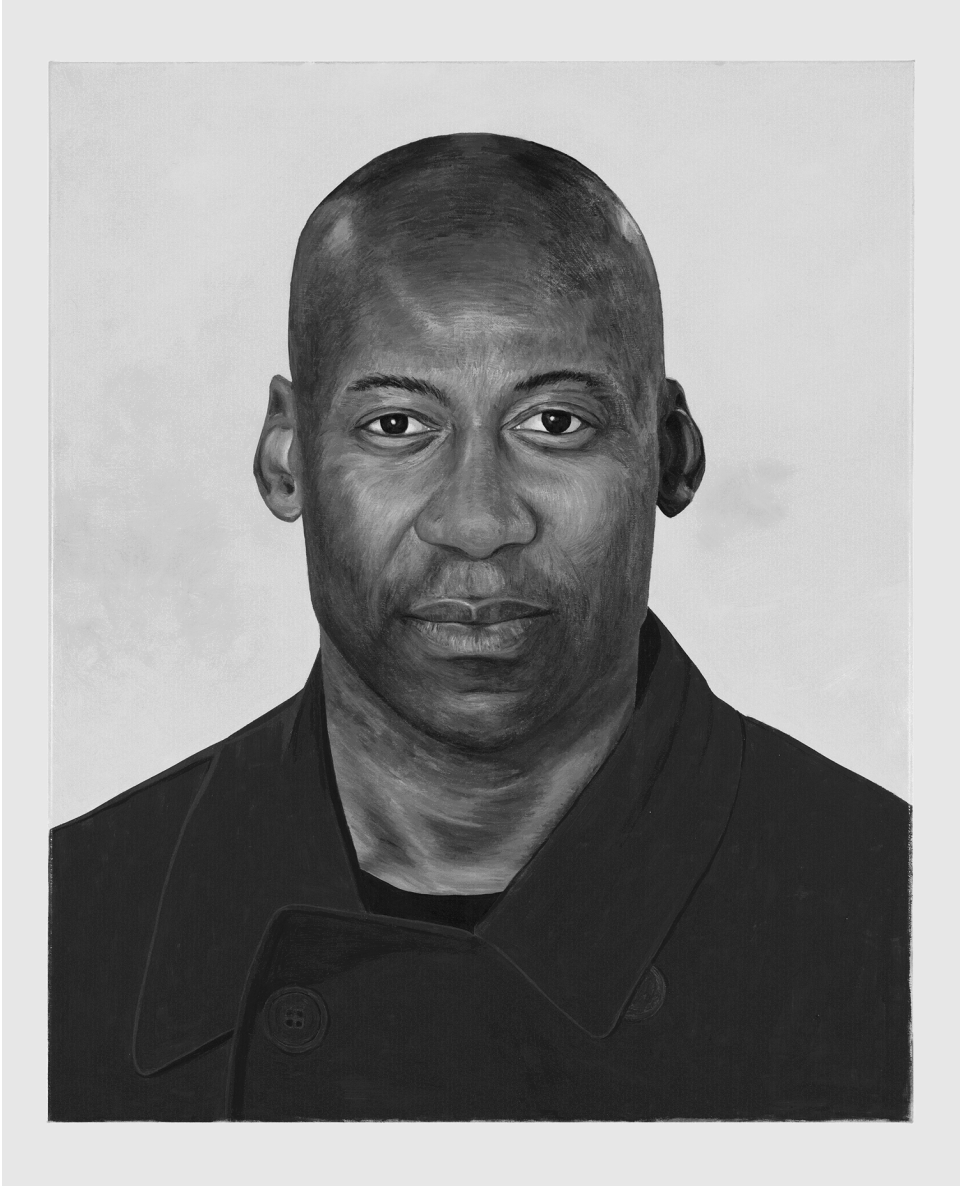
101. See "Berlins Kultursenator Joe Chialo tritt zurück," *Der Spiegel*, May 2, 2025, online.

102. My thanks to Farah for discussing the painting and its reception with me over the phone on August 13, 2025. The blue resembles that of a French worker's jacket more than the navy that Chialo is pictured wearing—or, to the critic Timo Fieldhaus, the blue of Israel's flag. Relatively sympathetic, Fieldhaus sees the painting as presenting a "pleasant realism, free of political messages," yet also possessing "enormous explosive power." "Cancel Culture bei Transmediale? Ein Gemälde von Joe Chialo sorgt für Kontroverse," *Berliner Zeitung*, February 7, 2025, online.

103. Consider *Of Things to Come* or, most famously, the case of Otto Dix's *The Trench* (1920–23). See Wolfgang Schröck-Schmidt, "Der Schicksalsweg des 'Schützengraben,'" in *Dix*, eds. Wulf Herzogenrath and Johann-Karl Schmidt (Stuttgart: Galerie der Stadt, 1991), pp. 161–64.

104. Tobi Haslett, "On a Painting by Hamishi Farah," *Triple Canopy* 29, February 4, 2025, online. For more context and a partial response to Haslett that accounts for Chialo's resignation, see Mitch Speed, "Bait and Switch," *The Diasporist*, May 12, 2025, online.

105. Quoted in Haslett, "On a Painting by Hamishi Farah." Ironically, in a preface to the catalogue for the Neue Galerie's recent centennial exhibition, Ronald S. Lauder—the institution's founder and a conservative Zionist—writes: "It should be noted that Germany has become a crucial political ally of the United States, and remains a bastion of artistic creativity." "Preface," in *Neue Sachlichkeit / New Objectivity*, ed. Olaf Peters (Munich: Prestel, 2025), p. 9.



Hamishi Farah. Untitled. *2025*.

It was safe to assume, as the curators did, that Farah's portrait took Chialo's political maneuvers as its subject in addition to his visage. Among contemporary figurative painting, the artist's work, skillful and absurd, rhymes more with the trollish art of Canadian painter Mathieu Malouf, who filters pop-cultural and art-world subjects through various styles, than with the empathetic portraiture of artists such as Aliza Nisenbaum, a Mexican painter known best for semi-stylized pictures of Latin American immigrants and workers. If Malouf and Farah both represent extensions of the institution-critical, post-painterly approach common to Western—often German—painting of the past half-century, the latter's trolling indicates a pointed negativity over the former's reactionary provocation.[106] For one, Farah travesties not just the repressive tolerance of the Western art system, as does Malouf, but also its opportunistic instrumentalization of race. As Hannah Black writes of Farah's 2023 "portraits" of black chess pieces, the artist often deploys a strategy of "anti-representational representation [that] energetically refutes the widespread myth that painting can make an image of a person."[107] The simulated figure of Chialo—a German-born civil servant whose Tanzanian ancestors fought with the Germans during the Maji Maji Rebellion—highlights the long-standing German (indeed Western) focus on categorization, or typology, as well as the limitations of assigning allegiances to subjects by profession or race (a quality that Benjamin perceived already at the turn of the 1930s and that he found August Sander's Neue Sachlichkeit–affiliated photographs to address).[108] In painting Chialo, then, Farah looks askance at much contemporary figuration's goal to redress historical omission (say, of Black subjects in European state portraiture) and takes advantage of continuities in mainstream German politics.[109] If the apparent belatedness of Farah's medium underscores the incommensurability of liberalism's advertised social values with the country's treatment of non-Germans in the present, that is, so

106. On post-painterly art, see David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 125–34. On Farah's motivations, see Guy Mackinnon-Little, "Conversation: Hamishi Farah," *TANK*, n.d., online.

107. Hannah Black, exhibition text for *Hamishi Farah: Black Painting*, Maxwell Graham, New York, 2023, online.

108. See Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1931), in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 2, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 520.

109. His "presence in the German state apparatus," Haslett argues, "might be cited as proof of the transcendence, at last, of racism—even as Arabs and antigenocide demonstrators get their skulls smashed in the street." Haslett refers here to the violent suppression of pro-Palestine protests in Germany since (and before) October 7, 2023, and elsewhere to the arrests, deportations, and threats that activists, artists, and migrants have lately faced in the country, including in Mannheim in the months before the Kunsthalle's centennial exhibition. See Hanno Hauenstein, "Germany Turns to U.S. Playbook: Deportations Target Gaza Protesters," *The Intercept*, March 31, 2025; and Sarah Maslin Nir and Christopher F. Schuetze, "Where Germany's Immigration Debate Hits Home," *New York Times*, July 13, 2024. On how German complicity in Israel's genocide has impacted the Berlin art world, see also Nan Goldin, "Berlin Speech," *October* 192 (Spring 2025), pp. 101–6.

too does it make patent Germany's repetitive, if repressed, patterns of racial and social classification across time.

Like some painters of the Neue Sachlichkeit, in other words, Farah figures a typical but contested personage, a situated subject of history, and an intervention into contemporaneous historical thinking.[110] This insistence upon uneven and recursive chronologies, to Haslett, renders the Chialo portrait especially potent in the German context (even if the actual controversy has been relatively quiet). The painting "captures the aborted historical process of German memory culture," Haslett argues, referring to the diffuse and contested discourse that has shaped German historical study since 1945, the country's perceived historical ground zero.[111] Memory culture concretizes the past and thwarts its ability to redirect the unidirectional and unique path of official German history. Already in the 1960s, scholarly considerations of 1920s Germany praised the period's futurity (its progressive social and aesthetic norms) while criticizing it for the future it permitted.[112] In such accounts, the earlier period presented an illusion of progress that masked the regression festering underneath. In an essay that revises this undialectical retrospection, Theodor Adorno, a Neue Sachlichkeit detractor, also indirectly outlines a productive role for the work he disliked: "Because the world has survived its own downfall," Adorno writes, "it still needs art as its unconscious historiography."[113] Without making explicit any such theory of history, much of the Neue Sachlichkeit represents a way to fill that need. But it points, too, not to the downfall's singularity but to its continuity, to its own series of historical returns and the expansive historicity that follows.[114]

110. Farah's stance brings him closer in temperament to the early verists—whom Hartlaub found cynical—than to Schrimpf's melancholy. In exhibitions such as *Dog Heaven 2: How Sweet the Wound of Jesus Tastes* (2021), Farah employed a variety of styles and points of reference, some of them connected to narratives of seventeenth-century colonialism—in this, the artist joins figuration to the conceptual or research-based practices of many peers—and some of them to current debates on representation in the art world and wider culture (e.g., Dana Schutz's son, *Black Lena Dunham*, a riff on Gerhard Richter's *Ema [Nude on a Staircase]*).

111. Haslett, "On a Painting by Hamishi Farah."

112. See Jochen Hung, "'Bad' Politics and 'Good' Culture: New Approaches to the History of the Weimar Republic," *Central European History* 49, no. 3/4 (December 2016), pp. 441–53; and Pegioudis, *Artists and Radicalism in Germany*, p. 1. Also relevant is a critique of a recent Berlin exhibition that included Dürer's *Melencolia I* and Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, both once owned by Walter Benjamin (the former, in reproduction; the latter is now in the collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem): Lina Alam, "The Politics of *Angelus Novus*' Return to Berlin," *The Public Review* (July 27, 2025), online.

113. Theodor W. Adorno, "Jene zwanziger Jahren," *Merkur* 16, no. 1 (January 1962), p. 51.

114. "Was it possible," asked Friedrich Meinecke, "among the feudal relics of a Germany that had had a military superstructure imposed from above, for a rising and increasingly enlightened middle class to achieve any peaceful and positive historical relationship to the political past of Germany and the West?" *Historism*, p. 345.