De-authentification and Authentification in and by the Contemporary Art Market

The Case of Neo Rauch

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

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

Neo Rauch is known above all for his monumental paintings of the past decade, but his surviving oeuvre includes works dating back to 1984. These are entirely omitted from the catalogue of Neo Rauch works compiled by the Galerie Eigen + Art, however, and rights to re-produce any such early works are not granted. Instead, the start of Rauch’s oeuvre has been magically reset to the year 1993. Autograph works produced before this date have consequently suffered a de-authentification, in the sense that their authenticity is not officially certified. This redrawing of the boundaries of Rauch’s oeuvre emerges explicitly in 2000 in the essay »Flurbereinigung« – literally »reparcelling« – by Harald Kunde. This reparcelling was then definitively validated by the »Randgebiet« exhibition of Rauch’s works that ran from December 2000 to August 2001, first in Leipzig and then in Munich and Zurich, and by another show at the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht in 2002. In the most recent monographs and exhibition catalogues, meanwhile, even the bibliographical information relating to Neo Rauch’s early phase is missing. This restrictive definition of what constitutes Rauch’s authentic oeuvre is noteworthy above all because those who have contributed to it include publicly funded museums that are strictly speaking publicly funded museums that are strictly speaking
potent canvases such as »Keimlinge« (»Seedlings«) and »Der Gärtner« (»The Gardeners«), an unmistakable change in style makes itself felt in works such as »Andere Länder, andere Sitten« (»Other Countries, Other Customs«) and »Kopf an Kopf« (»Head to Head«). Many of these were now executed on paper and already exhibited properties that would become typical of later works, namely an opaque ground and the combination of real-world objects and figures in alien situations with individual letters strewn seemingly by chance across the plane. Tending in the same direction are works from 1991, which are barely distinguishable from those Rauch would produce as from 1993. The best example I know is »Die Erde ist eine kurze Waltze« (»The Earth is a Short Waltz«), a painting in oil on paper of 1991. More or less opaque grounds, muted tones and sign-like ciphers carrying representational associations are characteristic of this and other works produced shortly afterwards. Recognizable human figures also make an increasing appearance between now and 1993.

The strict ruling that only the works he produced as from 1993 are authentic is probably linked with Rauch’s switch from the Galerie Schwind in Frankfurt to the Galerie Eigen + Art in Leipzig, marked by an exhibition of his work hosted by the Leipzig gallery that same year. It should also be seen in the light of the heated debates in the nineties over whether East German art - the art practised by Rauch’s professors at the HGB, in other words - was actually art at all. It is a fact that art produced in the GDR was almost wholly discredited throughout the entire decade following German Reunification: in June 1990 by Georg Baselitz, for example, who curtly dismissed the East German artists as »assholes« and »propagandists« in 1993 by the debate on art here became a proxy war, one that broke out in place of the political conflicts still unresolved in post-Reunification Germany; Second, the debate fed the suspicion that this was a clash between two contradictory concepts of art. If one was art, the other could not be art - and vice versa; and third, in view of these debates, an artist who wanted to achieve international success would do well to dissociate himself from the art of the former East Germany.

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

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

However, the market reacts with a price differentiation. Rauch’s works from 1995 onwards sell for up to five times as much as those produced prior to 1993, while his latest paintings carry a price tag up to ten times higher. This trend is also confirmed by the results posted by ArtBasel of 2012, where two recent monumental paintings sold for 720,000 euros each and a third for 850,000 US dollars. Rauch’s early works are bought and sold almost exclusively by collectors within Germany, moreover, whereas his current works attract an international clientele.

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

Notes

1 April Eisman: Painting the East German Experience. Neo Rauch in the Late 1990s. In: Oxford Art Journal, 35, 2012, pp. 233–249. – For the translation of this text I would like to thank Karen Williams, for helpful suggestions April Eisman and Paul Kaiser, for his invitation to the CIHA2012 congress Johannes Nathan.
8 See the illustrations in: Neo Rauch 2000 (note 5), pp. 42–47.
9 Neo Rauch 2010 (note 7), p. 16.

19 Art. Das Kunstmagazin, 6, 1990, pp. 54–72.
22 DER SPIEGEL, 21, 1999, 24.05.1999.

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