

Steve Plumb. *Neue Sachlichkeit, 1918-33: Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. 165 pp. \$44.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-420-2019-1.



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How New and How Objective?

A quotation prefaces Steve Plumb's monograph, a lightly revised version of his doctoral dissertation (Sunderland, 2002). The quote comes from the Weimar artist Otto Dix, whose sharply critical visions of post-World War I Germany symbolize for many the various contradictions of the Weimar Republic. The Dix quotation reads: "Also kurz und gut: ich wollte die Dinge zeigen, wie sie wirklich sind" (n.p.). If only the author had followed Dix's aesthetic mission in his slim volume! His monograph is short, consisting of 155 pages of text. Its overall thesis, summarized in the conclusion as "the object ... is the predominant unifying factor in the visual art of *Neue Sachlichkeit*," is not necessarily a new interpretation (p. 154). Almost three decades ago, John Willett masterfully and economically described the movement's main features, as did Wieland Schmied, in an important monograph and exhibition catalogue.[1] Additionally, the path taken to arrive at this rather unsurprising conclusion about the object's critical importance is meandering and leads to a number of conceptual cul-de-sacs. The title initially sounded promising. Plumb set out to define the chronological and thematic contours of Weimar's New Objectivity, an art movement tradition-

ally characterized by a return to a sober, often cynical realism after the supposedly irrational flights of spirituality and abstraction under prewar expressionism. But his objective often becomes obscure, and his arguments difficult to follow in the welter of quotations by art historians, critics and philosophers—all of whom attempted to define the very same movement. His chapters describe the various approaches taken by these art historians and critics of the 1920s and critics of our time in attempting to suggest *Neue Sachlichkeit*'s salient features. One chapter discusses theory and one chapter its themes, but there is no clear conceptual framework to allow the reader to distinguish between theory and theme. The author says as much when he prefaces the thematic chapter by stating that its main aim "is to look for examples of the points noted in the previous chapter" (p. 79).

A major difficulty with the author's account is his over-reliance on quotations of others to string together his own arguments, which, because he jumps from point to point, never allow the reader to understand his overall message. He quotes extensively from Weimar critics, such as Gustav Hartlaub, director of the StÄndische

Kunsthalle in Mannheim, who mounted an exhibition in 1925 using the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* in the exhibition's title to denote changes in contemporary art since expressionism. Hartlaub's exhibition has traditionally served as the starting point for examining new trends in post-war German art and the return to a more object-oriented grounding after almost two decades of expressionism and abstraction. In addition to numerous quotations from Weimar critics, such as Hartlaub and Walter Benjamin, Plumb intersperses quotes from recent art historians and critics who have written about the period or curated later exhibits and have offered their own definitions of the term, such as Franz Roh and Wieland Schmied in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s. Additionally, Plumb cites Matthias Eberle, Jost Hermand and Frank Trommler, the latter misnamed as "Fritz" Trommler (p. 53). He briefly summarizes their analyses of Roh's and Schmied's definitions of New Objectivity to demonstrate the movement's variety. But careful editing would have tightened the often convoluted arguments and eliminated errors.

A curious omission resulting from these extended discussions of critics and artists is the paucity of illustrations. Eight are included: several paintings, one sketch, one political cartoon and one photograph. In most chapters, Plumb describes one or more paintings, but unfortunately the work itself is not included so that the reader has to rely simply on the author's opinion of the illustration. It is true that lavishly illustrated monographs are notoriously expensive to produce, given copyright and other permissions needed in addition to the actual duplication of images. But when a volume expends a sizable portion of its narrative in using illustrations as examples to define *Neue Sachlichkeit*, including them as an integral part of the scholarly scaffolding is critical.

Frankly, because so many other writers have examined the major aspects of *Neue Sachlichkeit* from a literary, political or visual angle, Plumb's desire to encapsulate the various interpretations unfortunately results in

a muddle that neither clarifies or extends the arguments of his predecessors. As in most art movements that are given an umbrella definition—whether Romanticism, Impressionism or Expressionism—one is bound to find divergent strands and various ideas that differ from the definition embedded within the movement. *Neue Sachlichkeit* is no different. The chronological time period ascribed to it may be a bit longer than normally described, but in essence, its leading practitioners, such as Otto Dix and George Grosz, or less well-known artists, briefly discussed, such as Albert Renger-Patzsch or Karl Blassfeldt, would explore different themes and appropriate different stylistic strategies as artists were always wont to do. Some of them were politically engaged leftists, like George Grosz, who used figuration to articulate the corruption of capitalist society. Other artists within *Neue Sachlichkeit*, such as Max Beckmann or Georg Schrimpf, saw a visual return to the recognizable object as a way to bring together a society torn by war, revolution and economic distress, though Beckmann's profound images perhaps defy definition. In the end, had Plumb devoted increased attention to the more obscure painters he only sketchily mentions in his text, he would have added something substantial to readers' knowledge of the period and provided new information about the new objectivity movement. By attempting to cover too much thematically, chronologically and critically, however, the author offers instead a puzzling potpourri, not a satisfying or artfully presented synthesis.

Note

[1]. John Willett, *The New Sobriety: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period 1917-33* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland 1918-33* (Hanover: Fackeltraeger, 1969); Wieland Schmied, ed., *Neue Sachlichkeit and German Realism of the Twenties* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979).

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