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Bone Meal

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

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Abstract

My research explores the material properties of gaming interfaces and the paranoiac virtual spaces of male fantasies. The first chapter of this thesis is an extended artist statement and a summary of influences in my work. Topics include the relationship between fantasy violence and real violence, digital avatars, and the limits of empathy in digital space. This chapter also contains documentation of works produced throughout the course of my MFA candidacy as well as the contexts and concepts behind those works. The second chapter is a case study exploring the work of artist Neo Rauch, whose paintings quietly critique and illustrate the social baggage of failed political ideologies. The collective methodologies Rauch employs towards creating political artwork are an important influence in my own studio practice.

Keywords

Avatars, Fantasy, Video Games, Neo Rauch, Military, Empathy

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Part One: Comprehensive Artist Statement

Introduction

“The utilization of crime by an artist is impious. Someone risks his life, his glory, only to be used as ornament for a dilettante.”¹

My work explores the material properties of gaming interfaces and the paranoiac virtual spaces of male fantasies. My practice examines my own experiences as a male gamer within the emerging and dystopian glut of war-based video games, in which patterns of xenophobia and conquest are enacted on a continuous loop. It would be reductive to simply say that there is a correlation between video games and violence—a claim which has been sufficiently debunked.² Rather than focus on the effects of video games on men, I observe a much larger and more culturally embedded phenomenon. I immerse myself in, and investigate, virtual environments that encourage forms of proto-fascist hedonism. I present this immersion as a kind of homeopathy that attempts to develop (personally and artistically) immunity and distance from the psychological and emotive impacts of these virtual spaces. Therefore, my research interests are located within the relationships and causalities that arise between the spaces of masculine fantasy and real world events.

¹ Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 177. I first encountered this quotation in Steven Zultanski's *Bribery* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014). Zultanski's text and written style has had a formative influence on my practice, including the narrative voice of this written component. This introduction is a harkening back to his tone.

My sculptures appropriate these virtual space through the primarily physical materials/vessels that both enact and archetype such violent, escapist experiences to their viewers. Powder coated plastics and aluminum are the skins that cover our personal devices, and these become mirrors into the toxicities that gamers consume as entertainment. These online, paranoid and male-dominated spaces appear to be on the brink of exploding: they run rampant with dismal outlooks and perverse environments informed by (and full of) conspiracy theories, corporate shilling, Elsa-gate predators, and racist tirades.

Throughout this body of work I've incorporated artifacts dug up from WWI battlefields and purchased online. I use these aesthetically and affectively laden objects as a method for exploring—exploiting the immense suffering and atrocious intent inherently imbued within their materiality. WWI was a world shattering conflict; meticulously documented and catalogued, its scenarios, environments and disasters are recreated again and again in film and video games. My artistic practice is the pursuit of being as evil as I can be: since we're already in hell I might as well take my seat at the table and drink my goat's blood. I'm looking for my dividends, for what's owed to me. The future is of no interest, and history is a pillager's paradise. My position is that to choose contemporary war objects would be to offer potential dialogue with the present, suggesting an alternative future.

The re-telling and restaging of historical events is a precarious task that constantly risks exploiting the suffering of others. Like conservatives dreaming of better times, or the entertainment industry mining and reanimating the memories of the dead—grinding bones to turn a profit—I

mine the troubled history of WWI both romantically and with irreverence, understanding the precarious (and potentially dubious) nature of both of these positions.

Avatars

Many of the artworks I've produced examine the limitations of empathy and feeling within my own self when engaging with a virtual avatar, whether that avatar is a protagonist in a war film or a video game character. One of the most popular and self-referential forms of the avatar is that of the mechanical exoskeleton. The first type of mechanized heroes were seen in the pop culture of Japan following World War II, referred to as *tokusatsu*. Through television and film, these mechanized individuals became agents for re-telling and re-negotiating the trauma of a post-war Japanese society. The monster film *Gojira* is emblematic of this. As Ann Allison indicates, "*Gojira* signifies WWII as a travesty of human nature brought on by the atomic blasts of the Americans. For Japanese audiences, then, *Gojira* provided a vehicle for reliving the terrors of the war relieved of any guilt or responsibility—solely, that is, from the perspective of the victim."³ *Gojira* represented the horrors impacted with the atomic bomb, but the mechanized tokusatsu are the response to that threat. The prevalence of robots in Japanese culture, both in industrial/commercial robotics and also in popular culture, has its basis in anxieties related to WWII.⁴ In response to historical trauma, these fictional robotic super soldiers represented the desire for a super

³ Full quote: "... images of disaster are omnipresent in the film, and the portrayal of a city under attack whose population is terrorized, weakened, and besieged was certainly a replaying of wartime memories. The story of *Gojira*, however, is a retelling of the war with a twist. In Tanaka's version, the Japanese bear no responsibility for the destruction wreaked upon their land. Rather, the aggressions in the tale rest entirely with the monster and with the nuclear fallout provoking his transformation and rage." Ann Allison, "Playing with Power: Morphing Toys and Transforming Heroes in Kids' Mass Culture," in Jeannette Marie Mageo (Ed.), *Power and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4

⁴ Se Young Kim, "Children of the Atom: Postwar Anxiety and Children's Play in Super Sentai." *Asian Communication Research* 12, no. 2 (November 27, 2015): 54-72.

weapon, and also a means to rebuild Japanese society through technology.⁵ The mechanized man genre has expanded and evolved from its early conception into contemporary examples such as Iron Man, Transformers, and Master Chief—examples which arguably coincide with their own real-time conflicts and trauma. For instance, the first Iron Man film could easily be perceived as a Western hand washing of the invasion of Afghanistan.

Many of my works explore the potential for the mechanized hero to act as a metaphor for the phenomenological experience by which we relate to both the mechanical and the virtual. This tech exoskeleton is a callous shell that protects-numbs the user, enabling them to commit simulated (and non-simulated) horrors. The operators of these robotic shells use screens to mediate the virtual and the real, screens that effectively de-humanize their targets by translating them into pixels. This is a shared experience for drone operators and gamers alike, as both positions make use of nearly identical controller and operating systems.

Two works, *To gain a body you have to leave one behind* (Plate 1.1) and *Late Stage Optimus* (Plate 1.2), respond to the nature in which our bodies relate to the virtual space. When we interact with our machines, we leave our bodies with barely any relation to the real world. The capacity for those virtual spaces to keep us calloused to the real world doesn't end once we've disconnected. In order to exist in online space, there is a death of the present. The hyper-mobility of information and virtual assets (the comprehension of which sails over our heads on a daily basis) shapes digital space in such a markedly physical way that it feels like an entity that must be acknowledged before any conversation with others can begin. The need to be literate in the currents

⁵ Kim, 59.

(and currencies) of online news, memes and political discourse can be an alienating force. The real world feels awkward as we grow into our cyborg selves, and transgressions—intentional and unintentional—always feel imminent when the virtual world shapes culture so rapidly. Many profess to feeling left in a kind of ignorant and vacuous lurch. Hito Steyerl articulates a sensation of the internet as awkward, even dead.⁶ Further, it is obviously and completely surveilled, monopolized, and sanitized by copyright, control, and conformism. The internet is not dead. It is undead and it is everywhere.

In his book *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, Francesco “Bifo” Berardi studies the psychological states of mass shooters and their interactions with the online world as a method to better understand how virtual spaces interact with/on us. Berardi cites the work of Italian writer Luisa Muraro to engage with the psychological, social, and developmental impacts of a rapidly technocentric society:

... access to language is fundamentally linked to the affective relation between the body of the learner and the body of the mother. The deep, emotional grasp on the double articulation of language, on the relation between signifier and signified in the linguistic sign, is something that is rooted in the trusted reliance on the affective body of the mother. When this process is reduced to an effect of the exchange between machine and human brain, the process of language learning is detached from the emotional effect of the bodily contact, and the relation between signifier and signified becomes merely operational. Words are not affectively grasping meaning, meaning is not rooted in the depth of the body, and communication is not perceived as affective relation between bodies, but as a working exchange of operating instructions.⁷

⁶ Hito Steyerl. "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" *E-flux* 49 (November 2013). Accessed April 11, 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.

⁷ Francesco “Bifo” Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London: Verso, 2015) 30

Berardi argues that sensibility and sensitivity are at risk when the exchange of meaning between the us and the other lacks physicality and presence.⁸ He continues:

Empathy (the ability to feel the pleasure and the sorrow of the other as part of our pleasure and sorrow) is not a natural emotion, but rather a psychological condition that is cultivated and refined, and which, in the absence of such cultivation, can wither and disappear.⁹

Berardi and Muraro compellingly describe the stakes of a life lived increasingly as avatar, with “avatar” here encompassing both game-based interfaces as well as the lives we live (increasingly) on socially-driven platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, *reddit*, *4chan*, etc.

Hyper-Mobility and Numbness

The capacity for digital space to lack empathy is so pervasive, and so embedded within densely populated virtual spaces, that there is no space for contemplating the social implications of its destructive nature. The speed with which video games re-create modern warfare is stunningly fast; it was only 12 years after the Gulf War that *Conflict: Desert Storm* was released. But that was in 2002, and virtual assets are now so easily made and transferable, many indie developers are able to create today what would have once been considered a “Triple A” by themselves and in a matter of weeks. The hyper recyclability and mobility of virtual images and assets is also seen in Hollywood movies depicting the current conflicts in the Middle East. What results is a rapid simplification of complex socio-political events into easily palatable war porn films.

⁸ Ibid, 109

⁹ Ibid.

I've grown the need to respond to this type of media in my studio practice as a way of contemplating the phenomena and reconciling my participation in its consumption. Making objects is a way to generate empathy for somebody that doesn't necessarily exist. I explore this lack of empathy in the process of generating the works *Grave Digger* (Plate 1.3) and *Beacon // Barbecue* (Plate 1.4). The title *Grave Digger* is in reference to the famous monster truck that popularized the purple and green flame aesthetic in the 1980s. The piece irreverently re-colourizes the object with macho-romantic patterning through a process called hydro dipping, a popular technique used to customize car parts and gun stocks. I use a hydro dipped graphic to cover up the rusted layer that was encrusted on a WWI-era dagger. This act is intended to add a layer of fantasy to an already fantasy-laden object, which further coats the real item underneath. *Beacon // Barbecue* engages with a numbness we experience towards history. Following Berardi and Muraro, empathy must be constructed when there is no bodily source of engagement. A carved boot and prosthetic leg was rendered in the likeness of a found WWI German artilleryman's boot. The process of staring at this real object for hours on end and carving its likeness was emotionally and psychologically draining. To stare and learn the object's spatial dimensions—the very materiality of which was made (it could be argued) with harmful intent—was to confront evil in a small way. I fashioned the added leg to invoke a physical and psychical sensation of numbness, and to simultaneously act as a barrier in trying to accessing a collective trauma.

I use the term “hedonist” to describe certain virtual spaces which are increasingly designed to promote higher dopamine releases in their users. Constant reward systems are a staple not only in social media platforms but also in a huge faction of mainstream video game design—the most popular genre of which is “first person shooters.” Fast paced shooters offer constant thrills and

dopamine rushes. They are also perfect models of platforms that incorporate micro transactions: almost all new games offer customizable gun and costume graphics for a price. Taking hedonism at its most general definition (the belief that all pleasure is good and that the pursuit of pleasure has net gains for society), I identify contemporary pop and gaming culture as appealing to two specific (albeit generalized) societal groups: emotionally-stunted men and masturbation-obsessed teenagers—both isolated persons addicted to dopamine rushes, exhibiting little concern for the past or future and seeking only self-gratification.

The website *4chan* is a nexus for these societal groups. It represents an infamous fringe of the internet that is incredibly potent in its ability to cultivate nihilism, fascism and racism. *4chan* is important when studying the most violent aspects of online culture and its generating real world consequences. Many agree that *4chan's* persistent production of political memes had a significant impact on the outcome of the 2016 American election.¹⁰ It cannot be understated how much this fringe group of the internet radicalizes young men, unifying them through nihilism, misogyny, porn and video game addictions. I think *4chan* best represents what Berardi describes as a space of epic heroism taken over by machines of simulation where we share in our illusions.

Here lies the origin of the late-modern form of tragedy: at the threshold where illusion is mistaken for reality, and identities are perceived as authentic forms of belonging. It is often accompanied by a desperate lack of irony, as humans respond to today's state of permanent deterritorialization by enacting their craving for belonging through a chain of acts of murder, suicide, fanaticism, aggression, war.¹¹

¹⁰ Douglas Haddow, "Meme Warfare: How the Power of Mass Replication Has Poisoned the US Election." *The Guardian*. November 04, 2016. Accessed May 04, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/04/political-memes-2016-election-hillary-clinton-donald-trump>.

¹¹ Berardi, *Heroes*, 4.

This type of virtual fanaticism isn't unique. The same rhetoric found on *Achan's* forums is rampant in the letters, essays and poetry of Freikorps soldiers. The Freikorps were a paramilitary group made up of German WWI veterans. Many of these men would become prominent members of the Nazi party.¹² Examining their writings, authors Klaus Theweleit and Stephen Conway attempt to isolate and understand how to recognize potentially dangerous tendencies in other individuals. Theweleit dedicates a chapter to these men's references to dirt and the body. What we see is the classic, conservative penchant for cleanliness taken to a more extreme and precarious place riddled with thinly-veiled meaning,

Besides avoiding dirt associated with contact and secretion, people regard anything that is only ambiguously part of themselves as unclean. By analogy, they are disgusted at the prospect of contamination, heterogeneity. When confronted with such contamination, they become afraid of falling prey themselves to ambivalence and amorphousness, of losing themselves, of being harmed by a process of amalgamation, insertion, addition, extraction, seepage, or infiltration.¹³

The shiny, utensil-like apparatuses of the gaming console, computer, or virtual avatar act as the clean and exteriorized shells, glistening like surgery utensils, indifferent and visceral. An important aspect to observe within the mecha shooter genre of video games is the race of the opponent whom the gamer is pitted against—races whose names un-ironically echo 20th century wartime propaganda such as “the fallen,” “flood,” “scar,” “dominion,” “cabal,” or “brutes.” My sculpture, *orc for whomever whenever* (Plate 1.5), was a response to these newly recycled virtual signifiers of xenophobia. It also acknowledges the phenomenon of de-humanizing the enemy, a time-honoured tradition for peoples in conflict. The encased quality of the aluminum around the orc's face in is a nod to this interior/exterior binary: aluminum is synonymous with consumer

¹² Klaus Theweleit and Stephen Conway, *Male Fantasies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) 380

¹³ Theweleit, *Males Fantasies*, 385

electronics, and the aluminum elements of the work are in opposition to the figure's hand-carved, wooden face.

Collective Trauma and Simplified Narratives

When thinking about the mining of history and the artist's role in interpreting societal upheaval, a familiar pattern kept reoccurring. Post-WWI and WWII artists rebelled against the societal conditions that had led to war through surrealist methodologies and the deconstruction of visual language. These artists offered sobering protests to the violence they experienced, but however effective their protest, over time a dominating cultural pattern emerges that echos Marx's famous quote: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."¹⁴ A favourite examples of this notion of "first as tragedy, then as farce" is in the differences between the paintings of Viktor Vasnetsov and Vasily Vereshchagin. On the heels of the Russo-Turkish War in 1879, Vasily Vereshchagin (who served as a war correspondent) painted *The Road of the War Prisoners* (Plate 1.7). Depicting a harrowing scene of Turkish prisoners frozen in the snow as crows perch upon them, the painting and many of Vereshchagin's other works were infrequently exhibited for appearing to slander the Russian army and offending public taste. It was only one year later that another Russian painter, Viktor Vasnetsov, would paint a mythologized version of Vereshchagin's work with *After Prince Igor's Battle* (Plate 1.8). Here, fallen Russian knights lay peaceful, supposedly emulating a scene from a common folk-tale.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954), 73

Such re-telling or re-staging of the facts is a contemporary phenomenon as well, but one in which tragedy is simultaneously happening and being “documented” into culture. During the Spring of 2008 and its mission in Afghanistan, the Canadian government spent over \$200,000 on recruitment advertising that ran on the Xbox 360 gaming console and Xbox Live, the multiplayer internet platform.¹⁵ The Canadian government also spent \$30,000 on Xbox games, the majority of these being the first-person shooters *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Gears of War*. These were provided to deployed soldiers to play in their down time in operating bases in Afghanistan.¹⁶

The documentary *Restrepo*, made by photographer Tim Hetherington and journalist Sebastian Junger, follows a contingency of American soldiers that saw the worst fighting in the ongoing Afghan war.¹⁷ The daily firefights left a psychological toll on the soldiers, and doctors had to refer back to medical diagnoses from the Second World War in order to understand the soldiers’ symptoms. One of the most interesting aspects of the soldiers’ lives was the terminology frequently used to describe the Taliban: “the bad guys.” This childish moniker was jarring to hear from men who had killed other men. It makes sense, though, for a soldier whose job is not to think but to act: a “good soldier’s” world, we are taught, needs to be simple and straightforward, as hesitation can get you and your fellow soldiers killed. There is overlap between the dutiful soldier’s point of view and that of the consumer of mass culture: it is a perspective that has little

¹⁵ Mark Melnychuk and Regina Leader-Post, "Canadian Military Spent Thousands on Xbox Live Recruitment Ads." *Post*. September 19, 2014. Accessed April 19, 2019. <https://leaderpost.com/entertainment/canadian-military-spent-thousands-on-xbox-live-recruitment-ads>.

¹⁶ The Canadian Press. "Canadian Forces Orders 500 Video Games." *CTVNews*. November 18, 2010. Accessed April 18, 2019. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canadian-forces-orders-500-video-games-1.575846>.

¹⁷ *Restrepo*, directed by Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger (United States: Dogwoof Ltd., 2012; iTunes).

to no agency and accepts the world as it's presented to them. How many versions of *Restrepo* need to be made in order to impact political discourse? As jarring as such a documentary is, it shares space on Netflix next to many B-rated war films. If any altruistic narrative persists, it will continually be smothered by its Looney Tune other.

The piece *Demarcated Tulpa* (Plate 1.6) attempts to capture this sort of ham-fisted, over-simplified worldview that certain soldiers and many video games inhabit. A pillow-like grid invokes a militarized landscape, one that is emptied of inhabitants and history. This is the view that a drone might have. The large, comic-like shape of the figure was in reference to the mythical golem. In many variations of this story, the simple-minded defender loses its capacity to follow orders and runs amok, destroying everything in its path. *Demarcated Tulpa* represents a simplified and game-ified creature, one that increasingly holds a mythical place within our culture: part fantasy and the fantastical power of real-world actors are merged.

As a whole, my artistic outputs parse and weave together two main aspects. One is the attempt to map a phenomenon that persists throughout our culture, a phenomenon that fuelled by the mining of traumatic war narratives in order to churn them out as entertainment. The second aspect is that of my own conflict-reconciliation with this phenomenon. One aspect seeks to earnestly develop empathy with the objects of its focus and resolve their malicious design; the other irreverently decorates and exploits them to speak to my own complacent nature as a consumer. The artworks draw from both the virtual and physical worlds as they have become inextricably linked, and while many of my influences draw from the virtual world my artworks emphasize the importance of a physical response to the virtual. Fantasy may take ephemeral forms of narratives with-

in our imaginations and virtual entertainment, but there will always be physical consequences behind the consumption of violence.

Plates for Part One

Plate 1.1 Johnathan Onyschuk, *To gain a body you have to leave one behind*, 2017. Plastic, Silicone, sock, gaming computer, dimensions variable.



Plate 1.2 Johnathan Onyschuk, *Late Stage Optimus*, 2018. Powder coated metal foil, wood, dimensions variable.



Plate 1.3 Johnathan Onyschuk, *Grave Digger*, 2018. WWI dagger, hydro-dip print, 14 inches x 2 inches.



Plate 1.4 Johnathan Onyschuk, *Beacon // Barbecue*, 2018. Pine, WWI German artillery soldier's right boot, dimensions variable.



Plate 1.5 Johnathan Onyschuk, *orc for whomever whenever*, 2018. Cast aluminum, wood, 13 inches x 12 inches.



Plate 1.6 Johnathan Onyschuk, *Demarcated Tulpa*, 2018. Powder coated foil, foam, dimensions variable.



Plate 1.7 Vasily Vereshchagin, *The Road of the War Prisoners*, 1878-1879. Oil on canvas, 71.3 inches x 117 inches.



Plate 1.8 Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov, *After Prince Igor's Battle*, 1879-1880. Oil on canvas, 80.7 inches x 153.5 inches.

Part Two: Case Study

A Sieve that Sieves Itself: The Political Subterfuge of Neo Rauch

When looking at the paintings of Neo Rauch, one can get lost in the difficult task of interpretation or mystified by surreal folk-tale illustrations. This is often and unfortunately the point at which much criticism ends, informing the view that Rauch desists from engaging overtly with subject matter, or critiques (as from Jan Verwoert) branding him irresponsible. I argue that there is virtue in Rauch's creation of more politically encoded work and its conceptual resistance to immediate readings. By considering the socio-political context of his painting and its implications on his style, as well as the need for a countermovement against today's identity-driven culture, this case study will demonstrate the necessity and relevance of Rauch's hermeneutically open and poetically generative oeuvre.

Rauch's Socio-Political Context

Upon a closer examination of the socio-political environment in which Rauch grew up, one gains a richer understanding of the motifs and inclinations of an artist living in the German Democratic Republic. Rauch's formative years were spent in a recently divided Germany, with West Germany controlled by the Federal Republic of Germany and East Germany by the German Democratic Republic. The East was under Soviet power, while the West was relatively autonomous under the control of the Allied nations. Rauch graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig, where he studied under artists such as Arno Rink and Bernard Heisig. There is traceable lineage of traditional figurative painting throughout the Leipzig school, but less is known about the

school's long history for graphic design and literary illustration. Both of these are notably present in Rauch's work.¹⁸

Rauch is often reticent in interviews, revealing his process as part intuitive rendering of his subconscious and part reacting and discovering from what emerges from that process. This has led to the misconception that Rauch's worlds are inherently meaningless. Rauch has explained in many interviews that he allows himself to surrender to his feelings, and does not begin painting with a plan in mind. He expounds in an interview with *HuffPost* that, "As a painter, I try to systematize the irrational, and to do that in painting after painting. This process is not easily reconciled with communication as it is most commonly understood."¹⁹ Rather than attribute the artist's vagueness to a lack of conceptual rigor, Rauch's evasiveness could speculatively be the result of growing up in a culture of self-censorship, as enforced by the GDR Stasi secret police. Jokes in the GDR were a small form of resistance to this culture and give some of the best insight into the paranoia of the time. One very popular joke reveals how truly dark the situation was. An anonymous former member of the secret police describes it as such: "Erich Honecker and Erich Mielke were talking about their hobbies. Honecker said, 'I collect all the jokes about me that are going around.' Mielke replied, 'Man, Erich, we have practically the same hobby! I collect the people who are telling the jokes!'"²⁰

¹⁸ Elaine Kelly, Amy Wlodarski, and Sigrid Hofer, *Art Outside the Lines: New Perspectives on GDR Art Culture* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2011), 166

¹⁹ Elena Cue, "Interview with Neo Rauch," *The Huffington Post*, April 08, 2017, Accessed September 13, 2018. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/interview-with-neo-rauch_us_5849a9fce4b07d4bc0fa25b2.

²⁰ Anonymous, "The Danger of Humor: GDR Jokes," in *Making the History of 1989*, Item #328, Accessed March 24, 2019. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/328>.

What appears to an audience or critics as willful or lazy vagueness is perhaps due to Rauch's learned self-censorship, whether consciously or subconsciously. Rather than resign to the view that his work lacks conceptual rigor, acknowledging the socio-political context of his work calls on the viewer to commit more effort into uncovering what meanings might be veiled within his surrealist approach. Even more pertinently, understanding the implications of the socio-political context for Rauch's approach and style provides an invaluable lens into his art. This aids in addressing some of the criticism that has been levied against a perceived meaninglessness or a fear of engaging with his subject matter.

Implications for Rauch's Art

Rauch talks about his development as an artist under communist rule in the documentary *Neo Rauch: Gefährten und Begleiter*:

I think we came away from it all without even a black eye, because we simply benefited from the grace of a late birth. Someone perhaps two years older than me had to experience the drastic influence of the state on their art, and really it was over. In the 80's the system was lying in agony already and practiced in polite compared to the processes in the field of visual arts, because the worst had been endured. But I still have this anticipatory mindset stored as a moment of horror that from childhood on was put behind us: art has to function as a weapon in the social struggle and you are always intent on unequivocally revealing your class position, so in this life I will no longer sway to the path in which political art has taken root. This topic is finished for me once and for all, even if it is still so very much in vogue and has almost been made a condition in order to discuss art at all—so that the creator of the artifact introduces themselves as a politically motivated and a political art fabricated person, then I say I'm not part of that game.²¹

From this, we learn that despite escaping the worst of the GDR, Rauch remained influenced by the reality that had been existent for the generation prior to his. He appears to have actively

²¹ *Neo Rauch: Gefährten und Begleiter*, directed by Nicola Graef, performed by Neo Rauch (Germany: Weltkino Filmverleih, 2016, DVD).

sought to break away from the traditions of art by taking an overt political stance. Seeking to deflect the expectation that the artist needs to introduce himself politically, Rauch is arguably influenced by the bid to break from tradition in the socio-political context of the GDR. At the same time, Rauch does not shy away from expressing a voice, or position, through his art: he employs a covert approach to subterfuge that results in art that may appear vague or meaningless to the inattentive eye. In this case, paying close attention to Rauch's art reveals clandestine meaning behind the seemingly incomprehensible motifs.

Interpretation is one of the foremost concerns confronting a viewer of Rauch's paintings. With such a rich, dreamlike assortment of motifs, characters, and landscapes, it is as if an entire novel's worth of illustration has been compounded into one scene wherein timelines have been erased and the audience is left to pick up the pieces to understand its meaning. Familiar themes reoccur throughout Rauch's paintings: time dilation; the blur between the past, present and future; memory; and consumer and consumption aesthetics are among these motifs.²² Many of his paintings featuring the proletariat portray communist versions of Pinocchio. Monumental sculptures of hammer- and sickle-wielding men and women have come to life, and stepped off their massive plinths to wander in search of meaning in an unfamiliar landscape slowly dissolving from acidic capitalism. In the work *Der Gartner* (Plate 2.1), we see two men who appear to apprehend a giant. One man in camouflage pants looks to be calling for help with one hand placed on the giant's shoulder. The other man, dressed as though from another era, is forcing the sorrowful giant to read a book (possibly a manifesto). The giant looks tired and saddened by the thought of coming out of his ideological retirement. The scene feels reminiscent of the situation

²² Rauch, Neo, Stephen Little, and Peter Ruthenberg. *Neo Rauch - Works 1994-2002: The Leipziger Volkszeitung Collection*. Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2005.

soldiers faced post-war when having to return to a normal life after having committed unspeakable horrors. As a result, close interpretation reveals that the work potentially speaks fluently to the political situation in light of previous decades in Germany.

The wandering proletariat factory worker is a common character throughout Rauch's work. We see many factory workers sometimes wrestling with abstract and oversized mechanisms, snake-like appendages attempting to wrangle with a context they do not recognize. These workers often appear unmoored from the factories that gave them identity and meaning. We see this struggle with their newfound freedom in Rauch's work: a factory worker appears in distress on a game show, seemingly confused with its rules and structure. This could be taken as emblematic of the cultural struggles that came with re-unification. Rauch's empathy towards the psychological stress that the citizens of East Germany underwent is evident in his portrayal of this vulnerable class of people. Stephen Little talks about the worker as a tool of propaganda in his essay, "Neo Rauch: Works 1994-2002": "Loved by multiple generations of politicians, such images are seemingly fundamental to the modern state."²³ It becomes clear that Rauch is not purposeless in his work, but instead employs an indirect approach that still bears conceptual rigour.

Additionally, many of Rauch's characters are dressed in vague Victorian garb or indiscriminate grey, which to North American viewers has been interpreted as exotic and "retro." Rauch has expressed disdain for this latter adjective so much so that he has included the reversed spelling of it ("orter") in some of his works. Moreover, Europeans are confronted with a multitude of histories in any given square block: the Roman-built cobblestone road can easily lead to a Renaissance-era

²³ Rauch, Neo, Stephen Little, and Peter Ruthenberg. *Neo Rauch - Works 1994-2002: The Leipziger Volkszeitung Collection*. Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2005.

museum next to a crumbling brutalist bunker. In this case, the colour palettes themselves point to a deeper meaning derived from the historical contexts of Europe. Viewers oblivious to this context may deem the work meaningless.

Rauch's paintings can easily disarm their viewers with their often pastoral and perceivably innocent, Disney-esque colour palettes, but it is only when an understanding of personal and historic contexts are applied that his paintings seems to communicate graphic yet indecipherable messages. Works such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Plate 2.2) closely draw direct reference to Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy's original poem of the same title.²⁴ Cavafy's poem centers around a Roman society preparing for the arrival of Barbarians. It seems to critique the utility of a perceived and impending enemy in propping up the ruling class and a more authoritarian state—a Roman “patriot act.” In Rauch's painting, we see a similar scene play out: a carnival-like scene unfolding in which characters rent rifles while a man on stage dons a minotaur mask (dressing up as the nefarious enemy other, perhaps). In the left corner of the canvas, we see what looks like the real threat that the characters are waiting for, except this “real” minotaur is set upon a stake in preparation to be burned. The real threat isn't really a threat, but the idea of him is necessary in order for the party to continue.

Many of Rauch's placid, nightmarish scenes feel similar in tone to the work of Spanish surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel, especially Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel*.²⁵ Roger Ebert interpreted this work as an allegory for the fascist-sympathetic Spanish ruling class:

²⁴ C. P. Cavafy, "Waiting for the Barbarians by C. P. Cavafy," translated by Edmund Keeley, Poetry Foundation. Accessed April 02, 2019. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51294/waiting-for-the-barbarians>.

²⁵ *The Exterminating Angel*, directed by Luis Buñuel (Mexico: Gustavo Alatrisme 1962).

Having set a banquet table for themselves by defeating the workers in the Spanish Civil War, they sit down for a feast, only to find it never ends. They're trapped in their own bourgeois cul-de-sac. Increasingly resentful at being shut off from the world outside, they grow mean and restless; their worst tendencies are revealed.²⁶

Rauch's characters are passively trapped within his frames and perhaps in a world they do not fully understand, cognizant but in a somnambulant state. Uniformed men tie up complacent men and women while giants and gnomes abound, and factory workers try desperately to remember how to construct their projects. In similar fashion to Buñuel's work, Rauch's work does not necessarily render itself for direct or obvious reading, instead necessitating an eye that would seek out these deeper and subliminal topics. Ultimately, this examination suggests that the socio-political context in which Rauch developed has imparted on him an indirect style of visual duplicity, one which stems from conscious resistance to overtly political approaches and came to age within an era of self-censorship in the shadow of the GDR. Although conceptually resistant to immediate understanding, Rauch's work is covertly political rather than purposely misleading, formalist, or vague.

Rauch versus Identity Politics

While Rauch has revealed his process of developing nonlinear narratives and improvisational painting, he nonetheless admits, "In my darkest moments, I feel like I might understand it. This means that it's acting mechanisms come to light in an uncensored, open fashion."²⁷ When the artist is asked whether he understands the chaotic worlds he creates. Rauch withholds from his viewers the type of resolution or distinction between hero/enemy so often desired from political

²⁶ Roger Ebert, "The Exterminating Angel Movie Review (1968)," *RogerEbert.com*, May 11, 1997, Accessed September 13, 2018. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-exterminating-angel-1962>.

²⁷ Elena Cue, "Interview with Neo Rauch," *The Huffington Post*, April 08, 2017, Accessed September 13, 2018. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/interview-with-neo-rauch_us_5849a9fce4b07d4bc0fa25b2.

art, but he admits in part to grasping the traumatic events he portrays. His paintings attempt to portray the vast complexity of German identity and its violent histories. His works enact a particular experience of processing those legacies that act counter to didactic, narrativized, or politicized lessons. His mode of making promotes a specific form of pacifism, and is an inversion of the simplified (and politicized) narratives that permeate our heavily mediated lives. Surrealist modes of painting obfuscate truth and oppose propaganda, effectively disabling propaganda's misuse of history for new political gains.

The insight Rauch provides us is in opposition to the more radical side of identity politics witnessed in contemporary culture. There is an increasingly persistent notion that a person's ideas can only be addressed after their identity, history, sexuality, gender have been revealed and their degree of privilege apportioned and assigned. There exists a seeming consensus within identity politics that society is only composed of power struggles. Reductive and public practices of shaming and policing happening online today might be likened to a polite evolution of something like the GDR Stasi, who created networks of recruited citizens to spy on one another and report on any cultural dissidence within communities.

Counterarguments

Art critic Jan Verwoert challenges Rauch's apparent lack of political engagement with his subject matter, suggesting Rauch's flippant use of historical imagery is irresponsible.²⁸ Verwoert is adamant that Rauch's lack of political agenda is questionable, as it results in superficial images

²⁸ Jan Verwoert, "Neo Rauch," *Frieze*, October 14, 2005 Accessed December 12, 2018. <https://frieze.com/article/neo-rauch-0>.

that translate to Rauch lacking the critical sensibility to analyze and deconstruct his own work. Even if Rauch were to be interpreted as not politically engaging in subject matter, there would still arguably be virtue in becoming a non-actor, of wanting to opt out of this absurdist political drama if possible. At the same time, Verwoert's criticism may stem from an inability to grasp Rauch's pacifism, perhaps owing to an unrelenting investment in more politically explicit traditions that do not leave space for alternative approaches. Revisiting celebrated artists in whose traditions Rauch follows indicates that veiled political critique is not new. In this case, the figures and actions in Rauch's work, notably gripped by delirium and nightmarish inclinations, are reminiscent of Francisco Goya's works.²⁹ Both Goya and Rauch can be seen as practicing veiled criticisms of the oppressive situations under which they lived—the GDR being certainly less violent and oppressive than the Spanish monarchy and Catholic Church of Goya's time. Even more pertinently, Verwoert appears oblivious to Rauch's ambitions to rebel and subordinate “academic good behavior,” following in the footsteps and influence of Baselitz and Immendorff.³⁰ In this case, Rauch consciously refuses the doctrinaire quality of Socialist Realism while still using its language. His choice of diversion over decipherable messages is itself a political statement.

A historical account of the apparent and jarring impacts of unification, and the perceived collapsing of world views in East Germany, could be seen as Western Germany's inability/resistance to accept Eastern artists as autonomous and free thinking. Says Frank Zollner: “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

²⁹ Neo Rauch, Werner Spies, and Gary Tinterow. *Neo Rauch: Para* (Köln: Dumont, 2007) 42

³⁰ *Ibid*, 60

East German artists as ‘assholes’ and ‘propagandists.’³¹ This vantage is understandable from post war artists who typically sought to dismantle painting modes that were perceived as part of a society that had brought itself to the brink of destruction. Rather than simply reject and throw out tradition, Rauch takes on the seemingly futile and complex challenge of speaking within a traditional voice to offer some reconciliation with the past.

None of Rauch’s mentors, nor Rauch himself, were ever dictated to paint in a Socialist Realist manner, a movement which Rauch admits was already nearing its end while he was growing up.³² The state mandated art movement of the GDR is still a haunting memory for East German artists and is an important context to consider when experiencing Rauch’s attempts to paint from his subconscious recollection. It is important to acknowledge that many artists in East Germany, including Rauch’s mentors, weren’t simply complacent with the new ideological tastemakers but continually pushed forward their ideas on avant-garde painting. For instance, it took three separate organizations to debate whether a set of Bernard Heisig’s murals were suitable for the state.³³

Conclusion

Rauch’s works evidently defy easy deciphering, leading some critics to view him as avoiding direct political engagement with his subject matter. However, understanding the socio-political context of his upbringing and art, the viewer is offered more than a simple, didactic rejection of

³¹ Frank Zollner, "De-authentication and Authentication in and by the Contemporary Art Market: The Case of Neo Rauch," *Cultural Clearings: The Object Transformed by the Art Market* (2013): 43

³² Kelly, Wlodarski, and Hofer, *Art Outside the Lines: New Perspectives on GDR Art Culture*, 85

³³ Ibid, 83

historical tyranny. He presents the complex navigation of a zeitgeist—of a time and people worth understanding. These insights firmly place Rauch within a longstanding tradition of artists who have used surrealist methodologies to process trauma, using seemingly nightmarish and indecipherable art as resistance to tyrannical ideologies. At the same time, Rauch's defiance can be extended to the present-day in which overt identity politics is becoming almost dogmatic, a situation which further underscores the value in his artistic approach. These observations emphasize the merits present in Rauch's work, as well as the value to be found in being conceptually resistant to immediate comprehension.

Plates for Part Two

Plate 2.1 Neo Rauch, *Der Gärtner*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 19 inches × 15.8 inches.



Plate 2.2 Neo Rauch, *Warten auf die Barbaren*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 59 inches × 157.5 inches.

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