

Werner Spies, Opening Address for the “para” Exhibition at the Max Ernst Museum in Brühl, October 28, 2007

Berlin has played us the hit “the most beautiful French come from New York.” The show from the Metropolitan Museum in New York, dedicated to French masterpieces of the nineteenth century, drew huge crowds in Berlin. The Max Ernst Museum in Brühl has an interesting variation to offer: “the most important Leipziger comes from New York.” Indeed, he comes straight from the Metropolitan Museum. The paintings in our exhibition were created for that exceptional location, for that world-class museum. Rauch worked on the project for more than a year. The Metropolitan Museum and the Max Ernst Museum now appear as partners. The reason for that can be found in Max Ernst. Two years ago, I was able to organize a comprehensive retrospective for the Metropolitan Museum. The fact that now, in return, Neo Rauch’s exhibition comes to Brühl from the Metropolitan Museum, is remarkable in every way. The artist arrives at the right place, the perfect place, the place which is dedicated to the unmistakable confusion you could almost describe as giving a sense of purpose – the confusion with which Max Ernst infused the techniques and the themes of art. It is this proximity to a part of history, to art history, which may be what can so deeply disturb the observer of Neo Rauch’s work. One look at his paintings – for instance *Der nächste Zug* (The Next Move/The Next Draw), *Die Fuge* (The Fugue/the Gap) *Jagdzimmer* (Hunters’ Room), *Paranoia*, or *Vorort* (Suburb) – which rush to tell all their stories – shows that the artist not only confronts this proximity for himself; he also forces the observer to measure what he, today, as an unmistakable, critical contemporary, shows in the way of themes, objects, and combinations of layers of reality which have become deposited in our memories. We think and see

things in comparison and constantly pull up subconscious or repressed images from the depths of our imagination. The momentous discovery, the decisive ideology that we owe to Max Ernst, the collage, has left its dramatic mark on our expectations of art and poetry. Playing with paradox, reversal, and rearrangement appears early on. For this reason, I think an artist like Neo Rauch is his perfect modern-day successor. He too gives us disturbed images. We must see and experience them in all their provocative, centrifugal force. Let us take just one title from a painting from the nineties: *Die große Störung* (Major Disruption). We can see a precisely calculated confusion. One thinks of the manifest dream content described by Freud, which causes everything to disintegrate into random images. And just as in manifest dream content the centrifugal forces distort the causality of the action, so it is distorted in Neo Rauch's paintings. The effect is created by a composition, which, like the composition of Fernand Léger's *The Constructors* has the function of adding new areas of perspective. The perspectives change, the vanishing point is constantly moving. Between the frameworks on which the bodies juggle, the law of gravity appears to have been repealed. Just as Hogarth did in his famous etching *Method of Perspective Made Easy*, Rauch plays with false relationships. Not only do space and content do battle, but the color scheme is also disorienting. The action is torn apart by the colors. In the paintings, there is no dealing with the actual, no reproduction of reality that is not directed towards a personal, recognizable tactic. Wherever we look, everywhere everything the artist weaves on his loom is shot through with threads that defy logic. In this process, which Neo Rauch masters in a unique manner, and which we also find with other great magicians of the image, such as David Lynch, we can see the key demand of Surrealism. It sought to master what Breton called "le peu de réalité," the triviality of the real. The artist from Leipzig has made statements that graphically illustrate this dissatisfaction

with that which is revealed at first glance. The indication that the essential depends on the confusing was summed up by the artist shortly after the private viewing at the Metropolitan Museum, in conversation with Jordan Mejas: “That’s why I find the wonderful image of the tiger walking back and forth behind bars so appropriate that I would even apply it to my work. In a poem, the bars would be the text, with the real meaning behind them. All the great storytellers, all the great painters have stuck by this encoding, thanks to which the freestanding semantic structure of the content protects against the invasion of banal explanation. This is true of Kafka, Beckett, de Chirico, Max Ernst, Beckmann, Buñuel, and for the great days of Dalí. They all developed a syntax and a personal iconography that one must learn. This process is relevant to the title of the book with which Raymond Roussel attributes a hermeneutical regularity and a reason for the undertow of interpretation to his – at first glance incomprehensible – shapes made of clichéd words and over-the-top images. In the book *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres*, which was published posthumously, the writer explains the method of encoding which he employed in his works – we need look no further than his famous *Impressions d’Afrique*. But the decisive point is this: the insight Roussel offers into his methods only serves to increase the depth and darkness of his imagery. Because of the need to return constantly to the mysterious images, meaning and sense begin to reel and sway. What Roussel offers is not the key that can unlock the gates to ‘meaning.’ He invites us to discover a calculated complexity behind the supposed randomness of his combinatorics – a complexity that he, the author, can no more escape than can the reader or observer. Michel Foucault once described this challenge as follows: “The identity of words – the simple, fundamental fact of language, that there are fewer letters that describe than there are things to describe – in itself leads to a double-edged experience: it turns the word into the site

of an unpredicted meeting between the most distant phenomena on Earth.” In this quotation, we can remove the ‘word’ and substitute ‘image’ in its place. It was Wilhelm von Humboldt who first linked the question with the comment that language “must make unlimited use of limited means.” And in the realm of the visual, the means of directly expressing moods, dramas, and emotions are similarly restricted. Combinatorics is one answer to this drawback – and in this, Surrealism remains the most successful. The mixing of images opens up an endless spectrum of means of expression. We can extend this to include Neo Rauch’s playing with concrete, identifiable realities. Because the elements we find are mostly identifiable in themselves. But they influence each other to such a strong degree that one soon loses track of the relationships between them. The familiar is placed next to the familiar in such a way that their proximity opens up a gap into which the original meaning plummets and breaks its neck. In the collision of things that remain separate in the real world, new realms of possibility open up that we find disturbing. I believe we must take this observation as a starting point in order to describe the amazement we feel when looking at the work of Neo Rauch. This is not about painting which attempt a synthesis between Western European art and Eastern European art. The indications of a debate about Socialist Realism that has led to a post communist variation of it remain weak and superficial. The comment that Rauch is nothing more than an East-West painter who has been able to combine “the modern myths of the Warsaw Pact and the Western world” explains nothing. The observation of a fundamental alienation, of the means the painter uses to distance himself from the familiar, or better still, to not allow any familiarity to develop in the first place, seems to come closer. There are a number of motifs in Rauch’s work which express alienation and isolation. They include the stages, the curtain, the volcano – which appears as a symbol of uncontrollable and

unpredictable forces – they include windows and doors that open and shut in the paintings. All these create a distance between the painting and the observer. To quote the artist: “The window motif in the painting is something that continues to fascinate and captivate me. The possibility of standing in front of a thick glass panel which opens up in a wall and gives you a view of a parallel world in which there are laws that largely defy our rational understanding – that is a desirable simulation of supernatural perception using the sensory instrumentation of the painter.” In this quotation we hear the expression “parallel world.” Neo Rauch gives his exhibition the title “para,” which gives rise to a number of associations - paradox, paranoia, parallel, paralyzed – one explanation. When asked about the title, he says: “They are games I often like to play. Certainly it would have worked without a title, but this prefix was suddenly there, this almost, this as-if, this approach to a real state and the falling short of it. I had the feeling that could be the motto for all of my work.” But I think the title “para” is a powerful one in every way. It is programmatical, applying to everything that interests us about Neo Rauch, the allusive, the rejection of fixed images. The artist sketches out a parallel world. He allows us to penetrate a fictitious, often nightmarish *theatrum mundi*. And let me finish on that. Here too, with “para,” we may once more draw the link back and point out the conspicuous parallelism with Max Ernst’s way of working. In the forties, during his exile in Sedona in America, he created a book with collage and text which he titled *Paramythen* (Paramyths). In its pages, Ernst put the European myths that he had left behind together into strange and disturbing alloys. The title ‘Paramyths’ goes back to a concept put forward and defined in 1935 by Eugene Jolas in the magazine *Transition*: “I see in it a kind of epic miracle tale, which manages to create a synthesis out of the individual and the universal subconscious, as a dream, daydream, mystic vision. In its final form, it becomes a phantasmagorical mixture of prose poetry,

folklore, psychogram, essay, myth, and humor. The language of the paramyths aims to be a kind of incantation, music, a mirror for a four-dimensional universe.” Does this not describe the labyrinthine fields in which Neo Rauch abandons us with his beguiling, disturbing images on the map of art, that area that I have attempted to sum up with the words “happiness exclusion zone”? That is where we find encounters that derail our habitual feelings and trains of thought all in one go. The paintings are lit by the sparks provoked by the short-circuiting of uninsulated, unrelated situations. The semantic defect leads to the new light of Neo Rauch.

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