

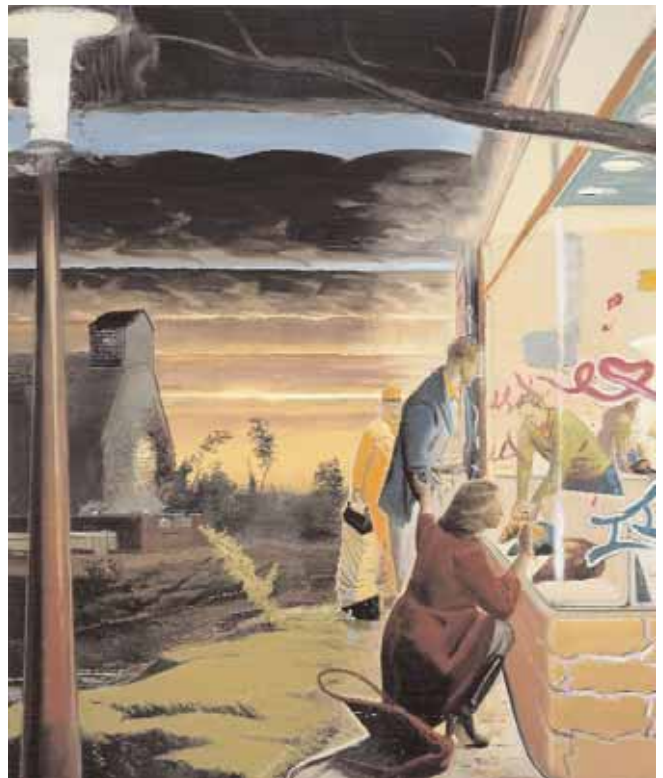
# Neo Rauch



Saint Louis Art Museum

Stepping into a gallery of Neo Rauch's paintings is a strangely disorienting experience. The locations Rauch depicts, such as a schoolroom, a shop window, or a skating rink, are deceptively commonplace. Yet the encounters staged within these spaces mark them as unfamiliar territories. Rauch's intrusion of a giant worm and ice cubes into a game of hockey (Hatz, 2002) or the sale of what appear to be human heads in a generic shop window (Gold, 2003) recall the tactic that Surrealist painter Max Ernst once described as "coupling two realities which apparently cannot be coupled, on a plane which is apparently not appropriate to them."<sup>1</sup> As the Surrealists did before him, Rauch uses unexpected juxtapositions of images to lead us to the irrational and compelling world of dreams. Although they are depicted in situations that demand focused physical or mental effort, Rauch's expressionless figures often appear to be sleepwalking. The canvases are populated with dazed characters attempting to comprehend charts, survive rough games, or solve puzzles. There is little variation between the people in the paintings (the same man and woman recur repeatedly), so that taken together, they read as surrogates rather than individuals. There is also a didactic quality in these works, many of which include a character gesturing forcefully as if to say, "Look here!" While the viewer is presented with numerous clues—frequently text is incorporated into the image—the actual nature of the task or lesson being undertaken remains unclear. Rauch's viewers, like his characters, are challenged to crack an enigmatic code.

The ostensible subject of *Takt*, 1999, is a music lesson. *Takt* can mean time, in the sense of keeping musical rhythm, but it can also mean tact, as in the delicate handling of a situation. A man seated at a piano is instructed by a woman who points to the keyboard with one hand and gestures toward a metronome with the other. As in music, themes within Rauch's paintings are repeated with variations. For example, the word *Takt* is suspended near the center of the canvas, in comic book shorthand for a spoken phrase or thought balloon. Its orientation, upside down and pointed toward an empty black field (as if it is being spoken by an invisible man), emphasizes the artificiality and whimsy of this comic book technique. A striped hot air balloon



Gold, 2003

rising on the right side of the painting echoes the thought balloon. The red, white, and green stripes of the hot air balloon are repeated in the patterned drapes that frame a picture window. Overlapping forms imply a certain perspectival logic in the picture, yet the image is spatially confusing. The instructor seems too small to inhabit the same space as her pupil, and the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the room are permeable. The viewer who pays attention to the painting's small details will eventually notice that this lesson is given on a piano without keys.

The logic of *Hausmeister* (*Caretaker*), 2002, is similarly elusive. Across the bottom of the image, the word *Haus* is superimposed over the word *Meister*. A woman waves emphatically toward a kind of geological map, while a boy backs away, raising one hand defensively. A man in an overcoat (the *Hausmeister*?) looks on. A number of narratives that explain the relationships between the boy, the woman, and the man are suggested by the image, but none can be confirmed. Actively courting ambiguity, Rauch starts with the kernel of an idea—sometimes the fragment of a dream or the contradictions inherent in multiple meanings of the same word—and tries to let each stage of the work lead to the next. He

describes this approach as “minimal process developed through maximal painting.”<sup>2</sup> In another interview he discussed his method more poetically:

*When I stand in front of a blank canvas, it's as if I'm standing in front of a wall of fog . . . I open various contamination chambers and remove a variety of material from them to temporarily store in the territories of my paintings. I lead frightened staffage out of quarantine barracks and offer them an opportunity to move into my chambers of fog.<sup>3</sup>*

With this comment Rauch casts himself as the director in a semitheatrical venture. The conceit of stage sets is particularly evident in *Einfall* (Idea), 2001. *Einfall* contains a picture within a picture: a man at a computer screen surveys the world outside his room through a camera mounted on a brightly colored robot. The smaller image is painted monochromatically in red (offset by gray), while the larger image vibrates with contrasting burnt orange, acid green, and sulfurous yellow tones. In the foreground of the composition, a placard emblazoned with a large N (for Neo?) points



Hausmeister (Caretaker), 2002

toward the man behind the computer screen, suggesting that the painting may be read as an allegory for the relationship of the painter in his studio to the world outside. *Einfall* has two meanings in English: while it more commonly refers to an idea that occurs to one suddenly, it can also refer to a military invasion. Quite possibly the idea occurring to the man at the computer is that an invasion is underway. The pulsating transformers and hybrid creatures that populate *Einfall* reference science-fiction fantasies such as H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*.

Critics familiar with Rauch's background (he was born and raised in Leipzig, where he still lives and works) see traces of Social Realism, the officially sanctioned painting style of the former East Germany, in his paintings. Rauch subverts the original propagandistic function of this style by making his content contradictory and strange. The antiquated quality of his protagonists might also relate to *Ostnostalgie* (east nostalgia), a term coined shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall that refers to a longing for the objects and images of the former East Germany. Rauch exceeds these categories by combining them with numerous other sources and techniques, including the eerie allegories of Max Beckmann, the perverse wit of Sigmar Polke, popular culture imagery in the forms of science-fiction films and children's book illustration, and the use of word-play to contradict or expose the narratives in his pictures. Rauch's works accrue layers of meaning that rest uneasily together like the undulating strata in Hausmeister's geological map. It is the friction between these layers that lends Rauch's paintings their tension, their mystery, and their humor.

Robin Clark  
Associate Curator of Contemporary Art

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1 Max Ernst quoted by André Breton in "Surrealist Situation of the Object" (1935), reprinted in Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, trans., *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 275.

2 Conversation with the author, Leipzig, June 21, 2003.

3 Interview with Alison Gingeras, "Neo Rauch: A Peristaltic Filtration System in the River of Time," *Flash Art*, November/December 2002, p. 69.



Hatz (Chase), 2002

## NEO RAUCH

Born Leipzig, East Germany, 1960  
 Studied at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst  
 Leipzig, 1981–86  
 Master student with Professor Bernhard Heisig,  
 1986–90  
 Lives and works in Leipzig

### Works in Exhibition

Takt (Tact), 1999  
 oil on canvas  
 250 x 200 cm  
 Michael and Judy Ovitz Collection

Einfall (Idea), 2001  
 oil on canvas  
 210 x 300 cm  
 Marc and Livia Straus Family Collection

Hatz (Chase), 2002  
 oil on canvas  
 210 x 250 cm  
 Private Collection, Pennsylvania  
 Courtesy David Zwirner, New York, and Galerie  
 EIGEN + ART, Leipzig/Berlin

Hausmeister (Caretaker), 2002  
 oil on canvas  
 250 x 200 cm  
 Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery, New York

Gold, 2003  
 oil on canvas  
 250 x 210 cm  
 Private Collection, Oyster Bay, New York  
 Courtesy David Zwirner, New York, and Galerie  
 EIGEN + ART, Leipzig/Berlin

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2002  
 Neo Rauch, David Zwirner Gallery, New York  
 Neo Rauch, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht,  
 Holland

2001  
 Sammlung Deutsche Bank, Berlin (traveled to  
 Mannheimer Kunstverein, Mannheim; Neues  
 Museum Weserburg, Bremen; The Douglas Hyde

Gallery, Dublin; International Culture Center,  
 Krakow)

2000  
 Neo Rauch: Randgebiet, Galerie für  
 Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig (traveled to  
 Kunsthalle Zurich and Haus der Kunst Munich)  
 Neo Rauch, Galerie EIGEN + ART, Leipzig  
 Neo Rauch, David Zwirner Gallery, New York

1998  
 Neo Rauch, Galerie EIGEN + ART, Berlin

1997  
 Manöver, Galerie EIGEN + ART, Leipzig  
 Neo Rauch, Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig

1995  
 Neo Rauch, Galerie EIGEN + ART, Leipzig  
 Marineschule, Overbeck Gesellschaft, Lübeck,  
 Germany  
 Neo Rauch, Goethe House, New York

1994  
 Neo Rauch, Projekt Galerie, Kunstverein  
 Elsterpark e.V., Leipzig

1993  
 Neo Rauch, Galerie Alvensleben, Munich  
 Neo Rauch, Galerie EIGEN + ART, Leipzig

1991  
 Neo Rauch, Galerie Schwind, Frankfurt am Main

1989  
 Neo Rauch, Galerie am Thomaskirchhof, Leipzig

### Selected Group Exhibitions

2003  
 For the Record: Drawing Contemporary Life, part  
 of Drawing the World: Masters to Hipsters,  
 Vancouver Art Gallery

2002  
 Drawing Now: Eight Propositions, Museum of  
 Modern Art, New York  
 Dear Painter, Paint Me, Centre Georges  
 Pompidou, Paris (traveled to Kunsthalle Wien, and

Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt)  
 Pertaining to Painting, Contemporary Art Museum,  
 Houston (traveled to Austin Museum of Art)

2001  
 La Biennale di Venezia, Venice  
 EU, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London  
 The Mystery of Painting, Sammlung Goetz, Munich

1999  
 After the Wall, Moderna Museet, Stockholm  
 Children of Berlin, P.S. 1, Long Island City, New  
 York  
 The Golden Age, Institute of Contemporary Art,  
 London

1998  
 Die Macht des Alters – Strategien der  
 Meisterschaft, Deutsches Historisches Museum,  
 Berlin (traveled to Kunstmuseum Bonn and  
 Deutsches Hygiene Museum, Dresden)  
 Transmission, Espace des Arts, Chalon-sur-Saône,  
 France

1997  
 Contemporary Art at Deutsche Bank, London  
 Need for Speed, Grazer Kunstverein, Graz, Austria

1992  
 RENTA Preis, Norris Halle, Nürnberg

### Selected Bibliography

Books and Catalogues  
 2003  
 Daina Augaitis. For the Record: Drawing  
 Contemporary Life. Vancouver: Vancouver Art  
 Gallery.

2002  
 Lynne Cooke and Daniel Birnbaum. Neo Rauch.  
 Maastricht, Holland: Bonnefantenmuseum.  
 Laura Hoptman. Drawing Now: Eight Propositions.  
 New York: Museum of Modern Art.  
 Paola Morsiani. Pertaining to Painting. Houston:  
 Museum of Contemporary Art.

2001  
 Lynne Cooke, Ariane Grigoteit, Harald Kunde, and  
 Thomas Wagner. Neo Rauch – Sammlung  
 Deutsche Bank. Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim.

2000  
 Klaus Werner, ed. Neo Rauch: Randgebiet.  
 Leipzig: Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst.

### Articles and Reviews

2003  
 Howard Halle. "Neo Rauch." Grand Street 71,  
 Spring 2003, pp. 116–21.

2002  
 Alison Gingeras. "Neo Rauch: A Peristaltic  
 Filtration System in the River of Time" (interview).  
 Flash Art, November/December, pp. 66–69.  
 Peter Schjeldahl. "The Drawing Board." The New  
 Yorker, November 4, pp. 102–3.  
 Roberta Smith. "Neo Rauch." The New York Times,  
 April 26, p. E33.  
 Luc Tuymans. "What the Painters Say." Art Press,  
 July–August, pp. 37–46.

2001  
 Daniel Birnbaum. "Neo Rauch." Artforum, March,  
 pp. 136–37.

2000  
 Kristin M. Jones. "Neo Rauch." Frieze,  
 June/July/August, pp. 116–17.  
 Roberta Smith. "Neo Rauch." The New York Times,  
 March 10, p. E41.  
 Gregory Volk. "Neo Rauch." Art in America, May,  
 pp. 161–62.

first page: Einfall (Idea), 2001