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| **Neue Sachlichkeit in Visual Arts** |
| New Objectivity in Visual Arts |
| Neue Sachlichkeit, which can be translated as ‘New Objectivity,’ was the name given to a tendency in painting which, from about 1921 on returned to something like traditional compositional and representational codes, eschewed vehemence of any kind, ‘Primitivism,’ and even painterliness, while emphasizing unbroken contour lines and unbroken local colour. Painters depicted conventional subject matter such as still life, landscapes, and portraits with the pictorial means of sculptural volume, perspectival space, natural proportions and unbroken, evenly modulated tonal values which had dominated painting since the Renaissance but which had been systematically dismantled by Modernism.  The tendency received its name with an exhibition at the Mannheim Kunsthalle in 1925, organized by Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, although art critics had sought to name and define it since 1920, and explicitly in opposition to an Expressionism widely perceived as moribund. Hartlaub described what he saw as a split in the overall tendency, with an inclination towards traditionalism and classicism on the ‘right’ wing, and towards aggressively critical social commentary and a propensity to exaggeration and caricature on the ‘left’ (although Hartlaub denied that there was any political significance to his terminology of ‘left’ and ‘right,’ the artists assigned to the ‘left’ wing were either active in or openly sympathetic to the left wing of German politics). |
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Hartlaub described what he saw as a split in the overall tendency, with an inclination towards traditionalism and classicism on the ‘right’ wing, and towards aggressively critical social commentary and a propensity to exaggeration and caricature on the ‘left’ (although Hartlaub denied that there was any political significance to his terminology of ‘left’ and ‘right,’ the artists assigned to the ‘left’ wing were either active in or openly sympathetic to the left wing of German politics). From the moment the term was coined there has been debate about whether it was not too diverse in terms of style, subject matter, and even regional developments for a single name to be meaningful. But this much at least can be said about all painting labeled ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’: in stylistic terms it was turned away from the subjectivism and emotional intensity of Expressionism, and where late Expressionism had tended to emphasize utopian and apocalyptic themes and had trumpeted a coming age of spiritual renewal and socialist brotherhood, Neue Sachlichkeit painters turned instead to the here-and-now, depicting the fashions, material culture, and living conditions of modern, primarily urban Germans. Medievalism and Primitivism, nudism and *Lebensreform* was displaced by an orientation towards the mundane and contemporary, technology and urbanism, working life as well as modern leisure activities such as organized sports, and an emerging but already pronounced consumerism and aspiration towards ideas of a ‘middle class.’ In general, class divisions and their outward signs were brought to the fore in Neue Sachlichkeit painting.  In the classicizing wing Georg Schrimpf simplified the volumes, facial features, and details of clothing in his figures, suggesting timelessness. Alexander Kanoldt also suppressed the textures of still life objects and landscapes, subtly emphasizing the underlying prismatic, almost Platonic structure of shapes. Like many Neue Sachlichkeit still life painters, he preferred the objects of bourgeois households to the café still lifes of the Cubists or the allegorical objects of an older tradition. The most renowned artists of the left, or ‘verist,’ satirical wing are Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Georg Scholz. All three passed through a stage of Expressionist vehemence, followed by a brief period of Dadaist countercultural and anti-art agitation, which included experimentation with collage and other non-traditional materials. After 1921, as the period of Weimar Germany’s most intense political unrest ended, the rage and revolt in these artist’s work gave way to socially critical but more naturalistic representations of the urban proletariat, and by 1924, after the period of economic instability had drawn to a close, their work increasingly turned to high society, and grew more ambiguously ironic in its depictions of Weimar Germany’s social contrasts. By the mid 1920s, having acquired various old-master techniques of mixed tempera and oil glaze, the major Neue Sachlichkeit painters gained teaching positions in academies, and built successful careers as portraitists of high society, although their paintings typically retained their ironic distance and pronounced tendency towards satirical exaggeration.  Otto Dix, who began the decade as a documenter of the miseries of the urban proletariat, as well as a satirist of crippled war veterans and prostitutes, developed with time into the movement’s greatest portraitist. Dix made more conspicuous use than any of his contemporaries of specifically German Renaissance painting as a model for some of his own style and technique. He painted the most powerful depictions of any artist of his generation of the experiences of the First World War, in which he fought on the front lines for three years, and returned to the theme repeatedly. George Grosz maintained a practice of lithograph drawings satirizing both the rich and powerful and the impoverished working class, although in the mid 1920s he, too, produced more conventional-looking portraits and self-portraits, not without satirical exaggeration. Georg Scholz, in a telling and complex self-portrait, ironized himself as an upstanding bourgeois (he was by now a professor of painting) in a suit, set in an urban (Berlin) landscape of advertising and consumer desire from which he is hopelessly alienated. These artists and their numerous colleagues continued to produce major and minor works of socially critical depictions of contemporary society.  Although Max Beckmann was featured prominently in the 1925 Mannheim exhibition, critics even at the time felt that he did not properly belong to the term Neue Sachlichkeit, and he has seldom been considered in historical retrospectives or scholarly studies of the movement. Christian Schad, whose portraits in a Neue Sachlichkeit style post-date the Mannheim exhibition, are neither classicizing nor overtly satirical, but rather coldly precise, lightly ironic records of the denizens of elegant high society and a louche demimonde, often mingling with each other, seemingly without any warmth or sentiment.  Along with class differences and class conflict, gender and sexuality were central themes in Neue Sachilchkeit. Next to society portraits painters depicted a variety of women in contemporary dress; prostitutes were a common theme. The ‘New Woman,’ sexually independent and gainfully employed (although the reality of her life was often less glamorous than it was represented to be in contemporary media), fashionably dressed in masculine styles, was often represented – and satirized, as in Dix’s portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden. The verists like Dix and Grosz represented a frank, often brutal sexuality, extending even to images of depraved sexual murder, or ‘Lustmord,’ often intended, like Dix’s representations of the war, to wring humor from the grotesque.  From the moment when the Mannheim exhibition made the term ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’ known, the name itself was felt by a wide public to capture the mood of post-war, post-crisis (political and inflationary) Germany: pragmatic; disabused; free of both the constraints of bourgeois convention and millenary excess; and oriented towards sports, mobility, technology, and consumer and mass media culture, rather than towards either traditional German culture or *Lebensreform*. The term ‘Neue Sachlichkeit’ became a slogan and was also used as a label in other arts, especially literature as well as photography and film. The Neue Sachlichkeit novel explored a range of themes similar to the painting, including the experiences of the New Woman (Irmgard Keun), the athlete (Marie Louise Fleisser), and the white collar worker (Erich Kästner). For some of these novelists, the abrupt reorientation of German society was represented as a liberation for their protagonists, while for others it was disorienting and even tragic. Lion Feuchtwanger presented, in significantly longer novels such as *Erfolg*, the menacing political conflicts that were brewing out of Germany’s social contradictions and conflicts. Stylistically, these novelists cultivated a readable and transparent style, as free as possible of the individual mannerisms and inward searching of Modernists such as Thomas Mann. In photography, too, the objectivity of the camera was foregrounded, with a deceptively neutral style free of dramatic lighting, cropping, or composition, and insisting on sharp focus and even lighting rather than the shadows and textures of earlier ‘art’ photography. Indeed, its mechanical nature made photography ideally suited to Neue Sachlichkeit. Subjects included individual contemporary Germans from all walks of life and class backgrounds (August Sander); power in the shape of modern, bland technocrats (Erich Salomon), and modern industry and technology (Albert Renger-Patzsch). In other words, in both literature and photography a style of objective stylelessness was cultivated. The German film industry also utilized the photographic code of objectivity, in contrast to the subjectivism and overt stylizations of Expressionist cinema, to produce films in the full gamut of Neue Sachlichkeit modes: glib middle class aspiration (*Die Drei von der Tankstelle*); verist social criticism of the misery of the urban proletariat (*Die Freudlose Gasse*); and the neutral survey of the whole range of urban phenomena, from the gritty working city to the gleaming machines to the glittering night life (*Berlin, Symphonie einer Grossstadt*).  To return to painting, recent research on the studio practice of Neue Sachlichkeit painters has emphasized the importance of what they took, sometimes mistakenly, to be traditional methods and materials. Artists worked through the 1920s to master mixed tempera and oil painting and the use of full-scale preparatory drawings, under painting, and transparent glazes. Another important area of research shedding new light on an old and troubling question is the continuity or discontinuity between Neue Sachlichkeit and the kind of realist painting which met with official approval and success in Nazi Germany. Dix was not the only Neue Sachlichkeit artist to be fired from his teaching post and pilloried in the infamous Degenerate Art exhibitions, but he also continued to paint and exhibit after 1933 (although the contrary is frequently claimed in the literature). Other Neue Sachlichkeit artists, like Franz Radziwill, were openly sympathetic to the Nazi regime, although he, too, was ultimately shut out of the German art market and exhibition venues. And while most of Dix’s students at the Dresden Art Academy were vociferous leftists and verist social critics, and were marginalized or even arrested, the pathway to the banal realism of National Socialist art in the 1930s may well have been made easier by, especially, the classicizing realism of Neue Sachlichkeit in the 1920s with its emphasis on contemporary dress and settings, its easy mingling of modern technology and rural nostalgia, and the aspiration to an ideal image of middle class status. |
| Further reading:  (Becker and Weiss)  (Buderer and Fath)  (Crockett)  (Grosz)  (Jost)  (Hille)  (Körber)  (Lethen)  (Liska)  (Lloyd and Peppiatt)  (Makela)  (Michalski)  (Oellers)  (Peters)  (Peters, Otto Dix)  (Rewald)  (Roh)  (Schmalenbach)  (Schmalenbach, Die Malerei der Neue Sachlichkeit)  (Schubert)  (Sternfeld)  (Tatar)  (Van Dyke) |