

PROFILES

# NEO RAUCH'S ANTAGONISTIC ART

*German painting's arch-traditionalist has a brush with controversy.*

**By Thomas Meaney**

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Rauch sees irony as essential and says, "You have to be able to risk kitsch." Photograph by Lena Kunz for The New Yorker



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I first met the German painter Neo Rauch shortly before Christmas last year, in Leipzig. It was one of the final days of his show at the gallery Eigen+Art, and the place was nearly empty. The show was called “Handlauf” (“Handrail”), and the title picture, roughly eight feet tall by ten feet wide, showed a solidly built, barefoot woman joining hands with a gentleman in leather boots. But the man’s hindquarters revealed him to be a centaur, and the woman seemed to have an extra leg and an extra face, to the side of her main one. They were in a tumbledown room in front of what looked like a stage backdrop of a classic German Romantic landscape—mountains, forest, clouds, moon—next to which a man cradled an electric guitar and a woman pounded some kind of tambourine.

This is what Rauch is known for: huge, dense, ostensibly narrative scenes in which narrative is stubbornly elusive. Events seem to take place in a parallel world. Portions of a canvas can be futuristic, with space-age infrastructure, while elsewhere there may be a sky out of Tiepolo and people who have come from the Napoleonic Wars or some primordial Europe. Rauch’s figures are bound together in tight compositions that recall Renaissance art one minute and socialist realism the next, and yet they remain sealed off from one another, unaware of anything around them, and their actions have a suspended quality. Alongside patches of preternatural calm, a discordant color breaks in, or a reptilian tail, or a burning backpack, or a Converse sneaker. The over-all effect is of allegorical painting, but these are allegories to which Rauch has thrown away the key.

As I walked around, a small, puckish man fell into step beside me and started to talk to me about Rauch and the Leipzig art scene. It was Rauch's gallerist, Gerd Harry Lybke, who has been a figure in East German art since the early eighties. Universally known as Judy Lybke—for his resemblance to a character on the American television show “Family Affair,” which Leipzigers watched surreptitiously in the Communist years—he grew up wanting to be a cosmonaut but found himself working in a factory and being an artist's model as a sideline. That's how he met Rauch and the other artists who became known as the New Leipzig School. He ran a clandestine gallery out of his apartment, and manned the entrance in the nude, in part to dissuade Stasi agents from entering. By the time the Berlin Wall fell, he was a major impresario, and he soon became one of the chief gallerists representing art coming out of the former East. As he explained it to me, all the bottled-up energy of East German art seemed to have nowhere to go but to his gallery. He captured it all, and started uncorking it in the nineties, when Rauch and several of his other artists began to break into the Western market. Rauch's pictures, which can nowadays fetch around a million dollars apiece, have established him as the unrivalled German painter of his generation.

Rauch's work stands in stark contrast to that of German worthies such as Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer. A generation younger, Rauch is not preoccupied with German national shame, and he paints like someone who never got the news that other artistic media existed. Critics are sometimes put off by his painterly traditionalism, but more often they write about having been cornered into admiration in spite of themselves. “I was well prepared to dislike Rauch,” the art critic Dushko Petrovich Córdova wrote, after seeing a 2005 exhibition. “The first room of the show abruptly ended my plans. Three large Rauch paintings imposed themselves on the huge space in an entirely unexpected way. They reminded me, in their scale, of the altarpieces by Giotto and Duccio that dominate the first room of the Uffizi.”

After Lybke and I had talked for nearly an hour, Rauch himself came in, from his studio nearby, wearing a leather motorcycle jacket. His wife, Rosa Loy, was

with him; they met while in art school, and she is also a prominent figurative painter. He surveyed the smattering of visitors and the staff warily, as if each of them might lay claim to his time. Now sixty-one, he is tall and fit, with a faintly martial bearing. His hands are strong, with rough, paint-caked fingers. His hair, close-cropped at the sides, is permitted to flow a little on top, and he peers at the world through slightly bulging, seemingly impastoed eyes.

Lybke introduced us, and Rauch took me to look again at some of the larger canvasses. In one of them, two men, one dressed in white and one in black, stood in front of some factory chimney stacks, daubing paint on a large set of horns, while a woman, twining her limbs around the horns, gazed on. To the left was a man assisting the painters, and at the bottom was a resentful-looking man with a large magenta megaphone in his hand and a snakelike tail that coiled up the legs of the assistant. This archetypal agitator reappeared in several of the paintings. "I dislike activist types," Rauch said. He speaks quietly, in a slightly formal register that all the while ironizes itself. I asked him about a group of three men in a smaller painting, one of whom, his hair in a topknot, was whipping his own back like a medieval flagellant. "They are punishing themselves for having white skin," Rauch told me, and added, "I detest hair buns on men."

As we looked at the last painting in the show, Rauch said, "So you've heard about the critic?" The year before, Wolfgang Ullrich, one of the country's leading art critics, had written an article, later expanded into a book, identifying a rightist ascendancy in the German art world. For progressive painters, he argued, the idea of art as a pure expression of freedom seemed less tenable in the face of gender and post-colonial critiques, on the one hand, and art-market commoditization, on the other. Right-leaning artists, by contrast, were rallying to the cause of aesthetic autonomy. In the past, radical artists had indicted a reactionary German society, but now many important painters were reactionaries who indicted politically correct liberalism. Rauch was singled out by Ullrich as the most famous example. "What are we to think when Rauch compares feminists to the Taliban?" Ullrich wrote.



Rauch responded with a large painting of a man resembling Ullrich hoisting himself up from a latrine and, with his own feces, painting a figure giving a Nazi salute. The painting was titled “Der Anbräuner,” which translates literally as “the one who makes things brown” but means something more like “the one who meretriciously paints his enemies as fascists.” The message was clear: Rauch was not about to let himself be publicly folded into the ranks of the new German right; in his view, the threat to German culture came from those who dared to reduce questions of artistic form to politics. Completing the publicity stunt, “Der Anbräuner” sold at a charity auction, raising three-quarters of a million euros for a Leipzig children’s hospice. Still, the experience had left Rauch wary. Shortly after “Der Anbräuner” sold, Rauch pulled out of a show in Leipzig that was to have been one of his largest exhibitions in his native land in a decade. Rauch sometimes speaks of his art as a peristaltic filtration system that pulls in everything around him, and lately there had been so much political dirt in circulation that caution seemed advisable. “Among my New Year’s resolutions is not to comment on political issues!” he wrote to me in January, and it took many months to persuade him to speak again. “I’ll coöperate with this profile under one condition,” he said at one point. “You send James Thurber to do my portrait.”

At night, Rauch sometimes lies awake with a feeling of being pursued by figures from whatever he’s working on. He paints entirely from imagination and says that his paintings have their origin in waking dreams. These images become a scaffolding on which he builds, by turns instinctively and cerebrally, letting the picture develop on the canvas. When I visited him at home in July, he looked haggard, having had a particularly disturbed sleep, but on this occasion there was an additional factor: a techno party nearby. “The only thing worse than techno for sleep is bad techno,” he said.

The house where Rauch and Loy have lived for the past twenty years is large but unimposing, situated on the southern outskirts of Leipzig. Nearby, a Communist-era lignite mine has been reclaimed as lakes and woodland, and the house, set back from the road, is hidden in overgrown foliage, making it feel

more isolated from the world than it actually is. Enclosed in bushes in the front garden stood a large statue Rauch had made of one of his centaurs, dressed like an office worker and wearily carrying two jerricans of gasoline, recurrent objects in his work. We sat with coffee at a worn wooden table under cherry trees in the garden. Rauch and Loy don't paint on weekends and instead spend their time gardening, mostly growing potatoes and other vegetables. "You could say we are 'preppers,'" he said, smiling at having hit on a slightly ridiculous English term. Rauch feels deeply rooted in the state of Saxony. "It may sound esoteric," he told me, "but I happen to believe in telluric forces, and that you have a connection to the place where you came into the world."

Saxony has been at the forefront of German painting for centuries. Caspar David Friedrich, the signal painter of German Romanticism, made his career there. The small court that ruled Saxony held its own culturally against the rest of the country, and its two largest cities, Leipzig and Dresden, have the museums and the academies to show for it. Much of the core of German Expressionism emerged from this background, including Max Beckmann, who was born in Leipzig, and Otto Dix and George Grosz, both of whom passed through the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts.

But the cities have also been considered provincial backwaters by many Germans, especially in the West. During the Cold War, part of Saxony was known as *Tal der Ahnungslosen* ("valley of the clueless"), because it was one of the few areas that West German radio waves didn't reach, and the Saxon accent is still roundly mocked in the rest of the country. The success of the new German right in Saxony has given a darker tinge to such regional rivalries, and the repercussions have been felt in the cultural world. A few years ago, another target of Ullrich's, the writer Uwe Tellkamp—whose 2008 novel, "The Tower" (a virtuosic G.D.R. version of "Buddenbrooks"), had made him an international publishing phenomenon—became persona non grata in German literary circles after he criticized Angela Merkel's refugee policies as dishonest.

Tellkamp is on friendly terms with Rauch, and has subsequently published a novella based on him and the Leipzig art scene. When I talked to Ullrich, he

spoke of both men as products of a peculiarly East German pride. “You have to understand that Rauch has an attitude that only in the East did they learn what *real* art was, and what it means to be a great artist,” he said. “Uwe Tellkamp sees himself as the next Thomas Mann, and Rauch sees himself as the new Max Beckmann. They have insulated their world view with the sense of their own majesty. They look with a kind of pity on artists who dabble in concepts or who cocoon themselves in theory. They don’t want to explain anything.”

Rauch’s studio is in an old cotton mill in a former workers’ district in the west of the city, and he likes to bicycle there from his home. The taxi-driver who drove me to the studio commented on how much Rauch’s paintings sold for and joked sourly that he was single-handedly responsible for rising rents in the city. (“Some people apparently preferred it when the whole district smelled of piss,” Rauch said when I mentioned this.)

I rode a freight elevator up to the top floor and went through a pair of unmarked metal doors. When I entered, Broken Social Scene was blasting from a stereo. I asked if I was disturbing him. “Everything disturbs me,” he said. He seemed to mean it, but not in a rude way—more as if this were an affliction he suffered from—and in his resigned tone there was a hint of self-mockery. A small pug named Smylla was pacing around the room. “We partly chose her for her size, since she fits on the basket of my bicycle,” he said. In one of Smylla’s several beds in the studio, I noticed a toy replica of her.

The room was cavernous and had the feeling of being half studio, half gym, with a punching bag hanging from the ceiling. “I imagine it’s the face of my critics,” Rauch said, with a smile that seemed to concede the predictability of the line. Behind him, four canvasses stood in various states of near-completion. In another, a winged man was supine on a table and being operated on: it was difficult to tell whether the wings were being torn off or stitched on. “Angels are important,” Rauch said cryptically.

He looked a little less groomed than when I'd seen him at the gallery; his face was bronzed from a recent vacation in the South Tyrol and sprouting scrubs of beard. We sat at a worktable next to a small kitchen, where he and Loy, whose studio is next door, break for lunch each day. Loy is one of the few people Rauch takes criticism from, but they have a rule that each will offer an opinion only if solicited by the other.

"Coffee, water, vodka?" Rauch asked. We opted for vodka. "Good," Rauch said. "That will loosen my tongue."

High up on one wall of the studio is a photograph of Rauch's mother. When Rauch was five weeks old, his parents, both art students at the academy in Leipzig, were killed, in a train derailment outside the city's main station. "My mother was nineteen, my father was twenty-one," Rauch said. "The state was set up to have children when you were young. My grandmother was thirty-nine." He grew up with his grandparents, calling them Mother and Father, in the midsize town of Aschersleben. The family kept photographs of Rauch's parents and some of their art around the house. "They were integrated into my upbringing, and we spoke of them often," Rauch said.

"When you have a tragedy like mine in the background, people tend to treat you tenderly," he told me. "I wanted to be like other children, but the tragedy hovered." He remembers older people whispering about the terrible thing that had happened to him, even though he didn't himself feel the full force of the event.

At around the age of sixteen, Rauch found a book about the Los Angeles architect Richard Neutra in a stall in Aschersleben, and went home and drew up designs for his own houses. Listening to British rock on the radio, he dreamed of the West. "It was this great blue promise on the horizon," he told me. "And I would be going there someday."

Life in the East entailed deprivations, but for a future artist there were also resources. One of the ironies of East German Communism is that it



consecrated many of the bourgeois rituals and institutions of German culture—piano lessons, choir practice, drawing schools, classical prose—that suffered in West Germany during the upheavals of the sixties.

After Rauch graduated from the local *Gymnasium* in Aschersleben, he applied to study art in Leipzig, just as his parents had. “It was not a mystery who I was and why I was going there,” Rauch told me. But his first application was rejected, he said, because he was too young. Waiting to reapply, Rauch spent three years in the Army, in an infantry battalion. He recalls his bit part in the Cold War fondly—“You were with the sons of professors and the sons of garbagemen”—and feels that it gave him discipline. “Of course, at the time I didn’t appreciate it,” he said. “But it was an important experience—a vanished experience in this country.”

Rauch arrived at the Leipzig Academy of Fine Arts in 1981. He was twenty-one, and recalls the atmosphere as that of a prolonged party. “There was a hedonism among the students that is all but unthinkable today,” Rauch said. “We had everything except drugs, which were hard to come by.” The academy, one of the most traditionalist German art schools, was then an unlikely citadel of experimentation, and Western art books were passed around like samizdat. More important to Rauch’s development, though, was a stringent emphasis on old-fashioned technical skills that were barely being taught in the West. “‘You think you’re an artist!’” he recalled a teacher scoffing on the first day of class. “He rolled up a piece of paper and placed it on my desk. ‘Draw that,’ he said. I couldn’t draw it!” For the first year, Rauch and his classmates worked almost entirely in monochrome. “You had to *earn your way* into color!” he said.

Rauch’s closest mentor, Arno Rink, and other professors there, such as Werner Tübke, Bernhard Heisig, and Wolfgang Mattheuer, formed the first generation of the Leipzig School. These artists believed in the country’s socialist ideal, but still insisted on adhering to their own aesthetic prerogatives, rather than conforming to any state-sanctioned style. Tübke painted gargantuan agitprop pieces, but in the manner of Tintoretto. Heisig painted Lenin as if he were competing with Velázquez. “With considerable courage, they had managed to

create a kind of space sheltered from the directives of the regime,” Rauch said. “Heisig once told me: If the state commissions you to do a work, don’t sacrifice your style, even if they want to title it ‘Workers and Intellectuals.’ ”

Rauch mostly disavows his paintings from this period, but his career took off quickly. Soon after getting his first diploma, in 1986, he began to be included in group exhibitions, and his work was warmly reviewed by the Communist press, which praised his synthesis of the international and the local. He was poised to become a leading artist in a state that was about to disappear.

“I can’t remember what I was doing on the day the Wall fell,” Rauch told me, getting up to refill our vodkas. He put some corned beef in Smylla’s bowl, and then realized that another bowl of it had already been set out. “A lucky day for her,” he said, shrugging. He returned from the kitchen with vodka, a pair of espressos, and slices of *Bienenstich* (“bee sting” cake), one of several German delicacies for which Rauch is a tireless evangelist.

When the socialist state collapsed, Rauch claimed, he was prepared to settle into a quiet life as a painter with a teaching post at the academy: “A more than adequate salary—it was going to be fine.” All the same, he resented the dissolution of his artistic world. “Suddenly everyone was scrambling to do installation art and video art, and whatever the curators commanded,” he said, and it felt almost embarrassing to be a painter. For a while, his work toggled between abstraction and figuration, as if trying to chart a course between them, but the latter eventually won out. The choice seems to have been instinctive, but

he came to think of it as a drama of purity pitted against opportunism. A 1998 painting, “Stoff,” showed women in a Cold War-era factory apparently mass-producing abstract art. “It’s less obvious when you paint a bad abstract painting,” Rauch told me. “Whereas with a bad figurative painting everyone knows right away.”

**I**n Berlin, I went to a Rauch show at Gutshaus Steglitz, a mansion from the early Romantic period in the far southwest of the city, a short walk from where I live. It seemed unusual that an artist who has had a solo show at the Met would exhibit in this charming but fusty venue. It was as if Frank Stella were having a show at the Brooklyn Historical Society. Later, I asked Rauch why he’d chosen to have his work shown there, of all places. “I have never been warm toward Berlin,” he said. “And they don’t like me there. So to have my show on the perimeter of Berlin is my way of saying, ‘Here I will come, but no farther.’ ”

Rauch is not wrong about his Berlin critics. “He’s absolutely disgusting,” Alexander Koch, one of the city’s leading gallerists, told me. Koch, who had been a junior colleague of Rauch’s at the Leipzig Academy, explained that the work had solved a German problem. “It was the nineties, and the failing project of reunification needed better publicity,” he said. “And here you have this success story of an Eastern German artist who is selling well in New York? It was just too perfect.” In 2010, when Rauch’s fiftieth birthday was celebrated with major shows in a number of cities, Elke Buhr, who is now the editor of the Berlin art magazine *Monopol*, wrote a scathing article asking why Rauch had become the most successful painter of his generation. “Unfortunately, it’s a dumb question,” she wrote. “The answer is: because he applies the clichés of German profundity so aptly.”

Koch told me that, on a recent visit to New York, he had met up with a group of well-known feminist painters, who were praising Rauch’s work. “I told them, ‘Have you bothered to look at what Rauch actually paints?’ ” he said, pulling up an image from the Leipzig show. “You’ve got a bomb blowing up a factory of

the good old hardworking Germans in the background, and then, in the foreground, there's a Biedermeier painter who's trying to do his work, while a demonic activist's reptilian tail is twirling around the poor man's leg, while his wife comforts him in an oh-so-wifely way. It's not as if Rauch is hiding anything he thinks."

Rauch's first international break came at the 1999 Armory Show, in New York, where his work was one of a handful of pieces by German painters. Roberta Smith, of the *Times*, singled him out as a Leipzig artist "who mixes various illustrational styles with beautiful paint handling and a sense of lost Utopias, and the more Pop-like work of Liz Arnold." It was only a line, but both Rauch and Judy Lybke attribute their ascent to Smith's notice.

A steady trickle of buyers became interested in Rauch, and soon private jets from LaGuardia were making direct flights to Leipzig. Overwhelmed with demand, Lybke hit upon a way of husbanding supply while increasing Rauch's appeal. He would tell prospective buyers that there were other artists they should really own before their collection would be ready for a Rauch. I talked to the collectors Don and Mera Rubell, who eventually mounted the first significant Rauch show in the U.S. They recalled the various artists they bought—Matthias Weischer, David Schnell—before finally being given access to some of Rauch's major early work, and described how Lybke fashioned an installment plan for them to pay for paintings they couldn't yet afford.

The more I spoke to people about Rauch, the more it seemed as if some kind of transatlantic ruse had enveloped him. A painter who went out of his way to learn from artists beyond the Iron Curtain had been mistaken for an experimental socialist realist by a New York art world hungry for East European exoticism in the wake of the Cold War. Some wealthy buyers liked the idea of having parables of the failure of Communism hanging in their living rooms. It hardly mattered that Rauch had been born too late for socialist realism's heyday and had suppressed as much of his early art as possible. When American buyers came to Leipzig, Rauch became the beneficiary of this historical misunderstanding.



Still, Rauch found life in nineties Germany unsettling. “They were sending all of these mediocrities over into the East to occupy key positions,” he said. “Men who looked like Quasimodo came looking for uncomplicated Eastern women.” Many East Germans felt humiliation at suddenly being poor relations in their new country. As Western investors and officials came to see what value could be extracted from the carcass of Communism, uncompetitive factories were shuttered, and workers found themselves jobless and reliant on the new state.

Rauch was spared such indignities, but in 1999 a West German curator mounted a controversial exhibition in Weimar called “The Rise and Fall of Modernism.” The exhibition juxtaposed rooms of Nazi art with rooms of G.D.R. Communist art, as if they were equal parts of the gruesome legacy that unification had overcome. Rauch was appalled to find that a Communist-era painting of his, a state commission for a national youth association, was in the show. (“We thought we could subversively convey our libertarian world view to them and get some money for it on top,” Rauch told me.) Because the painting had by then become the property of unified Germany, Rauch had no control over its inclusion in the show, or over the way it was jammed in with the other works. In a magazine interview, he threatened to break into the museum and rescue the picture.

It is this feeling of indignation that fuelled his more recent fight with Wolfgang Ullrich. Once again, a self-appointed liberal commissar was presuming to judge his politics and his motives, and was stifling dissent by labelling anyone who departed from bien-pensant norms a fascist. I expressed surprise that Rauch, no stranger to negative criticism, should have been so upset. “Yes, but this one went over the line,” he said. “Comrade Ullrich left art criticism to become a full-time political activist. This man, from the West, who doesn’t know socialism, is trying to bring these ideas back here, to the East, to me, who does.”

**I**n July, Rauch proposed a drive to Aschersleben, where there is a permanent museum dedicated to his work. I met him at his house, and we lowered

ourselves into his 1992 Porsche 911. “Brewster green,” he commented. “You have to special-order the color.”

I had read in a German newspaper that Rauch is a fast driver—a couple of years ago, he broke several ribs in a crash—but on the road he was a perfectly courteous participant in the delicate medley that is the German Autobahn. The news in Germany was of deadly floods across the West. “Baerbock will become Chancellor,” he said, referring to Annalena Baerbock, of the Green Party. I assured him that this would almost certainly not happen—the Greens had been dropping in the polls—but he was convinced that the Greens would triumph sooner or later, and he wasn’t happy about it.

“That’s the Petersberg,” Rauch said, as a small mountain came into view, and told me that it was the highest point between Saxony and the Urals. “I’ve painted it many times. There’s a twelfth-century church, a Bismarck monument, a G.D.R.-era TV tower, and a roller coaster.” It sounded like a site made for Rauch. I noted that there seemed to be a lot of wind turbines in the area. “They are foisted on these rural districts in a kind of low-level corruption scheme, where state ministers take the funds but the people who live here have little say,” Rauch said. “I would like to see them erect a turbine in Mitte”—the central district of Berlin. I asked Rauch if he’d ever painted any turbines. “No, no, no,” he said. “Only the old sort of windmills.”

We arrived in Aschersleben and pulled up to the Grafikstiftung Neo Rauch. Established nearly a decade ago, the museum is a jagged modernist structure in the middle of the town. Rauch visits every few weeks and is treated as an absentee lord by the staff. There was a large, well-lit room of Rauch’s paintings and drawings. We approached a drawing of a hipsterish-looking head atop a body of tentacles, one of which was holding a megaphone. “You have to be able to risk kitsch,” Rauch told me. He explained how he often, at the last moment, uses an ironic flourish—some adjustment to a landscape or a face, say—to rescue the equilibrium of a painting. “Irony is essential,” he said. “It’s the sport of kings, and where we should make our home if we want to stay sane.”

As we walked through the gallery, Rauch told me that, in the depths of the nineties, he had found solace and renewal in the writings of Ernst Jünger, a renegade nationalist who shot to fame in the twenties with an account from the trenches, "Storm of Steel." Rauch was especially drawn to his 1939 novel, "On the Marble Cliffs," about a besieged aristocracy in a surreal landscape battling a depraved forest ranger and his minions. The book was read at the time as an allegory of the rise of the Nazis; Jünger, though a figure of the hard right, ultimately found the Nazis *déclassé*. But Rauch felt that it spoke equally to our own era, when great artists must battle against a new generation of politically correct commissars, the grandchildren of the Communist originals.

Rauch had made arrangements for us to have lunch at the Grauer Hof, in the old town. "The trouble with the old town is that there are no German restaurants," Rauch said. "I don't quite know how this happens." The Grauer Hof turned out to be the grand exception: part of the vast agricultural landholdings of a monastery in the fourteenth century, it had been a prison from the nineteenth century until the nineteen-forties, and then a storage facility for the city archives under Communism. The owner greeted Rauch with deference and joined us at a table. We were the only occupants; the restaurant was open just for Rauch.

Over ox cheeks in rich red-wine sauce, potatoes, and beer, I asked Rauch if he wasn't exaggerating the confrontation between abstraction and figuration in the nineties. Weren't Richter and Kiefer and Bacon all figurative? "But it wasn't the painters who were in control," Rauch shot back. "It was the age of the curator." He entered into one of his periodic rhapsodies about the glories of British painting: "Freud, Auerbach, Bacon—we looked up to them because they were also working on an island, in their case an actual island, but they were cut off as well, much like us in East Germany." We were served another round of ox cheeks. "I'm afraid I need to capitulate before the potatoes," Rauch said to the owner. "The ox cheeks are my vegetables."

After lunch, we took a stroll through Aschersleben. Rauch pointed to the Art Deco movie theatre where, as a teen-ager, he had taken the *Jugendweike*, a

Communist version of a confirmation ceremony. On a small street, two children on scooters grazed my side, and Rauch, turning burgherly, gently admonished them. As we walked, he looked covetously at the buildings, wondering if he should buy a house in the center of town, or fix up one of the abandoned buildings. I asked him whether he didn't have a kind of schizophrenic attitude toward the West, where he has achieved his fortune and his revenge, but which also still irritates him. "I believe in capitalism," he told me. "But capitalism plus responsibility and sensitivity." There was something rote about the pronouncement. It seemed likelier that Neo Rauch was someone who was going to rise to the top of whatever system he was thrown into.

We got in the car and headed back to Leipzig. There were more animadversions against wind farms. "The view of the old poets is gone," he said. Rauch extolled Jünger's passion for the natural world—botany and entomology—and his visions of the future; the writer had dreamed up the drone and the smartphone in his novels, decades before their arrival in reality. "Jünger knew how to harvest his inner experience," Rauch had said earlier. "And he mints an infinitely rich trove of images."

That applied to Rauch also, and there were perhaps other commonalities. Jünger, despite his cordial, if aloof, relations with the National Socialists, was fêted by postwar German governments. By the time he died—in 1998, at the age of a hundred and two—he was lauded as the greatest German writer on modern warfare, a connoisseur of humanity's underbelly. Rauch, too, despite his provocations in the public sphere, is on good terms with much of the centrist German establishment, including the head of the Free Democratic Party and the editor of *Die Zeit*. He was commissioned to create the stained-glass windows of Naumburg Cathedral, which Angela Merkel inspected to her satisfaction, and he also built a light sculpture for the Bundestag. Jünger had a special name for the kind of figure who, with an abundance of sang-froid, purges all social norms from himself while outwardly upholding them: the Anarch. It's an idea for which Rauch feels deep affinity.



I asked Rauch what he'd meant when he said, in an interview, that beards symbolize the irrational and have an enormous potential for destruction. "I didn't mean irrationalism," he said. "I meant that beards are what our forefathers had—that it is impossible to imagine some of them, like Moses, without beards." He later remarked that, if you strip away the beards of the men on a Velázquez canvas, the painting loses its meaning. His own incipient beard was gone—"Rosa kept trying to escape from me when I went to embrace her with the beard, so it had to be gotten rid of"—but the question of facial hair no longer seemed to preoccupy him. "The irrational is encapsulated for me in the tattoo," he said. "They are emblems of a hollow spirit."

Rauch was veering into self-parody now. I thought about his postmodern, magpie approach to his artistic forebears—as if the whole history of painting had been flattened into a palette of techniques for him to pick from. Ullrich had been right to register something alarming about Rauch, but it was hardly the political pantomime he engaged in. It was more that Rauch had, through his teachers, come into contact with some of the last traces of the utopian impulse behind modernist art, but he had subjected their ideals to remorseless inversion. "I do utopia, but backward," he told me several times. In Rauch's paintings, connection has broken down, and he projects his utopia not into the future but into a fractured past.

Furthermore, Rauch's recent tours of duty in Germany's culture wars had unsettled the riddling poise of his neo-Romantic tableaux, and ambiguity was submitting to something almost hectoring. It seemed that Rauch realized this at some level and that it was behind his resolution, however imperfectly kept, to step away from politics.

Rauch told me that New York City was the only place he could live besides Saxony. "The hard angles, the lines," he said. "I could work with them for a while." The last time he was in New York for a show, Rauch made a trip up the Hudson. Dia:Beacon made less of an impression than West Point. "I have a great interest in military matters, and I wanted to see how the U.S. military élite do things," he said. "It was a great blunder that Germany got rid of the wrong

army after the Wall fell.” I asked Rauch what New York painters he liked. He mentioned Cecily Brown, Ena Swansea, Lisa Yuskavage, Marcel Dzama, Julian Schnabel, and Dana Schutz. “Nicole Eisenman is a good painter,” he said. “But I think she might have a tattoo.”

We reached Leipzig’s central station, where Rauch was to drop me off. In front of the station, a group of people crossed the street, including a limping man in camouflage, heavily tattooed. “The Herrenvolk are not coming back,” Rauch said, letting the statement hang in the air for sardonic effect. Before we said goodbye, he mentioned that he was behind schedule for his next show in New York. “I’m having a problem—a new kind of difficulty—with the figures,” Rauch said. No doubt the figures would be chasing him past the edge of sleep, deep into the night. ♦

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