

Realism
– Painting traditions between communism and post-communism case study
Leipzig –

Twenty years after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, Leipzig has developed into an internationally renowned art center. In a sense, the city has regained a position of prominence that it formerly enjoyed, once again becoming familiar to an international audience.

Leipzig has a long-standing cultural tradition, in particular as a center for printing and music. The various and manifold character of this tradition is connected with the history of the city in general. Whereas its sister metropolis Dresden was traditionally a court town with centralized patronage of the arts, Leipzig had long been the leading German trade center.

With the city undergoing an industrial boom in the 19th century, there emerged a class of individuals with fluid money and the desire to transform it into cultural capital. This led to a decentralizing of patronage, to the dissemination of a broader diversity of personal tastes. It is in large part due to the financial support of such individuals that Leipzig was able to inaugurate the Städtisches Museum [The City Museum] in 1848, today's Museum der bildenden Künste [Museum of Fine Arts].

At that time, Leipzig already had the necessary institutional foundation securing the quality of artistic training. One of the oldest German art academies was founded here in 1764 as the Akademie der bildenden Künste [Academy of Fine Arts] by Prince Franz Xaver of Saxony, known today as the HGB - Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst [Literally: Academy of Graphics and Book Art. Officially: Academy of Visual Arts]. During the rapid growth of the industrial revolution intelligent product designs were on demand.

This approach of in-depth, technical training was preserved in the German Democratic Republic. While individuals and artists' groups in Leipzig were practicing art forms influenced by developments in the international scene, the dominant official genre was closely connected to the academic, figurative painting tradition. Its main proponents, among them Wolfgang Mattheuer, Bernard Heisig and Werner Tübke, all three professors at the HGB, came to be known as the "Leipzig School".

The next generation, Arno Rink and Sighard Gille, had studied under the first generation before becoming Professors themselves and teaching the third, the current "New Leipzig School". This

term has been intensively cultivated by journalists in the last few years, and implies, for one thing, a continuation of the tradition of technically well-founded figurative painting. As Arthur Lubow wrote in the New York Times in 2006, “figurative art that was deprecated as hopelessly passé in Paris and Düsseldorf never lost its grip in Leipzig”.¹

The end of the GDR and the German unification in 1990 represented a massive historical rupture. It is hard to overestimate the extent to which Leipzig was confronted with a situation of openness, of tabula rasa. The vast majority of industries shut down, whole populations of qualified people went to the West to find work. This left a real vacuum in the city, vacant spaces, a lot of them appropriately dilapidated, and cheap rents.

In the course of the nineties artists and art students began taking advantage of the new opportunity, reappropriating factory spaces, which had more or less just been switched off and abandoned. There was a similar situation at the academy: while the old spaces were being renovated, many studios and workshops were temporarily relocated, usually in the same kind of former factory spaces, so that many students were able to work in uniquely uncrowded conditions, sometimes one painter in a nine hundred square feet studio. Big spaces and cheap rents, coupled with the fact that until around 2002 / 2003 no-one knew that there was an “important” art scene in Leipzig, least of all the artists themselves. The ability of students and artists to work and experiment in a pressure-free space may have been decisive for the flourishing of painting, photography and media in Leipzig.

The Baumwollspinnerei, a former cotton factory measuring twenty five acres, was one of several sites to attract artists and was also the site of one of the first off art spaces, launched as a non-profit initiative by students and ex-students of the academy. In the last few years, the Spinnerei has become a focal point of the art scene generally. Already dotted with artist’s studios, many of the city’s main galleries have moved in. More and more international artists have also been taking up residence, as well as galleries from Chicago, London, NY, Mexico City and Harlem in temporary spaces. In any case, the bigger private patronage that, alongside the state, keeps the current art scene going, is no longer local, as it was in the past, but has become international.

Although the aforementioned appears to be rather logical, Leipzig’s figurative painting tradition is perceived critically.² It is still affiliated with Socialist Realism starting in the Stalin era. In his

¹ Arthur Lubow, ‘The New Leipzig School’, The New York Times, January 8, 2006.

² Georg Baselitz, ‘Heimatkunde’, Cicero- Magazin für politische Kultur, January 2010;

1939 essay *Avant-garde and Kitsch*, well perceived US-American art critic, Clement Greenberg placed the Socialist Realism of the Stalin era, as well as other forms of totalitarian art, on a par with the commercial mass culture of the West, questioning its art value.³ The same happened in 1999 when Weimar, being about one hour away from Leipzig, became Kulturhauptstadt Europas [European Capital of Culture].

In Weimar, the exhibition titled “Rise and Fall of the Modern“ took place. Works by GDR artists of all subjects and media were displayed randomly on grey plastic— quite an obvious reference to rubbish bags— in a section of the Gauforum, a quadrangle building once put up by the Nazis.⁴ Ten years after the Fall of the Wall, the artistic production in the former GDR was questioned as to whether it could be considered art.

Above all, the exhibition drew an aesthetic parallel between the Degenerate Art exhibition of the Third Reich. Artists like Leipzig painter Neo Rauch threatened to take their works out and some eventually did after having taken the case to court. *Der Weimarer Bilderstreit* [Weimar Image War] can be read as a documentary of three hundred fifty pages about the status of former Eastern German art reflecting upon identity and intellectual property.⁵

In 2000, well-known art critic Roberta Smith wrote positively about Leipzig painter Neo Rauch in the *New York Times*, turning the perception of art upside down. In Smith's words, Rauch's works would “borrow liberally from the Social Realist painting and subdued advertising style once dictated by former East Germany.”⁶ As a result— to cut a more complex story very short— Leipzig became known as a city where one could see and buy technically well-painted works.

In the following years, well-known US-American collectors such as Susan and Michael Hort and Don and Mera Rubell visited. Leipzig painting, to some extent, became a brand, and was reevaluated by market mechanisms. This reevaluation resulted in major museum shows. The question “What is art?” is not decided democratically.⁷ It is decided within the art system, which consists of the artists, the art institutions, and the market.

Daniel Birnbaum, Isabelle Graw, *The Power of Judgment: A Debate on Aesthetic Critique* (Frankfurt am Main: Sternberg Press, 2008), p. 41.

³ Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008), pp.144-146ff, further reading on modernism in Socialist Realism: Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1988/96), pp. 72-73ff.

⁴ Roger Cohen, ‘Exhibiting the Art of History’s Dustbin, Dictators “Treasures Stir German Anger”’, *The New York Times*, August 17, 1999.

⁵ *Der Weimarer Bilderstreit, Szenen einer Ausstellung, Eine Dokumentation* (Weimar: Kunstsammlungen zu Weimar, 2000).

⁶ Roberta Smith, ‘Art in Review: Neo Rauch’, *New York Times*, March 10, 2000.

⁷ Hanno Rauterberg, ‘Es gibt da keine Grenzen!’, interview with Boris Groys, *Die Zeit*, No. 49, 1999.

The market success later created new synergies. The Spinnerei gave the brand its addressable basis. The large scale art event called Rundgang [Gallery Tour] makes all protagonists, especially artists and collectors, prestige-shareholder, its largest profits are symbolic.⁸ To clarify, the Spinnerei is not limited to painting, but open to all kinds of art. It is almost entirely based on private profit and non-profit initiatives forming a cluster.⁹ Local and international protagonists continue to circulate here and internationally. Its active players— the artists, along side curators, gallery owners, and entrepreneurs— will also define by their own actions how long Leipzig will be able to sustain its artistic popularity, locally and internationally.

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⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Über die Verbesserung der guten Nachricht. Nietzsches fünftes "Evangelium"* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001), p.21.

⁹ Walter Grasskamp, *Kunst und Geld: Szenen einer Mischehe* (München: Beck'sche Reihe, 1998) for further reading on art and the market.