

The London School of Economics and Political Science

“New German Painting”:
Painting, Nostalgia & Cultural Identity in Post-Unification Germany

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To my parents
Ruth and Haytham

Abstract

During the past decade one of the bestsellers in the American art market was a group of figurative-representational paintings from post-Unification Germany. Dubbed “New German Painting”, this body of work included artists with explicit East German affiliations, such as the so-called “New Leipzig School”, as well as artists who trained at academies in former West Germany. While the American art critical discourse predominantly promoted the art as a new kind of German history painting, which confronted the country’s recent past of division and reunification, the reception amongst German art critics was more negative by far. The latter did not see a serious engagement with recent German history in the new body of art, and dismissed the painting as catering to a growing post-socialist nostalgia industry. Moreover, the traditional figurative style of painting, which was adopted in particular by artists trained at academies in post-*Wende* East Germany, was often criticized as an aesthetically and politically reactionary artistic position.

In spite of the obvious social and political connotations of the art critical discourse on the “New German Painting”, art historical scholarship has barely examined this new body of art in light of underlying interactions between the painting’s aesthetic content and the social-political context of post-Unification Germany. This is a surprising omission, considering that scholars of modern German art are traditionally deeply concerned with the interplay between aesthetic and political continuities and discontinuities.

A possible explanation for this gap in the literature is that art history lacks a framework to capture the intersecting aesthetic and social-political notions that have emerged in the discourse on the painting. This thesis aims to overcome this shortcoming by examining the phenomenon “New German Painting” from an interdisciplinary perspective that combines sociological with art historical approaches. The theoretical perspective builds on innovations in the sociology of art, which complement established concerns with social structure with a sensibility for aesthetic specificity. In the empirical parts of the thesis this perspective is used to trace continuities between the new painting and its reception with earlier moments in German post-World War II art history; as well as to examine the social context and historical moment in which the painting emerged. Particular attention is paid to affinities between the discussion of the “New German Painting” and current cross-disciplinary academic literature on nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany. Overall, the thesis argues that this more encompassing approach is better suited for revealing how the phenomenon “New German Painting” sits at the centre of debates about collective memory and cultural identity in post-1989 Germany, including the complex relations between the former East and West that characterise these debates.

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Introduction

In 2006 the Berlin-based critic and curator Christoph Tannert published the book *New German Painting – Remix*, which aimed “to give an impression of what the international art world regards as Germany’s export hit” (6). Featured in the book are some thirty artists, many of whom had become bestsellers in the international, and above all North American, art market since the late 1990s.¹ Some of the better-known names include Neo Rauch, Daniel Richter, Norbert Bisky, Corinne Wasmuht, Eberhart Havekost, and Matthias Weischer. As the title of Tannert’s book indicates, internationally this loose group of artists was promoted as “New German Painting”. The label extended from the so-called “New Leipzig School”, artists who had studied at the Leipzig Academy (*Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst*) in former East Germany in the 1990s, to their contemporaries who had studied at academies across former West Germany, including those in Düsseldorf, Cologne, and Hamburg. The majority were born in the late 1960s and 70s, and were the first generation of artists to emerge from the unified Germany. This thesis investigates the phenomenon “New German Painting” and tries to make sociological, as well as art historical, sense of its genesis, emergence, and development.

Although Tannert’s book contains some abstract painting, much of the so-called “New German Painting” is unified by a figurative-representational style. In the international art market especially, the perception of the work was mostly as painting that was characterised by social-historical motifs: architectural structures and urban landscapes, arrangements of material and consumer culture, and gatherings of human figures, all of which seemed to date from a bygone age. After Germany, the paintings received most art critical and journalistic attention in the United States where the largest international market for the work had developed. Focusing on their nostalgic aspect, American commentators regularly praised the works as a new kind of German history painting, which confronted the country’s recent past of division and reunification. At the centre of the American debate stood the painting of

¹ Alongside some thirty artist-profiles the book includes two essays. The first is by Tannert and engages with the (re)turn of young artists working in Germany to traditional easel painting in the age of new media. The second essay, by the American critic Graham Bader, engages with the reception of the painting in the United States. The overall style and tone of both essays is journalistic and anecdotal.

representatives of the “New Leipzig School” (who were educated and based in post-*Wende* East Germany),² which many US observers saw as expressing an air of “*Ostalgie*”, a 1990s neologism that referred to collective sentiments of longing for the previous GDR.

Despite the painting’s success in the American market its reception amongst German art critics and journalists was by far more negative. The German debate on the work was largely prompted by its successful sales in the United States: for many German critics the high financial value the painting had attained in the US market was not an accurate reflection of its artistic value. The traditional figurative style of much of the painting – adopted especially by artists trained at academies in the post-*Wende* East Germany – was frequently decried as an aesthetically and politically reactionary artistic position. Further, critics did not see a serious engagement with recent German history in the new body of art. Instead they dismissed its nostalgic outlook and often overtly German iconography as catering to established American perceptions of twentieth-century German art as charged with the nation’s troubled past. It was argued that the artists and their promoters were trying to latch onto the fascination of American art collectors and curators with German painting from the postwar decades which confronted the history of Nazism and the Holocaust, by igniting an equal fascination with a new post-1989 German painting that addressed the nation’s history of division and unification. More specifically, the iconographic references of some of the painting to the GDR past were discarded as exoticising East German history and feeding a growing post-socialist nostalgia industry. Charles Maier’s dictum, that “nostalgia is to memory as kitsch is to art” (cited in Boym 2001: xiv) can be considered to apply to much of the domestic debate on the new painting. Many commentators did not take the work seriously – either as art or as a contribution to post-1989 German collective memory. It is these debates and dilemmas that this thesis aims to explore.

² “*Wende*” meaning “turning point” is the German term commonly applied to the social-political changes that happened within the GDR during the transition year 1989/90.

I. Research aims

The thesis aims to examine the aesthetic specificity of the “New German Painting” and its art critical reception in light of Germany’s recent history of unification, as well as the art’s export to the international market. The focus is on the German and American discourses on the new painting, which are analysed not only in terms of art historical continuities, but also for how they were shaped by the broader historical moment and social-cultural context in which they were formulated. As will be elaborated below, the thesis’ analytical framework combines sociological with art historical approaches.

Despite its innovative sound the label “New German Painting” has been a recurring phenomenon in modern German art. The second part of the title of Tannert’s *New German Painting – Remix* (2006) implies this longer history. As Christian Weikop observed in a review of the book, the term “remix” suggests “both continuity and a break from the past [...] or even the cyclical nature of debates” (Weikop 2007: 10). However, although Tannert hints at the cyclical recurrence of the phenomenon, he does not discuss its genealogy in any detail. What is missing from Tannert’s story of the new body of art are thus its complex historical connotations. Wired into the very label “New German Painting” is a longer history of issues concerning German collective memory, cultural identity, and affinitive patterns of continuity and discontinuity between Germany’s art history and political history. The application of the label to the new painting of the post-*Wende* years indicates the return of some of these issues, however under different circumstances and with different implications.

The “German” in German art

The notion of a “New German Painting” first appeared in the early nineteenth century with the *Nazarenes* and other German Romantic painters. With Germany not yet a political union, art attained patriotic significance under the concept of “a nation of shared culture”, the German “*Kulturnation*” (Belting 1998: 41-48). About a century later the label returned with the arrival of “German Expressionism”. The artists from the expressionist group “*Die Brücke*” (*The Bridge*) described their work as “new German art” (“*neudeutsche Kunst*”) in the brochure for their first group-exhibition at the Dresden Galerie Arnold of 1910 (Heller 2011). Countering Franco-

centric definitions of modern art dominant at the time, the group proposed an alternative German version of modernism, which was inspired by the distinctive formal and stylistic vocabulary of medieval and Renaissance German art and folklore (Benson 2011).

Whilst the early history of the label was dominated by the intertwinement of art with issues of national identity, in its later history – after 1945 – questions of collective memory moved centre stage. In the 1980s the painting of the so-called German “Neo-Expressionists” (artists such as Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lüpertz, and Jörg Immendorf) was once more labelled “New German” (see Faust and de Vries 1982; Kuspit 1984). Although these artists had been exhibited in Germany since the late 1960s, it was only in the early 1980s, when they were introduced to the American market, that they became the subject of major art critical controversies. As with the latest crop of “New German Painting” and its nostalgic aspect, American and German art critical opinions were divided on the mnemonic function of the painting that was steeped in Teutonic and Nazi symbolisms. Whilst American critics promoted the neo-expressionist painting as confronting the German trauma of National Socialism, German commentators were overwhelmingly sceptical of the painting’s memory function. They accused the artists of a certain historical amnesia and claimed that through aestheticizing and stylising the terror of Nazism they effected its normalisation and banalisation.

As the preceding paragraph indicates, the art critical discourse on the post-1989 “New German Painting” operated with some of the central concepts that had defined the label’s earlier history. To the present day art historical scholarship has hardly touched on these correspondences. The phenomenon of the post-1989 “New German Painting” is still largely a blind spot within art history. Although art historians have published essays on individual artists in exhibition catalogues, they have not examined the painting critically and historically as a group. Some work done on the “New Leipzig School” is the exception (see e.g., Gerlach 2008; Saehrendt 2009: 154-159). In part this neglect is likely to be related to the recentness of the phenomenon; the museal consecration of the art is still in its early phase. Whilst works by some of the better-known artists of the group have been included in international museum collections since the early 2000s, the majority of the painting is in the hands of

private collectors. The shift of attention of much art historical scholarship towards contemporary art and the art market (exemplified for instance in the literature published on the “Young British Artists” within a decade of their emergence, see e.g., McCorquodale and Siderfin et al. 1997; Burrows 1998; Stallabrass 1999) has not taken hold amongst scholars of German art history.

Considering that scholars of modern German art are traditionally deeply concerned with the interplay between artistic developments and social-political history, it is surprising that they have not yet turned to the “New German Painting”. As the editor of a recent volume on post-1945 German art observes, “to write a history of German art means to engage aesthetic not only in relation to taste and sensory pleasure, but also and more significantly in relation to socio-political circumstances” (Eckmann 2009: 35). The claims and controversies of art critics, concerning underlying interactions between the aesthetic content of the “New German Painting” and the post-Unification German context, mirror this dual concern. Yet, even in spite of this parallel, art historians have, until now, abstained from the critical analysis of these claims and controversies.

Since the early 1990s art historians have increasingly challenged reductive narratives that present twentieth-century German art as unified by an underlying expressionist stylistic continuity. One of the major international exhibitions that reinforced this notion of continuity in style was *German Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1905-1985* (Joachimides, Rosenthal, et al. 1985) at the Royal Academy of Arts, London in 1985/86. In a critical review of the exhibition, Walter Grasskamp (1991) suggested this curatorial framing was an attempt “to compensate for the *discontinuity of the nation*” (23, emphasis in original). Yet, at the same time, it was a framework that erased the very problem and paradox of modern German art; namely that its underlying continuity is a “continuity of disjunctures” (Grasskamp 1991).

Grasskamp’s review is part of the volume *The Divided Heritage: Themes and Problems in German Modernism* (ed. Rogoff 1991) written as a critique of the stylistic continuity constructed by the Royal Academy exhibition. The volume is one of the most significant contributions to Anglo-Saxon scholarship on modern German art of the past two decades. In particular, it brings into focus affinities between the

nation's discontinuous political history (from the Wilhelmine Empire, Weimar Republic, Third Reich, through to the two postwar Germanys) and patterns of rupture and continuity in artistic developments. More recently, the catalogue *Art of the Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures* (eds. Barron and Eckmann 2009) has continued this theme, expanding on artistic relations between the GDR and West Germany and on how each Germany developed its own way of dealing with the German cultural tradition after Nazism and the Holocaust.

What is striking about these, and similar, attempts to critically re-write modern German art history as a continuity of disjunctures, is that they tend to stop at the year 1990. The underlying assumption appears to be that controversies surrounding the question of the "German" in German art – which were reanimated during the Cold War with each Germany trying to gain discursive control over the debate – were either resolved with the nation's political reunification, or are no longer relevant to contemporary artistic practices that are increasingly international in their orientation. The thesis argues that the phenomenon of the post-1989 "New German Painting" demonstrates the opposite. The question of the "German" in German art resurfaced in both, the aesthetic specificity of the painting and in the way it shaped the critical discourse on the art.

Nostalgia & its two sides

The particular ways in which the question of the "German" in German art resurfaced in the post-1989 "New German Painting" – as well as the broader cultural, social, and political factors that triggered this resurgence – differed substantially from previous articulations of the very same question. The event of Reunification, and the process of bringing together the former East and West into a unified nation, intensely coloured engagements with "Germanness" in the painting and its reception. The thesis argues that the nostalgic aspect of the "New German Painting", and its art critical interpretations, are most revelatory of the new circumstances under which artists and critics renegotiated notions of "Germanness".

The empirical chapters of the thesis examine the nostalgic aspect of the painting as having two sides: thematic and stylistic. Although these two sides cannot be strictly

separated empirically, this division helps to analytically unpack the nostalgic aspect of the painting. In the first instance the painting's thematic contents are examined as expressing a social-cultural nostalgia. What American critics often called the painting's nostalgic "lifeworlds" (Kuspit 2006) – the places, people, and objects depicted in the works – are examined for how they thematise memories of the two postwar Germanys, the GDR and the old Federal Republic. In what ways, and with what implications was the redefinition of German collective memory after 1989 – how both Germanys were to be remembered, and where this memory was to stand in relation to the shared Nazi past – negotiated in the paintings' nostalgic lifeworlds and their reception?

Secondly, the stylistic specificity of the painting, its return to a traditional figurative style, is examined as expressing nostalgia for a time before approaches to painting as (re)presentation were overtaken by the critical reflection of painting as a medium. The thesis argues that it was in the work of the "New Leipzig School" that this nostalgia for painting attained a broader social and political relevance. These artists trained at the Department of Painting/Graphics of the Leipzig Academy in former East Germany during the 1990s (with the exception of Neo Rauch, who completed his studies in the 1980s). Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, East German professors teaching at the Department staunchly continued with a syllabus that centred on the traditional modes of figurative painting established at the Academy during the GDR. This preservation of the artistic heritage of the GDR stood in sharp contrast to the wider devaluation of GDR art, and its marginalisation from national art museums and art historical narratives during the 1990s "*deutsch-deutscher Bilderstreit*" (the public and expert debate on the future of the artistic heritage of the GDR). It is suggested that, viewed as an artistic position which preserved elements of the artistic heritage of the GDR, the nostalgia for painting of the "New Leipzig School" sits at the centre of controversial debates about Germany's artistic identity after Unification: should the artistic identity of the reunified Germany (like its political identity) be modelled on that of the old Federal Republic; and, if so, what, if any, role was the artistic heritage of the GDR to play in the country's future?

That said, it would be misleading to suggest that the whole character of the painting associated with the label "New German" can be accounted for in terms of different

notions of nostalgia or *Ostalgie*. Whilst the focus of the thesis is on examining the relationship between the painting and its reception as nostalgia, it also explores how the aesthetic specificity of individual works is by far more complex and richer than can be accounted for in this framework. In particular the question of art historical continuities and ruptures, which can only be answered by turning to individual of the paintings, prompts the analysis to move beyond the conception of the painting in terms of nostalgia.

Combining sociological & art historical approaches

In order to extend the re-writing of modern German art as a continuity of disjunctures to the period after 1990, the thesis adapts an analytical framework that combines art historical with sociological approaches. The resurgence of the question of “Germanness” in the “New German Painting” of the post-*Wende* decades was deeply intertwined with factors that lie outside the analytical scope of more conventional art historical perspectives. The question returned not simply as one of form and style, but encompassed broader issues, including, German collective memory and identity after Unification; disputes over the future of the artistic heritage of the GDR; the institutional histories of art academies in former East Germany; as well as developments in the international contemporary art market. To gain a critical understanding of the “Germanness” of the new painting, and how it relates with earlier moments in modern German art, these factors also need to be taken into account.

Whilst the thesis’ combination of sociological and art historical approaches was devised to better understand the artistic phenomenon that is being examined, this encompassing analytical framework also speaks to recent innovations in the sociology of art. As detailed below, Chapter 1 discusses this contribution of the thesis to the sociology of art.

II. Chapter outline

Chapter 1 positions the thesis’ interdisciplinary approach in relation to a “new sociology of art”, which has overcome the discipline’s traditional antagonism towards art history. Over the past two decades sociologists of art have increasingly

broadened their analytical repertoire to incorporate art historical approaches and methods more attuned to examining the aesthetic dimension of art. The discipline's established concerns with external social-structures are increasingly being complemented with a sensibility for the relative autonomy of artistic forms, intentions, and meanings. Yet, as the chapter shows, this recent development has raised new questions in the sociology of art about how to do justice to the specificity of the aesthetic without reverting to a perspective that treats art as removed from, and unaffected by its social context. Further, the attempts of scholars to positively engage with the aesthetic specificity of art have reanimated criticisms of the widely accepted position of aesthetic value-neutrality within the discipline. A notable number of scholars are today calling for sociologists of art to abandon their pretence of value-neutrality and to put their efforts towards formulating sociologically informed aesthetic judgements.

Following this theoretical discussion, **Chapter 2** – a shorter and more descriptive chapter – presents the empirical materials that inform the thesis. Consistent with the thesis' interdisciplinary approach diverse empirical materials are analysed: select artistic works that were labelled “New German Painting”; the art critical discourses that developed around the painting in the United States and Germany; twenty-four self-conducted interviews with relevant art world actors; as well as some of the broader public debates in post-Unification Germany that relate to the “New German Painting” phenomenon. Further the chapter elaborates on how the thesis combines methods of discourse analysis, interviews, and visual analysis.

Chapter 3 provides a theoretical basis for the analysis of the nostalgic aspect of the “New German Painting” in the empirical parts of the thesis. It reviews an emergent cross-disciplinary literature that has examined underlying connections between nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany and processes of collective memory and cultural identity formation. The concern of this literature has been the critical reappraisal of so-called *Ostalgie*, and other forms of post-*Wende* nostalgia, which were not considered a serious and legitimate form of engagement with the country's recent history of division and unification in German public discourse. Whilst contributors to this literature have limited their attention to the areas of literary texts, film, architecture, and consumer practices, the chapter argues that the phenomenon “New

German Painting” strongly resonates with some of the literature’s central concepts and claims. To better understand the recent academic interest in different forms of nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany, the chapter positions it within the context of broader debates in German History and Memory Studies about shifts in German memory culture since Reunification. With the historical turn of 1989/90 there was a pressing need for the focus of German “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*” (coming to terms with the past) on the Nazi past and the Holocaust to be extended to also include the two more recent pasts of the GDR and the “Bonn Republic”. This expansion brought with it not only debates on a necessary hierarchy in German collective memory, but also changes in the relationship between personal and public memory, German guilt and suffering, and authentic and mediated memories.

The empirical part of the thesis consists of four chapters. The first, **Chapter 4** examines the American reception of the “New German Painting” as a new kind of history painting and the negative German response to this reading of the art. The concern of the chapter is to explain the different approaches of American and German critics to the memory function of the new painting as conditioned, in each case, by underlying art historical continuities as well as broader social-cultural factors. To provide a historically grounded analysis, the chapter compares both the American reception of the new painting and its German response, with the earlier American and German debate of the 1980s on the memory function of the so-called German “Neo-Expressionist” painting that was steeped in Teutonic and Nazi symbolisms.

Chapters 5 and **6** form a pair. Both focus on the artists of the so-called “New Leipzig School” and their continuation of the traditional figurative style of painting developed at the Leipzig Academy during the GDR. In the international art market this artistic position was often considered an exotic post-socialist anachronism which reflected the isolation of East Germany from western art discourses since the 1960s. German critics, in turn, recurrently accused the Leipzig artists of catering to a growing post-socialist nostalgia industry, as well as a nostalgia for classical concepts of painting, which was denounced as an intensely reactionary artistic position. Chapter 5 returns to the early 1990s, before the international export of the new Leipzig painting began, to try and understand under what institutional conditions it

was possible for East German professors teaching at the Department of Painting/Graphics of the Leipzig Academy to continue the classical syllabus of figurative painting dating from the GDR. It examines the motives of staff and students at the Department for preserving the local East German artistic traditions in the midst of a climate of artistic innovation in the remainder of the Academy. The social-political relevance of the artistic identity of “eastern German distinctiveness”, which was formulated at the Department during the post-*Wende* years, is analysed in the context of the wider devaluation of GDR art, and its marginalisation from national art museums and art historical narratives, during the contemporaneous *Bilderstreit*.

Chapter 6 continues the analysis of the artistic position of the “New Leipzig School” and its foundations in the artistic heritage of the GDR. It takes the reader up to the early 2000s when the artists’ works began to be sold and exhibited internationally. By this time, their traditional style of figurative painting allied them with a resurgent interest in painting and figuration in international contemporary art. From occupying a marginal position within the Leipzig Academy during the 1990s, the artists had become a focal point of attention in international debates. Building on an analysis of the paintings of individual representatives of the group, it is argued that what made the works stand out in this broader context was the specific constellation of art historical and cultural factors at the post-*Wende* Leipzig Academy and the distinctive artistic tendencies that developed from this. The former GDR provided the young artists with an environment in which to explore the contemporary relevance and reception of figuration and painting in significantly new ways. Not only were they able to experiment with the post-socialist reception of the figurative styles of painting dating from the GDR, but by manoeuvring between local traditions and international art discourses and practices they managed to formulate new perspectives on contemporary issues such as intermediality, cultural hybridity, and strategies of post-modern citation and irony. Looking at these developments against the background of the post-Unification assessment of GDR art, it is suggested that the Leipzig artists significantly contributed to the gradual positive revalorisation of this work towards the late 1990s. The chapter concludes by raising the question of the political significance of the continuation of the artistic heritage of the GDR in the post-*Wende* German context.

Chapter 7 again broadens the view from the “New Leipzig School” to the larger phenomenon “New German Painting”. The focus is on the paintings’ ruin motifs – urban wastelands, run-down buildings, deranged and cluttered interiors, dis-functional sites of industrial production – and how these were inspired by the icons of the postwar modernist ideology of progress as manifest in the areas of industry, architecture, and material culture. It is argued that, whilst these ruin motifs were specific to the post-*Wende* moment, especially in the East, they were also part of a broader contemporary fascination with modernist industrial ruins that unified the former East and West. Scholars who have examined this “new cult of ruins” have usually interpreted it as harbouring nostalgia for the utopian imagination that underpinned the postwar social-political project of mass industrial modernisation on either side of the Berlin Wall – the dream of material happiness for all. In the case of the “New German Painting”, the political implications of the artists’ nostalgic representations of a past age and its utopias of social transformation were addressed above all by German critics. However, rather than indicating the resurgence of hope and attempts at recuperation, the artists’ nostalgic return to modernist ideals of social progress were widely perceived as signalling disillusionment, a reading that often led to their association with the political right. The final part of the chapter departs from the political labelling of the paintings’ ruin motifs and instead examines their temporal structures. What lines of historical continuity and discontinuity did they establish across the historical divide of 1989 and between East and West, and with what historiographic effect?

In a short **Conclusion** the thesis revisits one of the central questions raised in Chapter 1: whether a sociological study of art that engages in a positive analytics of the aesthetic should also move to critically judge the art examined. This question is reflected on in light of the preceding analysis of the “New German Painting” and its combination of sociological with art historical approaches. Has the thesis formulated a critical judgement of the painting; and if so, from what position – that of the sociologist, art historian, or impassioned observer – and according to what criteria – aesthetic, social, political, or historical?

III. A personal note on the choice of research subject & approach

The subject matter and analytical approach of the thesis are somewhat reflective of my personal and academic biography. I first came across artistic work associated with the label “New German Painting” when working at a Berlin contemporary art gallery in 2004. Although this gallery did not represent artists associated with the label it was located close to some that did. During the Berlin art fair *Artforum*, I also noticed the considerable amount of figurative-representational painting exhibited by German contemporary art galleries and the interest of visitors and collectors in this work. At the same time I observed a disparity between the public popularity of the work and the many dismissive reviews it received in much of the German feuilletons. Many art critics denied the painting’s art historical significance and reduced its popularity to an art market phenomenon.

When beginning my PhD I was interested in uncovering some of the historical underpinnings of the disparity in the reception of the “New German Painting”. I wanted to find out about how the negative reaction of many art critics to the work was conditioned by historically established prejudices towards figurative-representational painting in postwar German art history. After engaging in more detail with the critical discourse on the painting I was particularly struck by the recurring description of the work as nostalgic. I noted how this art critical definition led to an extensive debate on collective sentiments of *Ostalgie*, and other forms of post-*Wende* nostalgia, in German newspapers from the mid-1990s onwards. My aim was to understand how the art critical reception of the paintings’ nostalgic aspect was wired into this broader public debate on post-*Wende* nostalgia and the related issues of post-1989 East-West relations, collective memory, and cultural identity.

As well as an intellectual interest in these subjects, I also had a personal interest in them. I was born and grew up in former West Germany, but moved to the UK as a teenager in the late 1990s. My first experience of East Germany was in 1989, when, together with my grandmother, who lived in the western lowlands of the Harz Mountains, I visited an East German border town. The memory I had of East Germany thereafter was that of a child, marked by highly subjective impressions and obscure details. The same, in a way, goes for my relationship with Germany’s post-Unification history at large. I only developed the intellectual maturity to engage with

the country's post-*Wende* condition once I had left the country and was living in the UK. During trips back home I noticed how the old Federal Republic, in which I grew up, was changing. I became interested in understanding these changes more systematically and in light of Germany's larger post-World War II history.

My specific choice to embark on a cultural history of post-Unification Germany through the case study of an artistic phenomenon attests to my belief that art often has the capacity to reveal social-historical nuances and peculiarities overlooked in other areas of historical research. At the same time, the choice to examine an artistic phenomenon reflects my academic trajectory: my training first as an art historian and later as a sociologist. Studying art history at undergraduate level, I was already interested in the social aspects of artistic phenomena. However, when I began my PhD in Sociology and read the classics in sociology of art (such as Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* and Howard Becker's *Art Worlds*), I missed an engagement with the aesthetic specificity of artistic work. The encompassing analytical approach I take in this thesis, which combines an analysis of the internal aesthetic dimension of art with one of its external social-historical conditioning, brings together my background in art history and sociology.

Chapter 1 An Aesthetically-Minded Sociology of Art

The thesis' combination of a sociological with an art historical perspective is a response to the persistent social-political dimension that characterised the art critical debate on the "New German Painting". The thesis examines in equal part the aesthetic and art historical specificity of the painting, as well as the broader social-historical context, which determined its production and reception. Theoretically this interdisciplinary approach is grounded in analytical and methodological innovations introduced in the sociology of art during the past decade, which have complemented established concerns about social structure with sensitivity to aesthetic specificity. In the course of these innovations the established separation of the discipline of sociology of art from art history and its internal aesthetic concerns has also been fundamentally revised.

Until the late 1990s much sociology of art was of a polemical tone that was directed against art world definitions of art, including art historical accounts. Even as late as 2005 David Inglis argued most sociology of art was characterised by an imperative of "exposure", which aimed to prove "that there is really no such thing as 'art' per se, but that the very word 'art' is a label put on certain things by certain interested parties (intentionally or unintentionally)" (Inglis 2005: 99). The driving motive of sociology of art was to expose the collective belief that artistic value and meaning resided in the artwork itself, or the skills of the artist, as an illusion. Instead sociologists proposed theories of artistic value as socially constructed within art worlds that function via collectively defined conventions. The latter approach was characteristic of the North American brand of sociology of art and its social organisational approach to cultural production.³ A more critical sociology of art developed in France, most notably in the writing of Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, artistic value was not only collectively produced within the structures of a historically determined "field of art" (Bourdieu 1993, 1996) but, more fundamentally, art and aesthetic discourses also served the reproduction of social class hierarchies. In his sociology of taste, Bourdieu (1984) argued that the Kantian notion of aesthetic judgement as universal and disinterested

³ For an overview, see Zolberg (1990: Chapter 3) and Peterson and Anand (2004).

concealed the function of aesthetic discourses as an instrument of symbolic power, which allocated socially dominant and dominated positions.

Common to both the organisational and critical approaches within sociology of art was that they either considered notions of intrinsic artistic meaning and value the territory of art history and aesthetic philosophy, or denied them altogether. In her 1990 assessment of the sub-discipline, Vera Zolberg described this non-consideration of internal aesthetic factors as “dangerous reductionism” (Zolberg 1990: 212). In response to such criticism a growing “new sociology of art” (De La Fuente 2007) emerged in the late 1990s, which refuses to “limit sociological investigations of the arts to contextual or external factors” and aspires to “[frame] questions about the aesthetic properties of art and artworks in a way that is compatible with social constructionism” (409).⁴ This turn towards the artistic work itself, also came with a turn towards art history. The new sociology of art has broadened its conceptual repertoire to incorporate art historical approaches and methods more attuned to examine the internal-aesthetic aspects of art. Similar to anthropology of art, it is more sympathetic to the artistic discourses and milieus it studies. The concern is no longer to demystify illusions about the value of art; many in sociology are now striving to describe and understand the worlds of value that art constitutes for different groups of actors and how it enables social action and orientation.

This chapter reviews recent tendencies in sociology of art to engage with the aesthetic specificity of the artistic work itself and the discipline’s rapprochement with art history. The thesis’ interdisciplinary analytical approach is positioned in relation to these developments. The chapter begins with a discussion of the turn towards art history amongst sociologists. It then moves on to discuss revisions of the concept of artistic agency in sociology of art, which have been aimed at theorising the sociological causality of art and its aesthetic specificity. Although the thesis shares these concerns to incorporate questions of aesthetic specificity into sociology of art, the literature examined takes the focus on artistic agency to an extreme, thereby edging out established sociological concerns about social structure and collective meaning. Following on from this, it is discussed how the thesis sits closer to an

⁴ See also Hennion and Genier (2000), as well as Zolberg (2005) for an overview of recent analytical and methodological innovations in sociology of art.

alternative body of literature in the new sociology of art, which is sensitive to the autonomy of artistic meanings and intentions without compromising sociological perspectives on the significance of historically established social structures. The analysis of the “New German Painting” in relation to the post-1989 German condition is premised on such a more balanced approach that attends to both issues – artistic agency and social structure.

The final part of the chapter addresses on-going debates in the sociology of art concerning the question of whether the sociologist can maintain a position of aesthetic value neutrality. Such debates were reanimated with the emergence of the new sociology of art and its engagement with art’s aesthetic dimension. It is suggested that a position of strict value neutrality is untenable in sociological studies that address issues of aesthetic specificity. The very use of art historical categories brings with it certain value judgements that are inherent in these categories. The theoretical argument that sociology of art can stand outside critical mediation is identified as empirically unsustainable. Sociological studies of art do not only build on art critical discourses, but they inevitably feed back into them. However, it is argued, a critical and reflexive perspective can be maintained by situating artistic practices, meanings and values in relation to broader social-historical structures and dynamics.

1.1 Learning from art history

Since the establishment of the sub-discipline of sociology of art in the late 1960s, its self-definition has increasingly depended on the strict separation of its concern with the external social conditioning of art from art history’s engagement with art’s internal aesthetic aspects. In the past decade many contributions to sociology of art have revised this disciplinary separation by opening up towards art history, its methods of visual analysis and its canonical knowledge. A growing number of sociological studies of art, which draw freely on art historical scholarship (e.g. Born 1995; Heinich 1996; Wolff 2003; Becker and Faulkner 2009), demonstrate a new willingness amongst sociologists to learn from art history. In an intellectual history of the two scholarly fields, sociology and art history, Jeremy Tanner (2003) pointed to the historical foundations of this cross-disciplinary exchange. Both disciplines developed in the nineteenth century as a response to modern social structures and

cultural institutions and they share an interest in the same intellectual problems, related to issues of cultural innovation and change and the relationship between collective structures and individual forces. By overcoming the disciplinary separations that developed over the course of the twentieth century, contemporary scholars in both fields can benefit from insights into and collaboration with the other. Addressing recent innovations in sociology of art, Tanner suggests that especially sociology could benefit from an earlier “critical tradition in art-historical and art sociological thought which can allow them to address contemporary problems in the sometimes more nuanced, and aesthetically informed manner characteristic of certain earlier strands of sociological thought” (Tanner 2003: ix)

In the first instance, sociologists who have recently turned again to art history did so to acquire a vocabulary for discussing the formal-aesthetic aspects of artistic practice. However, of perhaps greater analytical significance, has been the move of sociologists into art historical terrain in order to understand and theorise the autonomous temporal dynamics of artistic practice and discourse. As Georgina Born pointed out in a recent essay titled “The Social and the Aesthetic: For a post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production” (2010), extant sociologies of art have mostly been blind to the specific and independent historical logic of artistic production: “If there is an overriding dimension of creative practice that has been lamentably neglected [...] and that demands to be studied, it is the insistent, existential reality of the historical orientation of producers by reference to the given aesthetic and ethical trajectories or coordinates of the genres in relation to which they work” (Born 2010: 192). Born’s essay is exemplary of recent contributions to the sociology of art, which have recognised that artistic practices and discourses are not only determined by external social-structural developments, but also by the internal history of art. Artistic production is always conditioned by the history of art that preceded it, a “horizon or ‘foreknowledge’” (Born 2010: 192), which artistic producers respond to by continuing, modifying, or rejecting it. Similarly Ron Eyerman, who views “the history of art [...] as a history of images”, has argued it “cannot be conceived in the absence of those images that preceded it” (Eyerman 2006: 18).

Art sociological writing that has confronted the specific historicity of artistic practices and discourses has often drawn on anthropologist Alfred Gell’s (1998) concept of art

history as a complex network of temporal series. Approaching the subject from a broader anthro-philosophical interest in the nature of time, Gell described artistic works as “made out of time”. Speaking of individual works that compose an artist’s oeuvre, he suggests they “form ‘moments’ of temporal series [...] they are ancestral to, and descended from, other works in the *oeuvre*” (233). For example, each of Marcel Duchamp’s works can be identified as a development of, or preparation for, other of his works. Similarly, artistic styles develop through conscious and unconscious acts of repetition in and over time. Gell terms the temporal series in which artistic works exist, “retentions” (containing traces of the past) and “protentions” (containing anticipations of the future).

Of particular relevance for this thesis is Gell’s application of his concept of art history as consisting of complex temporal series not only to individual artistic oeuvres, but also to collective artistic traditions (for example, Gell discusses Maori architectural design). As stated in the Introduction, the thesis views the phenomenon “New German Painting” as coherent with a notion of modern German art history as moving between rupture and continuity. The painting bears memories of previous moments in German art history – especially of the artistic heritage of the postwar GDR and FRG – but it also demonstrates the modification and innovation of these traditions. A diachronic analysis, which maps the complex relations of retention and protention the painting entertains, is crucial to an analysis of its social-historical and also political significance in the post-1989 German context. What cultural continuities and ruptures with the two postwar Germanys are projected in the painting? And, which cultural memories are claimed worthy of preservation, and which discarded, for the reunified nation?

The growing sociological recognition of the relatively autonomous temporality of the artistic sphere is also manifest in sociological discussion on value shifts in art. Until the early 1990s sociology of art was usually concerned with continuities in artistic value and judgement and how these were secured by collectively established conventions or reproductive social structural logics. More recently sociologists have also turned to examining discontinuities in value judgements, looking at the changes in aesthetic regimes that these shifts reflect (e.g. Wolff 2008: Chapter 2). Value hierarchies in art are no longer examined as conditioned only by extra-artistic social

processes; aesthetic developments and discourses internal to the artistic sphere are increasingly also taken into consideration. The consultation of art history's specialist knowledge in this area has become essential.

In her work on public disputes over the evaluative criteria for contemporary art in France as well as the US "culture wars", the French sociologist Nathalie Heinich has shown that public art controversies are one of the most fruitful sites for examining value shifts in art (Heinich 1998, 2000). Art controversies generally arise around artistic works that in some way run up against, or transgress established categories of judgement and collective reference frameworks. In the field of contemporary art especially, the interplay of transgression and controversy are intrinsic to the recognition process (Heinich 1998a, Marontate 2009). As Jan Marontate observed, "[n]ew art deliberately challenges boundaries between good taste and bad, between art and non-art, fomenting conflict between uninitiated publics and art world insiders" (Marontate 2009: 176). The close interconnection of value shifts in art with art controversies is also evident in the "New German Painting". The art historical consecration of the painting, through the integration of some of the works into museum collections, was accompanied by heated debates in German and American newspapers and art journals concerning their artistic value. The critical debate in particular questioned the artists' return to the traditional medium of painting, their figurative style, and engagement with subjects of national history, which conflicted with the dominant tendencies in contemporary art, new media and conceptual art, and the deconstruction of stable notions of national cultural identity in an increasingly global art world. The thesis examines these art critical controversies in order to tease out the shifts in artistic practice and discourse they signalled. Further it relates these shifts in the artistic field of post-1989 Germany to broader social and political developments after Unification.

1.2 A revised concept of aesthetic agency

Central to sociologists' engagement with the aesthetic dimension of art have been revisions of the concept of artistic agency, in order to account for the causal sociological properties of artistic practices and materials, rather than seeing them as a mere reflection of underlying social structures. In undertaking this revision, a sizeable

group of authors – often summarised under the labels “pragmatist” or “post-critical sociology of art” (see De la Fuente 2010) – have looked towards Actor Network Theory (ANT), and the related field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), where scientific objects and devices have been theorised as “*actants*” involved in the co-production of social situations. Coined by Bruno Latour, as part of his relational sociology (Latour 2005), the concept of *actant* was formulated to broaden the question of the social to all beings, human and non-human. Underlying this redefinition of agency was a view of the social not as an *a priori* force that glues things together (or as a distinct substance or domain of reality), but as emerging from the momentary and specific associations of varying heterogeneous beings. In Latour’s relational sociology things “are not social by nature, but only social in the sense that they are associated with one another” (Latour 2000: 113). Consequently social explanation does not mean the uncovering of society as a hidden source of causality, but the tracing of the associations between different beings, human and non-human (e.g. scientific objects), which in their associations make socialness.

Latour’s conceptualisation of non-human *actants* as playing a determining role in social life, spoke to the aspirations of the new sociology of art to formulate a revised concept of artistic agency, which permitted the positive theorisation of the causal sociological properties of the artistic work itself.⁵ Borrowing from the conceptual toolkit of ANT and STS, sociologists of art transferred the concept of *actant* onto artistic work thereby awarding it a determining role in social action:

“In the language of Bruno Latour, the artwork (like the scientific object in his analyses) is an *actant* [...]. Like any other participant in the process of art making, it imposes constraints on what others, including the artist or artists who are constructing it, can do” (Becker and Faulkner, et al. 2006: 4).

North American sociologists of art, such as Howard Becker, formerly known for their organisational approach to cultural production, have coupled the concept of *actant* with the concept of “constraint”. The latter had already been used earlier in the organisational approach to theorise artistic production as a collective process determined by the rules and regulations of specific art worlds (Becker 1982).

⁵ Nathalie Heinich (1998a) has examined the influence of Latour’s early work (e.g. *Science in Action: How to follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, 1987) on the post-critical, pragmatist sociology of art.

However, rather than continuing to seek the collective constraints imposed on artistic production only in the structural organisation of art worlds, these authors have now moved on to ask how the aesthetic specificity of the artistic work also imposes certain constraints on the production process. For example, in their study of repertoires of “ordinary” jazz musicians Becker and Robert R. Faulkner (2009), examined how the material-aesthetic properties of artistic work, as well as its cognitive-discursive embeddedness (i.e., its embeddedness in art historical discourses, traditions and trajectories), determine artistic production.

The issue of how to theorise the social agency of art has come up not only in sociologies of visual art but also of music. Also drawing on Latour’s concept of *actant*, Tia DeNora (2003) developed a concept of music as an “affordance structure”, which enables the formation of certain kinds of social identities, interactions, meanings, and collectivities. Breaking with established sociological concepts of art as a discourse or text, which constitutes a classifying system that mediates social structure, DeNora examined music as a resource for social action, “a resource for – rather than medium about – world building” (2003: 46). She proposed a concept of aesthetic agency that moved beyond issues of “representation” and which instead was premised on the idea that social actors and scenes are shaped by their references to aesthetic materials (see also DeNora and Witkin 1997).⁶ Similarly, Antoine Hennion’s sociology of amateur musical practices and tastes (e.g. Hennion 2003, 2007), established art, not as a perfect intermediary that allows social structures to pass unchanged, but as a process in which what is being mediated is transformed by the multiple number of *actants* involved. Relying on Latour’s theory of social mediation as an emergent, interactional process (Latour 2005: 39), Hennion explains the meaning and value of musical work, not as determined by either the artist or society, but as co-produced by a series of mediators that come together in specific situations of musical performance: artists, listeners, musical discourses, established modes of performance, performance devices and locations.

⁶ In a recent programmatic article, co-written with Sophia Krzys Acords, DeNora developed her conception of aesthetic objects and devices as existing in a dynamic relationship with society, into a coherent analytical approach, which the authors term “arts-in-action”, see Acord and DeNora (2008).

Although the new sociology of art which adopted Latour's concept of *actant* found a way to incorporate the aesthetic specificity of artistic work into sociological analysis, the fixation of this literature on the micro-politics of interaction is problematic as it fails to address the broader macro-sociological structures in which artistic practices are historically embedded. Reviewing the contributions of DeNora and Hennion to the field, Jeremy Tanner (2010) criticised the authors for their bias towards "the local, interactive, and contingent character of aesthetic agency" (Tanner 2010: 246). Although this bias can be explained by the authors' theoretical grounding in Actor Network Theory and their stance against the structuralism of the still dominant critical sociology of art à la Bourdieu, the sociology of art they propose is reductive in its own way. According to Tanner, they postulate the analysis of the local contingency of artistic interaction as being mutually exclusive with an approach that conveys the broader social-historical conditioning of art. However, as Tanner argues, rather than oppositional these approaches are interrelated analytical dimensions: "The genesis of new cultural forms always presupposes reference to [...] a priori structures, typifications and definitions of the situation, as much as to local 'situational and material affordances'" (Tanner 2010: 247). The separation of these analytical dimensions into two exclusive approaches is premised on a false opposition between, on the one hand, a concept of local interaction as contingent and enabling agency, and, on the other, of social structures as definitive and a-temporal and as constraining agency. That social historical structures are also contingent forces (albeit more durable) is concealed within this false opposition.

Further, the fixation of much of the new sociology of art on aesthetic agency runs the risk of not only ignoring the broader social-historical structures in which art is embedded, but also art's symbolic dimension. In an attempt to break with established representational theories of art as mediating collective social meanings, many contributions to the field have tended to abandon concepts of symbolic meaning altogether. Typical of this is the Latour-inspired sociology of art of Albena Yaneva: in an essay on contemporary art installations, Yaneva declares that "[i]n the place of symbolic signification, I shall put the network of relationships among all those actors, humans and non-humans (Latour, 1991), which take part in the installation process" (Yaneva 2003: 170). Alarmed by the actor-centrism of much of the new sociology of art and its focus on the aesthetic materiality of artistic work over its symbolic

meaning, Eduardo De La Fuente (2010) re-emphasised the need to also confront the latter: “the artwork is much more than [...] an ‘actant’ [...] we see this from the fact that many artworks are valued and esteemed out of all proportion to their material or objective qualities” (De La Fuente 2010: 6)

Whilst this thesis is close to the concerns of scholars such as DeNora and Hennion to attend to the aesthetic specificity of art and its ability to affect social action, it strives for an analysis that also examines the broader social-historical structures that condition art. The aim of the thesis, to examine the artistic phenomenon “New German Painting” in relation to the post-1989 German social-historical context, is premised on precisely such a more balanced sociological engagement with both artistic agency and social structure. The next section reviews some of the recent literature in sociology of art that has addressed the aesthetic dimension of art without throwing overboard established sociological concerns of social structure and change.

1.3 Between aesthetic specificity & social mediation

A relatively dispersed group of scholars has argued for a revised sociology of art that is sensitive to the autonomy of artistic meanings and intentions without, however, giving up established sociological positions on the determining role of social-historical structures. Pioneers in this field include Janet Wolff and Georgina Born. In her 1983 work, *Aesthetics & the Sociology of Art*, which anticipated the growing need of sociology of art to engage with questions of aesthetic specificity, Janet Wolff defined her project of a “sociological aesthetics” as based on an approach that combines substantive aesthetic concerns with a critical sociological perspective. Wolff claimed the relative autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, and its irreducibility to social, political, or ideological coordinates, need to be recognised without losing sight of the simultaneous processes of social constructionism involved in artistic work and its reception. Similarly, in a 1993 article Born developed a “composite” concept of artistic work, as consisting of the aesthetic politics of the work itself as well as of processes of social and institutional mediation (see also Born 1995).

The dialectical position of sociology of art, between aesthetic specificity and social mediation Wolff and Born propose, breaks with established theories of social

mediation and art as a passive mediator that mirrors its social conditions of production. Working with a concept of social mediation that abandons all notions of pre-existent social structures (as in the sociology of art inspired by Latour's relational sociology, see above), scholars such as Wolff and Born have tried to create space for the relative autonomy of art within established theories of social mediation. Exemplary is Robert Witkin's (1995) "sociology of the artwork", which integrated the externalist concerns of sociology with social structure and change, with an internalist art historical approach concerned with substantive aesthetic issues. Witkin argued that modern artworks and artistic developments could provide an insight into modern social transformations: for example, he analysed Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863) as exposing late nineteenth century bourgeois ideological configurations of class and gender (Witkin 1997). For Witkin the painting does not passively mediate the social conditions of its time, but constitutes a reflexive engagement with society. Thus whilst collective social, political, and ideological factors are mediated in aesthetic form, art is also conceptualised as an agent for social change through its potential to offer a critical view of society.

The treatment of culture as a relatively autonomous structuring mechanism that shapes social actions and institutions is also characteristic of Jeffrey Alexander's North American brand of "cultural sociology" (Alexander 2003). Whereas Alexander's cultural sociology was previously focused on discursive cultures, their codes, narratives and metaphors, he has recently expanded its scope to the material dimension of social life, including artistic work (Alexander 2008 and 2008a; Alexander and Bartmanski, et al. 2012). In keeping with the definition of culture as a relatively independent variable in social life, art and other objects of material culture are approached "not as a substitute for signs but rather as an alternative, non-verbal medium for symbolic communication" (Alexander 2008: 12). This approach resonates strongly with Visual and Material Culture Studies. However, Alexander adds a distinct sociological dimension to it. As an Émile Durkheim scholar he examines material things as carriers of collective meanings and representations. To adapt these Durkheimian concepts usually applied to the realm of discourse to the area of material culture, he coins the term "iconic power". Material objects attain iconic power "when they have not only material force but also symbolic power" (Alexander and Bartmanski 2012: 1). The iconic object consists not only of its aesthetic surface and

materiality, but is underpinned by a depth of cultural meanings that have their origin in society. Art and its social symbolical value is most representative of this surface-depth relationship (Alexander 2008). Crucially, the relationship Alexander proposes between aesthetic surface and social depth is not a hierarchical one, but the two layers of the iconic object are theorised as mutually constitutive. The iconic power of a material object “emerges from [the] mutual contact [between aesthetic surface and discursive depth], not as a causal sequence but as an intertwining.” (Alexander and Bartmanski 2012: 4). Thus, whilst Alexander’s concept of iconic power accounts for the existence of artistic works as collective representations that have their meaning in society, it also accounts for their simultaneous existence as autonomous aesthetic surfaces that can have an independent social effect.

Whilst Alexander speaks of individual artistic works as collective representations, Ron Eyerman has attempted to theorise the sphere of art as a space of collective meaning production. In his programmatic essay “Towards a Meaningful Sociology of the Arts” (2006), Eyerman departed from conventional sociological metaphors of the sphere of art as either an “art world” (Becker 1982) or a “field of art” (Bourdieu 1993). Viewed through the latter’s spatial metaphors the collective structures and institutions of art become reified into forces that determine cultural production and its reception. By contrast Eyerman gives more room to the relatively independent processes of imagination, creativity, and experience as constructive of the space of art. Echoing Witkin’s concept of artistic reflection as a reflexive engagement with society, Eyerman understands art as a space of experimentation from which the surrounding world can be critically viewed: “More than experience and wider than the practice of making or viewing artworks, art can be conceptualized as a means of approaching and knowing the world” (Eyerman 2006: 20). It is as a space for experience as well as a cognitive process that, for Eyerman, art becomes a social space of collective meaning production from which new social identities and practices emerge. Anticipating this theorisation of art as a space for processes of collective identity construction, his earlier book, *Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Eyerman 2002), examined how the representation of African American experiences in literature and music was vital to the formation of a positive African American collective identity that contested dominant negative stereotypes.

The link between the artistic imagination and processes of collective identity construction had been examined earlier by Born (1993). Consistent with her composite concept of the artistic work, Born argued that sociologists of art cannot limit their concerns to external social structural forces and their conditioning of artistic practices, but in turn they also need to engage with the imaginative and aesthetic constructions of artistic work and their connection with imagined social communities and identities. Imaginary investments in notions of social communities and identities form an inherent part of the aesthetic choices artists make and how they position themselves institutionally and discursively. These artistic choices cannot be reduced to “cruder instrumental calculations such as the economic rewards of mainstream commercial success, or the cultural capital attending avant-garde status” (Born 1993: 237), as in Pierre Bourdieu’s prominent theory of the field of art. Instead, sociologists also need to ask “what kind of ‘community’ do aesthetic strategies articulate?”, and “if [this community] is aesthetically produced, what social meaning or political effectivity does it have?” (236).

According to Born, artists usually employ two kinds of strategies in their projection of imagined social communities and identities. Whilst the first set of strategies constructs “alterity, difference, marginality, the small scale, the ‘local’, the ‘independent’, the ‘avant-garde’”, the second projects “submersion into the dominant collectivity, [and] constructs the mainstream, the ‘global’, the communal and consensual” (ibid.). However, Born emphasises that the political meaning of the social communities and identities projected through these strategies of artistic positioning cannot be determined *a priori*. For example, the construction of alterity does not necessarily stand in an antagonistic relationship with the dominant culture, nor does it necessarily stand for an exclusive community. To make out the political colouring of the imagined social communities and identities projected in artistic positioning a composite analysis of artistic production is necessary. This includes the examination of the aesthetic specificity of the work itself, its discursive and institutional mediation, as well as the broader cultural context in which the art was produced and exhibited.

The artistic positioning of the “New German Painting” tended to project an imagined social community and identity that centred on notions of cultural and national alterity.

The painting of the “New Leipzig School” in particular was appreciated for its East German difference in the international art market. Chapters 5 and 6, which examine the institutional and discursive mediation of the painting in conjunction with its aesthetic specificity, show how the cultural identity of “eastern distinctiveness” of the painting shifted from being a strategy for constructing alterity towards being geared at integrating the artistic legacies of postwar East and West Germany. It is shown how, with this shift in artistic strategies of positioning, the political meaning of the identity of “eastern distinctiveness” also changed.

1.4 Aesthetic value judgements in sociology of art

The thesis’ analysis of the phenomenon “New German Painting” from an interdisciplinary perspective, which moves between art history and sociology, raises the issue of aesthetic value judgement. Whereas art historians often tend to aesthetically judge the art they examine, sociologists of art have traditionally adhered to a position of aesthetic value neutrality. However, within the field of sociology of art the position of value neutrality has been the subject of much controversy. Reviewing the scholarly field in 1990 Vera Zolberg wrote “the idea that sociologists have the professional right to express their own taste is an issue which is subject to ongoing contention” (Zolberg 1990: 72). With the emergence of the new sociology of art and its positive engagement with the aesthetic dimension of art, the debate around questions of value neutrality again gained momentum. Can the sociologist engaging with aesthetics sustain a position of value neutrality? Or, does the move into aesthetic territory invariably involve the sociologist participating in the interpretative and evaluative discourses of art criticism and art history? Responses to these questions have moved in two directions. On the one hand, there is a group of scholars which denies the sociologist the right to any aesthetic judgement on the grounds of the discipline’s dictum of value neutrality. On the other, there are scholars who are pressing for sociology of art to put its efforts towards formulating sociologically informed aesthetic judgements.

One of the foremost advocates of a value-neutral sociology of art has been Natalie Heinich. Speaking from the standpoint of Weberian sociology, Heinich argues that the study of value conflicts in art requires as a precondition that the sociologist abstain

from any value judgements (see Heinich 2002). In Heinich's definition sociology of art has a mediating function. It should describe the value systems and beliefs of oppositional actors to facilitate understanding between them, without however, taking sides. Crucially, the sociologists' obligation to value neutrality extends for Heinich to the abstention from any interpretation of the art object itself: "The sociologist should close his eyes to the object that makes the actors speak in order to open them to the very reasons that make them speak as they do"(Heinich 2000a: 164).

Despite attempts to positively engage with the aesthetic specificity of art, much of the new sociology of art adheres to the view that the advocacy of one kind of art over another cannot be grounded or reasoned within the conceptual framework of sociology. For Heinich, sociological attempts to move into the interpretative and evaluative territory of art history and criticism result "at best [in] programmatic declarations, poorly equipped critical evaluations, or [...] unconvincing links of cause and effect between an object (the artwork) and a collectivity" (Heinich 1998a: 70). Similarly Austin Harrington (2004), who insists on the need for sociology to engage with the specificity of the aesthetic and its relative autonomy, also maintains the sociologist should not and cannot engage in aesthetic value judgements: "Social theory cannot itself generate aesthetic judgements about works of art [...] [it] can analyse and interpret value but it cannot itself ground value" (Harrington 2004: 4). Any such attempt would reduce aesthetics to social or political questions and artistic value would be established on the basis of social facts, not aesthetic quality.

Arguments for an aesthetically value neutral sociology of art tend to be underpinned by disciplinary separations between a value-neutral social scientific discourse on art and an evaluative humanist discourse. Relying on this disciplinary separation Heinich argues that: "explicit value judgments are only permissible when the sociologist does not act as scientist" (in Danko 2008: 246). Analogously, Harrington separates "social-scientific methods of *value-distanciation*" from "humanistic practices of critical *value-appraisal* and *value-affirmation*" (2004: 4). Conversely, scholars who have pressed for sociology of art to engage in aesthetic value judgements have challenged this disciplinary separation between social scientific and humanist discourses. Indeed the openness of a growing number of sociologists of art towards the methods and

knowledge of art history indicates that the dismantling of this disciplinary separation has become programmatic to much recent sociology of art.

In her essay “Aesthetic Neutrality and the Sociology of Art” (1979), Elisabeth Bird was one of the first to argue that the theoretical demand that sociologists maintain a position of aesthetic neutrality cannot be sustained in empirical investigation. In the choice and delimitation of the research object, sociologists of art are already required to rely on established aesthetic and art historical categories which involve implicit value judgements. Building on Bird’s argument, Wolff ([1983] 1993) problematized the general failure of sociologists of art to thematize and interrogate the aesthetic judgments inherent to the art historical categories they adopt. The consequence is that the social as well as aesthetic mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion underlying these categories cannot be confronted. According to Wolff the challenge for sociology of art is “not to try even harder for a value-free sociology and a more refined notion of aesthetic neutrality”, but rather “to engage directly with the question of aesthetic value” (107). Sociologists need to examine not only “the value already bestowed on works by their contemporaries and subsequent critics and audiences”, but they also need to openly discuss the “aesthetic categories and judgments which locate and inform the researcher’s project” (ibid.).

More recently, a growing cohort of scholars has called for sociology of art not only to lay open its use of art historical categories but also to engage in critical interpretation of the artistic work itself. Again Wolff (2008) and Born (2010) are at the forefront of this debate. Contrary to some of their colleagues, who argue that sociology has no means to ground aesthetic value, Wolff and Born have suggested different ways of formulating aesthetic judgements that are informed by a combination of sociological and aesthetic factors.

In her book *The Aesthetic of Uncertainty* (2008) Wolff addresses the contemporary problematic of debating questions of aesthetic value without either returning to the discredited discourses of universalism or joining with the postmodern discourse on total value relativism. As an alternative she suggests a “principled position”, which examines the negotiation of aesthetic values in historically and socially specific communities, characterised by specific interests and values. The underlying

supposition of this approach is that aesthetic criteria are grounded in community. To address the social, political, and moral structure and situation of value communities, Wolff turns to debates on the concept of “discursive democracy” in the field of political theory and philosophy.⁷ What she takes from this debate is the notion of an “ethical, democratic politics [...] committed to the possibility of achieving consensus about questions of value – morality, justice, truth – all understood as provisional” (Wolff 2008: 22). Such a democratic politics of value can, she argues, only be achieved if value uncertainty takes the place of the value certainties of Enlightenment thought. Uncertainty, as conceptualised by Wolff, involves not the abandonment of principles, but rather opens a space for dialogue and the formulation of value criteria by consensus within a group of actors. Wolff argues that the sociologist engaging with aesthetic value debates has an ethical responsibility to examine these debates from a principled position, which reviews not only the social but also political and moral basis of aesthetic judgements. Crucially, she acknowledges that aesthetic judgements are not only grounded in community but are also a response to the aesthetic specificity of the art itself, which “always meets its viewer [...] in the context of a specific social and historical moment in which the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political [...] are never quite separable” (141).

Although less normative than Wolff’s principled position, Born also suggests that sociology can assist in the formulation of more reflexive aesthetic judgements. In her programmatic essay “The Social and the Aesthetic” (2010) she argues for a sociology of art that assists in the development of an enriched art criticism, “enhanced by our growing reflexive, sociological understanding of the operations, institutionalization and [199] imbrication in processes of cultural production of what – by analogy with interpretative communities – might be called value communities” (198-99). The sociological repertoire of methods and concepts can help animate art critical debates by opening up new avenues for discussion and criteria of judgement, allowing them to move beyond discussions of aesthetic form into issues of how form is socially and historically mediated. For Born the critical effectiveness of a sociology of art that breaches the traditional disciplinary boundary with art criticism, lies in its offering of a new set of vocabularies, concepts, and criteria for artistic judgement, which can

⁷ For a critical review of Wolff’s usage of the concept of discursive democracy, see Rothenberg 2010.

productively “destabilize established hierarchies of value not only within, but crucially, across critical fields and value communities” (199), thereby proffering the renegotiation and renewal of cultural politics.

Both Wolff and Born argue from a position that denies the pretence of sociological value neutrality and the possibility for the art sociologist to stand entirely outside processes of critical mediation. Sociological studies of art not only build on art critical and historical discourses by adopting their categories of classification, but they inevitably also feed back into them. Without denying their role in criticism and longer term art historical discourses, the two scholars devise ways in which the sociologist of art can nevertheless maintain a degree of reflexive critical distance. Whereas Wolff (2008) argues for a politically informed sociology of art which tests the democratic ethos of artistic value communities, Born (2010) strives for an analysis that is encompassing in a more general sense. It involves “the ability to take in and analyse diacritically, as much and more than the practitioners and cultural fields themselves, the movements and logics of their social and aesthetic dynamics; and to read one tendency in relation to others, but fully historical and with an ‘internal’ comprehension of the positivity of the aesthetic” (Born 2010: 200).

The analysis of the “New German Painting” advanced in the thesis aspires towards a similarly encompassing perspective to that proposed by Born. Whilst drawing on art historical discourses and categories to elaborate the critical value debates around the painting, it also draws on sociological theories of social mediation to capture the social and historical situatedness of the value communities which artistic producers and their critics constitute. A position of strict value neutrality is rejected in favour of an analytical position which thematizes the criteria of value and aesthetic judgements involved in the discourse around the painting and their art historical, social, and political grounding. The intention is not to side with any one party in the critical discourse around the painting, or to affirm or oppose any one judgement. Rather the thesis holds the discourse around the painting up against the art itself, which is viewed as consisting of an aesthetic specificity that is relatively independent from its institutional and discursive mediation.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter established the analytical approach of the thesis at the intersection of sociology of art and art history and discussed the foundations of this approach in recent analytical and methodological innovations in sociology of art. The increasing concern of recent contributions to sociology of art with aesthetic specificity, and the willingness of scholars to learn from art history's specialist knowledge and methods, was shown to correspond with the thesis' concern to provide an encompassing analysis of the phenomenon "New German Painting". In particular the attempts of sociologists of art to theorise interactions between the aesthetic specificity of art and the autonomous temporal dynamics of artistic production and discourse with social structure and collective meaning, were established as central to the thesis' analytical framework: its analysis of the phenomenon "New German Painting" from a perspective that seeks to reveal how the art, and its reception, were not only determined by underlying social and historical structures, but also how they project autonomous artistic dynamics that provide insights into the specific ways in which Germany's recent history of division and unification has played out in the field of art.

Chapter 2 Empirical Materials

The thesis' interdisciplinary approach is reflected in its analysis of a set of diverse empirical materials. These include artistic works that were associated with the label "New German Painting"; the art critical debate that developed around the painting, twenty-four self-conducted interviews with relevant art world actors; and some of the broader social-cultural debates that defined the public discourse in post-Unification Germany, such as the discourse on post-*Wende* nostalgia.

This chapter provides an overview of the diverse empirical materials that inform the thesis and elaborates on how the empirical chapters combine methods of discourse analysis, interviewing, and visual analysis. The first part of the chapter delimits the German and American art critical discourses examined. Parts two and three explain the interviews conducted and my own role and position in them. Following on from this the need to anonymise interviewees cited in the thesis is discussed. The final part of the chapter details the selection of art and artists examined in the thesis, as well as the methods of visual analysis used in the examination of individual paintings labelled "New German".

2.1 The German and American art critical discourse

The German and American publications on the "New German Painting" examined date from the late 1990s to 2010. The principal American reviews analysed are articles published in the *New York Times*, in art journals such as *Art in America*, as well as essays from exhibition catalogues and forewords. The German materials derive from a broader range of sources, for the simple reason that more was published on the paintings in Germany. These include the major daily newspapers: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Welt*, and the weekly *Die Zeit*; cultural and political magazines such as *Der Spiegel*, *Cicero* and *Der Freitag*; as well as exhibition catalogues and forewords.

The analysis of these sources focused on two themes: firstly, the art historical significance of the "New German Painting"; and secondly its relationship to the post-1989 German condition. Statements on the painting's art historical relevance were

examined for aesthetic value judgements of their figurative style and how such judgements were embedded within broader narratives of twentieth-century German art, as well as concepts of artistic modernism and anti-modernism. Critical commentaries which related the painting to the post-1989 German condition were scrutinized for their presentation of the art as a collective phenomenon specific to post-*Wende* Germany. More specifically it was examined how commentaries which related the paintings to the post-*Wende* condition tended to ground this relationship between the art and its social-historical context of production in the painting's nostalgic aspect.

Because the thesis aims for an encompassing analysis of the phenomenon “New German Painting”, which addresses its aesthetic specificity as well as its social-historical conditioning, it is examined how the critical discourse on the painting related to broader social-cultural discourses concerning post-1989 Germany. The social-cultural discourses scrutinized include the debate on post-*Wende* nostalgia and shifts in German collective memory, the 1990s *Bilderstreit* over the future of the artistic heritage of the GDR, as well as debates on a growing neoconservative end-of-utopia discourse in German culture and politics of the 1990s.

2.2 Selection of interviewees, type of interviews & access

The analysis of the art critical discourse around the “New German Painting” draws on published texts, as well as twenty-four interviews conducted with relevant actors in the German contemporary art scene. Interviewees included critics who had written on the painting, curators who had exhibited some of the work, gallerists who sold it, as well artists and their teachers at the academy.⁸

Interviews were conducted with the intention of gaining a more thorough insight into the critical controversies that surrounded the art historical and social historical significance of the “New German Painting”. Further they were relevant to the

⁸ A group of actors not interviewed was art buyers and collectors. Speaking to art collectors might be considered particularly important for analysing the paintings' financial success in the international art market: who bought the paintings and what were their motives? However the analysis of collector motivations lies beyond the scope of this thesis. It would inevitably move into more general art sociological questions of taste and collecting practices, which is a separate project from the one presented here.

reconstruction of sequences of events in the development of the artistic phenomenon, and also for clarification of relations between specific actors.

The actors interviewed were limited to the German artistic field as to interview American art critics and curators who had reviewed and exhibited the painting, would have exceeded the financial resources available for the thesis and accessing the American scene long-distance (e.g. by conducting phone or email interviews) would have been extremely difficult. However, the choice to focus on the German discourse in interviews was not taken only for pragmatic reasons. In contrast to the American reception, the German art critical discourse on the painting emerged out of a national context shared with the art itself. As much as the art, its criticism was thoroughly embedded in the cultural, social, and political fabric of post-Unification Germany. The fact that it was in Germany that the painting generated the most sceptical and negative criticism, indicates the problematic relationship of the art to its post-Unification context. By interviewing relevant artists, academy teachers, gallerists, dealers, and critics based in the German artistic field, the aim was to understand this difficult relationship in more detail.

The first round of interviews was conducted between June and September 2006. Most took place in Berlin which, since the late 1990s, has again become the hub of artistic activity in Germany and where I was based during my fieldwork. Other interviews were conducted in Hamburg, Leipzig and Dresden. In the autumn of 2009 a second round of interviews was conducted with artists, academy professors and gallerists based in Leipzig. By this time the central role of the “New Leipzig School” in the development of the broader phenomenon “New German Painting” had crystallised with the progression of my research.

The interviews conducted were semi-structured, and generally lasted between one and three hours and the questions asked focused on a set of themes. These included: the international export of the “New German Painting”; perceptions of the artists associated with the label as a group; the role of the “New Leipzig School” in the development of the phenomenon; the art historical significance of the paintings’ figurative style and their focus on recent German history; and the relationship of the nostalgic lifeworlds portrayed in the paintings to the post-1989 German condition.

Interviews with actors who had reviewed or exhibited the painting were usually begun with a comment or question concerning these reviews and exhibitions. Interviews with artists were generally initiated with the question of how they came to paint, and why figuratively. Apart from two interviews with non-German speakers all interviews were conducted in German. The translations of interview excerpts cited in the thesis are my own. All interviews were recorded (unless interviewees requested otherwise)⁹ and later transcribed.

Contemporary art worlds are social scenes with strong access barriers. Approximately ten of the twenty-four interviews conducted were arranged before the start of the fieldwork period in June 2006. These interviews were with critics and artists whose contact information was publicly available on the Internet. All subsequent interviews were made possible by interviewees suggesting, and sometimes establishing contact with other people whose accounts of the phenomenon “New German Painting” they thought would be relevant to the research.

About eighty per cent of the people contacted responded positively. Only one interview with an internationally well-known artist was not arranged in advance (I approached the artist during an open-studio day at the university, which he was then teaching at). Access to interviewees was sometimes made difficult because of the excessive documentation of the “New German Painting” in the German cultural press, and the sensationalist tone with which many journalists had commented on their financial success in the international market. This had created a situation in which many of the actors involved in the making of the artists’ careers were irritated by the media attention the art received and were tired of giving interviews. Some of the key artists and gallerists approached for interviews responded with apologetic emails, explaining that they felt they had sufficiently commented on the subject in published newspaper and journal interviews and articles.

⁹ Three of the twenty-four interviews were not recorded. In one case the director of a Berlin *Kunstverein* refused to speak if the conversation was recorded. In the other two cases I did not ask for permission to record the interview out of fear that this would disrupt the interview or break off the conversation. Detailed notes on these interviews were taken immediately after they had occurred.

2.3 My position & identity in interviews

Chapter 1 discussed the issue of whether the sociologist of art engaging in a positive analytics of the aesthetic can sustain a position of aesthetic value neutrality, or whether this means the inevitable move into the interpretative and evaluative terrain of art criticism. This question also arose in the interviews I conducted: was I to speak from a value-neutral position or was I to express my own views on the art discussed? Because I wanted to learn about my interviewees' views of the painting I opted for the former position. Yet, that said, with the progression of the interviews I realised that in cases where interviewees were reluctant to articulate their views on the painting's value and meaning, it was sometimes helpful to prompt them with a judgement to which they could respond.

For interviewees to take me seriously as an interlocutor and to speak about their opinions of the "New German Painting" in more detail I had to show a certain level of expertise on the painting as well as on related art discourses. This was especially the case when speaking to art critics and others who, like me, do not "do" but write about contemporary art. My background in art history and work experience at a Berlin contemporary art gallery helped to establish my position as someone who was familiar with the relevant contemporary art discourses.

Throughout my interviews I had the identity of someone who was not a complete outsider to the art world she was studying, but also not a well-connected insider. This identity accompanied me on various levels. Firstly, I was a sociologist writing about contemporary art and therefore coming to the subject from another discipline than my interviewees. One effect this had on interview situations was that although interviewees expected me to have a certain level of knowledge of contemporary art discourses they did not expect me to be conversant in detailed areas of these discourses. Another was that interviewees often adopted an explanatory tone when explaining their views on specific artistic works. This provided me with a more nuanced insight into how they formulated their value judgements of the "New German Painting".

Secondly, I was an insider/outsider in the sense that although I had moved in the Berlin art scene, I was not an insider. Although I had worked for a commercial Berlin

art gallery, the few months' experience I had of the Berlin art market could not compare to the years of experience of my interlocutors. Thirdly and lastly, my biography also made me an insider/outsider. I was born in Germany and am a German native speaker, yet have lived in the UK since I was a teenager and I was doing my research at a London university. I was someone coming to the scene I was studying from the outside, not only in terms of my academic discipline, but also culturally. Yet again, being based in London also gave me a certain insider status. Although Berlin has become an increasingly significant centre for contemporary art in Europe, it has still not reached the relevance of London in terms of exhibitions, auctions, collectors' money and density of artists.¹⁰ Being associated with London gave me a certain authority in approaching interviewees. I was someone coming from another art centre, which many actors in the Berlin art world looked up to, not someone coming from the periphery.

Due to my dual insider/outsider identity in the interviews, the interviews were characterised by changing modes of conversation. Because of my partial knowledge of the art scene I was studying I was at times able to discuss specialist subjects with my interviewees. In these moments, rather than taking a question-answer format, interviews took the form of a discussion between semi-expert and expert. Yet, at the same time, my ignorance of some of the topics interviewees talked about always ensured that there was another, more explanatory level.

2.4 Anonymising interview voices

The people interviewed for this thesis are public figures who operate in a small and tightly knit social scene: the German contemporary art world. The business these people are in is a very personal one. More so than in other professional sectors, peoples' professional lives depend on personal ties, contacts, and favours. Under such conditions, a public insult or being found to support the "wrong" artist, gallerist, or curator can be career damaging.

¹⁰ For a comparative analysis of Berlin and London as contemporary art centres, see Becker, Klonk et al. (2008).

Artists' reputations especially have a direct effect on how their work is evaluated, both artistically and financially. In the case of artists who mostly sell their work in the contemporary art market, rather than competing for public commissions and funding, their concerns to positively cultivate their reputation (and also the efforts of their gallerists to this end) are not directed at gaining collective artistic recognition alone, but also at securing and consolidating the monetary value of their work. Concerns over an artist's collective recognition and the financial value of his/her work are intertwined in the sense that, if an artist loses the recognition of other relevant art world members, the market value of his/her work is often also likely to decrease. In the case of some of the artists interviewed for this thesis the monetary sums at stake in the protection of their reputation are up to six digits. Consequently, the thesis deals with not only artistic objects, but also artistic careers and objects of great financial value.

Although not all the interviewees approached requested anonymity, citations from interviews are anonymised as a precautionary measure. When making value statements about art labelled "New German Painting", some interviewees added comments such as "I say this in confidence", "of course, one cannot say this openly", or "please delete what I just said from your tape later". Because the thesis is interested in precisely such value statements, the only way to make use of them in the analysis was to anonymise the voices of interviewees.

Whilst it is common practice amongst art historians to reveal the names of artists, critics, and other actors they interview for their writing, sociologists – and sociologists of art - usually anonymise interview voices. Yet, despite the widespread application of this measure, sociology lacks a strong methodological debate about its effects on presentation and analysis. To learn something about these issues it is best to look at concrete examples. Two sociological studies of art will briefly be considered for this purpose: Diane Crane's *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985* (1987), which examines how the development of art styles depends on social ties between artists, and Olav Velthuis' *Talking Prices* (2005), a comparative study of the pricing policies of contemporary New York and Amsterdam "avant-garde" and "commercial" galleries. Both Crane and Velthuis' studies rely on published materials as well as self-conducted interviews. In both the

voices from self-conducted interviews are anonymous. To conceal the identities of their interviewees the authors use circumscriptions in the place of actual names, which, however, still provide an idea of the social position and professional role of the interviewee.

Neither Crane nor Velthuis discuss their reasons for concealing the identities of their interviewees, yet it is fairly evident that they faced the same problem as I did during my fieldwork: it is difficult to get interviewees to openly state their views about the artistic and financial value of certain artworks if they know their statements will be published and attributed to them. This problem becomes even more acute when studying very recent artistic phenomena, such as the “New German Painting”, which involves interviewing people who are still active in the art world that is being studied. Recognising this problem early in my fieldwork I assured my interviewees that their voices would be anonymous if cited in the thesis. With the exception of one interviewee (Professor Arno Rink, the former director of the Leipzig Academy), whose identity would have been evident even if his voice had been anonymised,¹¹ the thesis relies – like Crane and Velthuis – on circumscriptions that indicate the social position and professional role of interviewees.

Some may argue that the concealment of interviewees’ identities makes the thesis lacking in critical rigour. However, counter to this I argue that by keeping interviewees anonymous, a more critical analysis was enabled rather than obstructed. The measure permitted the citing of parts of interviews which were pregnant with value-judgements, and which proved crucial for the analysis of the art critical controversies that surrounded the “New German Painting”. Rather than hiding something about the art discourse examined, the concealment of identities enabled a more detailed analysis of it. Further, by anonymising interviewees the analysis is not side-tracked by questions of “who said what” and “who about whom”, which dominate so much journalistic writing on contemporary art. Instead the focus is on the broader artistic phenomenon “New German Painting”, in which individual people’s stories play a role, but which is not reducible to these stories.

¹¹ In my interview with Arno Rink I did not declare that I would anonymise his voice in the thesis. Rink also did not ask for this in the course of the interview.

2.5 Selection of art and artists & methods of visual analysis

The artists and paintings to be examined were chosen with the intention of providing an overview of the different moments in the development of the phenomenon “New German Painting”: *where* and *when* the figurative style and the thematic focus on subjects of recent German history associated with the label originated, how the painting developed into a collective artistic phenomenon and how this related to its international curatorial and financial success. Further, artists and paintings were selected with a view to defining the aesthetic specificity of the “New German Painting”. It is necessary to note here, that although the label was used as a starting point for selecting artists and works I am wary of its generalising effects. One of the strategies employed so as not to collapse aesthetic differences between artistic works, is to alternate between the analysis of individual paintings and their comparison. Crucially, the thesis makes no claims to provide a comprehensive overview of the art associated with the label in recent years. The range of works that would need to be examined to provide such an overview is by far too broad for the scope of a thesis; a project of this size is more suited to the catalogue format. Christoph Tannert’s (2006) *New German Painting – Remix* is the first attempt at providing such a more comprehensive picture.

The artists examined range from forerunner figures, such as Neo Rauch and Daniel Richter, whose work has been included in established museum collections, to lesser-known artists, who have only been exhibited in commercial galleries. A full list of artists examined is provided in Appendix I. The artists of the “New Leipzig School” (including Neo Rauch, Tilo Baumgärtel, Tim Eitel, Martin Kobe, David Schnell, and Matthias Weischer) form the most significant group of artists examined and two of the thesis’ empirical chapters (Chapters 5 and 6) focus on their painting. The Leipzig painting stood at the centre of the critical debate on the nostalgic aspect of the “New German Painting” and, above all others, were considered to express an air of *Ostalgie*. Further, various factors seem to indicate that the impetus for a return to a figurative style of painting focused on themes of national history amongst an emerging generation of artists in post-1989 Germany had come from the post-*Wende* Leipzig Academy.

Other artists examined studied at a range of academies in former West Germany, including those in Hamburg, Düsseldorf, and Cologne. They include well-established figures such as Daniel Richter and Corinne Wasmuht, as well as lesser-known artists such as Christian Hellmich, Stefan Kürten, Jonas Burgert and Till Gerhard. Although they constitute a dispersed group their works are related through certain aesthetic factors. Like the painting of the “New Leipzig School” they are marked by a figurative style and they often seem to allude to themes of national history. Further, the paintings manifest a strong nostalgic dimension. They do not portray the ruins of the GDR, however, but are filled with material relics dating from the pre-Unification Federal Republic.

The reader will notice that hardly any female artists are examined in the thesis. There was a noticeable absence of female figures in the art critical debate that developed around the phenomenon “New German Painting”. Although a considerable number of female artists were involved in the development of the painting style today associated with the “new German” work (e.g. Rosa Loy, Susanne Kühn, Cornelia Renz, Katherina Immekus, Verena Landau, and Isabelle Dutoit), their names and paintings clearly stood in the shadow of those of their male colleagues in discussions and exhibitions on the art. This was particularly the case with the promotion and reception of the “new painting” in the United States, where it was overwhelmingly perceived as male. Whilst German reviews and exhibitions provided a more balanced and nuanced account, they are also marked by a considerable degree of gender inequality. The thesis addresses the reasons for this inequality and the absence of female artists from the reception of the “New German Painting” in Chapter 4. In another project it would be interesting to conduct an analysis of the “female” side of the artistic phenomenon “New German Painting”, by examining the work of those women artists who moved on its margins, and also by looking at the different ways in which the image worlds and visual languages of the painting associated with the label “new German” were gendered. However, such a project lies beyond the analytical scope of this thesis.

Building on the turn towards the artistic work itself in recent contributions to sociology of art (see Chapter 1) paintings associated with the label “New German” are given relatively independent analytical status. Images of the paintings are treated as primary empirical materials, rather than being assigned the secondary status of visual

illustrations of what has been said or written about them. The methods of visual analysis used in their examination are art historical as well as cultural historical. Art historically the paintings are examined for their connections with previous moments in German and international art history. Cultural historically they are examined for iconographic references to German cultural, social and political history. One of the central questions addressed in the visual analysis of the painting is how German history was portrayed in the painting's nostalgic "lifeworlds".

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the various empirical materials analysed in the thesis and it elaborated on the thesis' combination of methods of discourse analysis, interviewing, and visual analysis. The chapter was largely descriptive, however it commented reflexively on my own position in interviews and the reasons why the thesis anonymises the interview voices that are cited.

Chapter 3 Nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany

It was the nostalgic aspect of the “New German Painting”, which art critics generally referred to when they established it as in some way linked with the post-1989 German condition. However, as discussed in the Introduction, this relationship between the painting’s mnemonic dimension and the post-Unification German social-cultural context has not, until now, been systematically investigated, nor have the social-political implications of this interrelation been critically considered. In turning to this task the thesis draws on an emergent cross-disciplinary body of literature that has examined the underlying connections between nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany and processes of collective memory and cultural identity formation. The central concern of this literature has been the critical reappraisal of *Ostalgie*, and other forms of post-*Wende* nostalgia, which previously were barely considered a serious and legitimate form of engagement with the country’s recent history of division and unification in German public discourse. This chapter provides an overview of this literature. The first part discusses the academic reappraisal of different forms of nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany and it is suggested that, although the academic literature has until now not examined the phenomenon “New German Painting”, it strongly resonates with some of the literature’s central concepts and claims.

To provide a broader view of the historical and disciplinary-contextual foundations of the recent academic interest in post-*Wende* nostalgia, the second part of the chapter positions it within the context of wider theories about changes in Germany’s post-Unification memory culture. Both the public and academic debates on German memory culture have widely suggested that the West German memory politics of “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*” (“coming to terms with the past”), which was established in the late 1960s and carried into the reunified Germany as a normative memory framework, gradually transformed during the 1990s. With the historical turn of 1989/90 there was a pressing need for the focus of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* on the Nazi past and the Holocaust to be extended to also include the two more recent pasts of the GDR and the “Bonn Republic”. Further with this pluralisation of difficult German pasts that needed to be worked through, also came a rise in personal historical narratives. The strict regulation of historical representations, which

persisted in both Germanys before 1989, was gradually loosened. As a result personal and highly emotionalised recollections, which were previously limited to the private sphere, made their passage into mainstream public discourse. Beyond nostalgic representations of former East and West Germany, such personalised and emotionalised narratives included, above all, stories of German suffering during and after World War II, which had been largely suppressed within the discourse of “collective guilt” of West German memory politics. Scholars who have assessed this new situation in the German memory culture speak not only of a diversification of German memory, but also of intense memory contests, which reflect post-Unification Germany’s new cultural plurality. The aim of the second part of the chapter is to show where the different forms of post-*Wende* nostalgia fit into this broader picture of a changing landscape of memory discourses in Germany.

3.1 The academic reappraisal

The neologism *Ostalgie* was coined in German newspapers in the early 1990s to refer to expressions of longing for the old East, the GDR. The term was usually used a-politically, to refer to desires for the everyday lifeworlds of socialist East Germany, including its popular and consumer culture. Although political identifications with the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), or its post-1989 successor party, the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) were sometimes also referred to as *Ostalgie*, such political ascriptions were the exception.

The early German feuilleton debate on *Ostalgie* described it as a collective defence mechanism against the rapid social-political and economic transformations eastern Germany underwent after the transition of 1989/90. Articles published in *Der Spiegel* in 1995 suggested eastern Germans who struggled to adjust to western liberal capitalism found consolation in idealised memories of everyday life in the GDR as simpler and more humane (Schmitz 1995; Broder 1995). Approximately a decade after Unification the public debate on *Ostalgie* underwent a paradigm shift. After the release of the cinema box office hit *Good Bye, Lenin!* in 2003, and the screening of *Ostalgie* entertainment shows across German television channels in the same year,¹²

¹² These shows included the *Ostalgie Show* and *Ein Kessel DDR (A Pot of GDR)* broadcast by the public-service channels ZDF and MDR, and *Meyer und Schulz: Die ultimative Ost-Show (Meyer and*

Ostalgie was no longer debated as a “localized nostalgia for the GDR that enabled some east Germans to guard their experiences”, but as “a lucrative industry” (Hodgin 2011: 154). The term became associated with “ludicrous products such as ‘The DDR in a box’, a novelty item that includes mundane souvenirs from the former GDR such as worthless currency or plastic eggcups” (Enns 2007: 475). In other words, *Ostalgie* became commonly equated with trivial kitsch.

The memory function of *Ostalgie* was already a controversial subject in the early public debate during which it was still predominantly seen as a collective defence mechanism against the rapid transformation of the East. Considered a typical case of nostalgia, *Ostalgie* was said to provide a rose-tinted view of the GDR past, which trivialised the GDR dictatorship and its victims. For its critics *Ostalgie*, “elid[ed] questions of complicity, responsibility, and accountability in relation to the burden of the GDR past” (Berdahl 1999: 205).¹³ Its effect was the “*Verklärung*” (idealisation or distortion) of the GDR past, not its “*Erklärung*” (explanation).¹⁴ With the transformation of *Ostalgie* from a local memory culture into a culture industry, the charge that it commodified recent German history for its export into western markets was added.

Somewhat counter-intuitively the feuilletons of the early 2000s also began to speak of a sense of *Westalgie* – a longing for the pre-Unification Federal Republic – amongst the citizens of the old Federal States of the Republic (e.g. Schindhelm 2001; Martenstein 2003). The delay in the discussion of *Westalgie*, more than a decade after the public debate on *Ostalgie* began, signalled a failure or unwillingness to recognise that Unification had not only removed the social horizon of the GDR, but that it “was also a historic rupture for West Germans, who likewise have been trying to reconcile their West German past with the unified German present” (Fuchs and James-Chakraborty, et al. 2011: 9). The first decade following Unification was dominated by historical narratives of social-political continuity between the old “Bonn” and the new, expanded “Berlin” Republics (see Geyer 2001: 356). The established view was

Schulz: *The Ultimate East Show*) and the *DDR Show* broadcast by the private channels SAT1 and RTL. For an overview and critical analysis of the shows and the reception in the German feuilletons, see Cooke (2005:144-175)

¹³ For a similar definition of nostalgia more generally as a history without guilt, see Boym (2011: xiv) and Legg (2004).

¹⁴ For this distinction, see Fulbrook (2011).

that, while the transition of 1989/90 had constituted a traumatic disjuncture for the citizens of the former GDR, it had “not called into question the history of the FRG or undermined Western German subject positions” (Plowman 2004: 250). Rather the FRG seemed to have emerged victorious from the Cold War, and its “success story – a story of economic prosperity and democratic stability – appeared to have been vindicated” (Fulbrook 1994: 211).¹⁵ Still by the early 2000s many denied the historical possibility of collective sentiments of *Westalgie*, arguing that it was “unclear what aspects of their lives western Germans may have lost as a result of unification” (Cook 2005: 40). Sceptics dismissed *Westalgie* as a commercial phenomenon that imitated the *Ostalgie* industry that had recently emerged, but which had never been anchored in any collective experiences of loss. Yet, the social-political realities of the day made it increasingly evident that the opposite was the case: that the old Federal Republic was indeed gradually disappearing. Whilst national unification had eroded the foundations of West Germany’s post-national collective identity, which had once positioned it “at the avant-garde of progressive morality” (Olick 1998: 551), the costs of unification and economic globalisation were posing increasing strains on the West German welfare state (see Jarausch 1997: 9; Fuhr 2005: 25).

During the past decade a reappraisal of *Ostalgie* and other forms of post-*Wende* nostalgia has taken place amongst scholars from different fields of study. Focusing on the areas of literature, film, architecture, and consumer practices scholars from the fields of German Studies, German History, Anthropology, and Sociology have taken an interest in these cultural practices as addressing “the fundamental question of how to (re)write the relationship between East and West Germany and their respective histories for the present” (Hell and Moltke 2005: 81). Rather than considering cultural expressions of post-*Wende* nostalgia as signalling an actual longing for the divided past, or reducing them to amnesiac commodities, scholars from the humanities and social sciences have asked how they constitute cultural practices that are engaged in processes of post-1989 German memory and identity construction, and what they reveal about East-West relations since Unification.

¹⁵ On the notion of the post-1945 history of the FRG as a success story, see also Schildt (1990).

In particular scholars have examined *Ostalgie* and other forms of nostalgia as counter-memories that contest dominant historical and identity discourses in post-Unification Germany. *Ostalgie* has been seen as a cultural practice engaged in the renegotiation of one-dimensional and accusatory official historical narratives of the GDR as a totalitarian state (see Jarausch 1997: 38).¹⁶ Instead of focusing on the political history of the GDR and its repressive mechanism, *Ostalgie* told the history of normal everyday life in the GDR (Saunders 2006). The anthropologist Daphne Berdahl has framed *Ostalgie* as a lay culture of remembrance, which brings a degree of symmetry into the “asymmetrical context of remembering in the new Germany” (Berdahl 1999: 202). For Berdahl it projects an “alternative vision of ‘Germanness’ — of eastern German particularism” (205). Similarly the political sociologist Detlef Pollack (1999: 93-94) defined *Ostalgie* not as a desire to return to the GDR past, but as a cultural practice that was about East Germans’ struggling to construct a positive self-image that countered the post-Unification condemnatory narratives of East German history: “people want to preserve their self-esteem, defend their pride and dignity, which were called into question in the course of German unification” (94).

Analogous to this reassessment of *Ostalgie*, scholars concerned with literary and cinematic expressions of so-called *Westalgie*, have also analysed these cultural practices as a form of counter-memory (e.g. Plowmann 2004; Shortt 2011). They have argued that through historicising the pre-unification Federal Republic, *Westalgie* challenged the rhetoric of continuity between the old “Bonn Republic” and the new, expanded “Berlin Republic”, which dominated the German political and public discourse of the first decade following Unification. Sentiments of *Westalgie*, which implied the disappearance of the Federal Republic in its postwar form, called this very story of the Federal Republic as one of continuity and success into question.

In contrast to the German public discourse on post-*Wende* nostalgia, the scholarly debate on the subject reframed it according to what Memory Studies has termed a “functionalist” perspective on nostalgia (Atia and Davies 2010). This perspective “[moves] past an inquiry into essences – what nostalgia *is* – towards studies of uses, purposes and circumstances, or what we might call the complex emplotment of

¹⁶ For the dominant conceptualisation of the GDR as a totalitarian regime amongst German historians, see Epstein (2003: 638-644).

nostalgic yearning in discrete historical and political circumstances” (Dames 2010: 270). Post-*Wende* nostalgia has been examined as a “situated cultural practice” (Stewart 1988) engaged in re-negotiating the respective histories of East and West Germany, all with an eye to establishing individual and collective subject positions in an ill-defined and contested post-*Wende* present. Looking at how “aspects of the past [served] as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future” (Pickering and Keightley 2006: 921) the recent academic literature on post-*Wende* nostalgia recognised it as a form of memory which was not fixated on the divided past, but very concretely directed at the present condition of the unified Germany and its future.

3.1.i Bringing painting to the debate

The silence on painting in the academic discourse on cultural expressions of nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany is striking. It becomes particularly evident if one considers that art critics began to describe the “New German Painting” as unified by a distinctly nostalgic outlook in the early 2000s, the same time that the discourse on post-*Wende* nostalgia made its way from public debates into academia. Instead the academic debate has focused on literary texts, film, architecture, and consumer practices. The focus on literature is unsurprising, given that in the postwar decades literature already held the status of the unchallenged artistic medium through which the German past was contemplated (see Brockmann 1999; Parkes 2002). The turn towards film came with debates about a visual-spatial turn in artistic representations of German history. German Studies scholars have suggested that since Unification literary accounts of the German past were increasingly replaced by visual representations and spatial installations: “the reconfiguration of histories in the wake of 1989 [...] takes shape in emblematic imaginary spaces” (Hell and Moltke 2005: 78). While architecture and film played a central role in these debates,¹⁷ painting was rarely mentioned. Finally consumer practices have been the focus of scholars working in the fields of sociology and anthropology, as well as German History, who are interested in the role and agency of material culture in social life and historical developments (see Berdahl 1999; Betts 2000; Blum 2000).

17 On architecture, see Heckner (2002) Fuchs and James-Chakraborty, et al. (2011: Part III), and Ward (2006). On film, see Cooke (2003, 2005), Hell and Moltke (2005), Cook (2007), Uecker (2007), Enns (2007), and Hodgkin (2011).

Disciplinary limitations and boundaries largely account for the marginalisation of painting from the academic discourse on post-*Wende* nostalgia. Most of the literature has come out of German Studies Departments, where research tends to focus on literary works, and – in the vein of Cultural Studies – film and other popular art forms. In the social sciences the examination of painting and other high art forms is equally rare and painting overwhelmingly continues to be the territory of art history. However, as discussed in the Introduction, art historical scholarship has scarcely addressed the critical analysis of the artistic and social-cultural significance of the “New German Painting”, let alone its nostalgia.

In an attempt to bring the phenomenon “New German Painting” to the academic debate on post-*Wende* nostalgia, this thesis draws on literature from the social sciences as well as humanities. The subject of post-*Wende* nostalgia is by its very nature a cross-disciplinary subject. It encompasses formal-aesthetic questions, relating to the expression of nostalgia in mostly cultural products and practices; as well as a more social-scientific perspective, which is attentive to the processes of identity formation and the critiques of contemporary social-political conditions that often underlie collective sentiments of nostalgia. However, despite their common subject, scholars from the humanities and social sciences working on nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany have until now engaged little in dialogue on questions of methodology and analytical perspectives. As a result formal-aesthetic analyses of nostalgia art and culture in the humanities are rarely complemented by a critical social-political theorisation of the symbolic objects and practices at hand. In turn in the social sciences the aesthetic dimension of post-*Wende* nostalgia continues to be largely unexplored (see Bartmanski 2011: 215).

An exception to the usual separation of aesthetic from more sociological and political questions in the literature has been the field of Material Culture Studies, which has focused on expressions of *Ostalgie* in consumer practices. Scholars from this field have innovatively brought sociological and political questions to bear on aesthetic materials (e.g. Berdahl 1999; Betts 2000; Blum 2000). This thesis follows the same direction by combining a sociological with an aesthetic analysis of the “New German Painting”. On the one hand, it raises sociological questions about the notions of post-

Wende German cultural identity that were formulated in the painting and its reception. On the other, it provides an analysis of how the formulation of these cultural identities was intimately intertwined with the artistic and discursive positioning of the painting in the context of longer post-World War II art historical trajectories. As Georgina Born (1993) has suggested, the imaginary investments into notions of cultural identity form an inherent part of the aesthetic choices artists make and how critics and other commentators position them art historically (see Chapter 1).

3.1.ii *Ostalgie/Westalgie vs. post-communist nostalgia*

A large part of the paintings examined in this thesis were created in post-socialist East Germany. The works of the “New Leipzig School” show ruinous interiors and urban landscapes that appear to invoke their local context of production. Consequently the thesis marginally speaks to the growing scholarly debate on post-communist nostalgia (Boym 2001; Todorova and Gille 2010), especially in the field of art (Scribner 2003; Erjavec 2003).¹⁸ In recent art theory the post-communist concept of “*Eastalgia*” or “*Ostalgie*” (the English dubbing of *Ostalgie*), has been applied broadly to “art from and about the former Soviet Bloc” (Gioni 2011: 24). By contrast, the concern of the thesis is with the “New German Painting” and its nostalgic aspects in the specific post-1989 German context, not the broader post-1989 East-bloc. When referring to the analysis of the painting’s nostalgic aspect in the specific German context, the German term *Ostalgie*, rather than its English dubbing “Eastalgia”, is used throughout the thesis.

Recent work on post-socialism has shown that the analyses of “Eastalgia” or East Bloc nostalgia in general terms tends to run the risk of obfuscating the nationally and culturally specific histories of socialism and the transition to capitalism. In the past decade post-communist nostalgia has become a catchall phrase, “a kind of sociological black box amenable to academic evocation but somewhat short of analytic purchase” (Bartmanski 2011: 216). The elusiveness of the concept is in many respects the result of insufficient attention having been paid to its regional

¹⁸ See also the exhibition “Ostalgie” at the *New Museum*, New York in 2011 (http://www.newmuseum.org/assets/general/pressreleases/20110216_OSTALGIA.pdf). For an insightful review of this exhibition, see Budick (2011).

variations.¹⁹ What Andreas Huyssen (2003) argues for memory discourses more generally: “it is important to recognize that although memory discourses appear to be global in one register, at their core they remain tied to the histories of specific nations and states” (16), also applies to the different national and regional manifestations of post-socialist nostalgia.

The national specificity of Germany makes it a case in which eastern and western German memories cannot be examined in isolation from each other. The GDR and FRG were not only part of the same nation before their partition by the Allied Forces in 1949, but they were also involved in a dual relationship of “separation and interconnection” (Klessmann 1993) during the decades of division. Eastern Germans especially, looked towards the FRG as a reference culture that framed their aspirations more than the socialist East Bloc (Hogwood 2000).²⁰ In turn, political decision-making processes in the former Federal Republic were influenced by fears about the ideological impact of the GDR on the citizens of West Germany – and to a larger extent than West German historians and political theorists acknowledged during the time of division (Klessmann 2001: 3).

Because of its historical, sociocultural and political ties with West Germany, the transition of the former GDR from socialism to western capitalist democracy was an exception in the East Bloc: “its destination was not a mixture between the pre-socialist phase and a future to be defined as in most of the other transition cases” (Mayer 2006: 9). Whilst other states in the East Bloc were given the chance to define their post-socialist identity on their own terms, East Germany was incorporated into the already existing Federal Republic. “Voluntary annexation” (Osmond 1997) not Third Way Socialism followed the “Peaceful Revolution”.

Retrospectively many have argued that East Germany’s incorporation into the already existing Federal Republic led to a situation in which Germany “remained frozen in the

¹⁹ For a contrary account of the concept of post-socialism/communism as a useful social-scientific and historical analytical category, see Humphrey (2001), Berdahl (2010: 187).

²⁰ The cultural orientation of eastern Germans at the FRG was made possible by the reception of western German radio and television in large parts of the GDR. Further, western German consumer goods entered the GDR through postal packages sent by western German relatives to family members in the GDR.

political landscape of the Cold War” (Kelly and Wlodarski 2011: 1).²¹ Notions of “self” and “other” which were formulated during the time of division were prolonged (Lewis 1995), and with them also East-West tensions. In their analysis of the artistic culture of post-*Wende* Germany, Elaine Kelly and Amy Wlodarski (2011) have argued that especially in the field of art, Cold War oppositions and prejudices continued to mark relations between East and West in the period following Unification. The German art critical discourse around the “New German Painting”, especially the discourse on the works of the “New Leipzig School”, confirms this observation. The artistic identity of the “New Leipzig School” was one of “eastern German distinctiveness”, which was often established as standing in an antagonistic relationship to western contemporary art. Consequently, the thesis suggests that when dealing with expressions of *Ostalgie* in art, these cannot be explained in terms of the eastern German post-socialist situation alone, but require analysis in the context of the complex relationship between East and West Germany before and after Unification.

Further, and following on from the last point, the thesis argues that the relationship between *Ostalgie* and its western German counterpart, *Westalgie*, begs analysis before the relationship of *Ostalgie* with other East-bloc nostalgias. The art critical discourse on the “New German Painting” did not only speak of the paintings of the ruins of the GDR by the “New Leipzig School” as nostalgic, but also of other paintings by artists who studied at academies in former West Germany, and which portrayed cultural relics that seemed to invoke the history of the postwar Federal Republic. This extension of the discourse on the paintings’ nostalgia, from the “New Leipzig School” to other of the “New German Painting”, indicates that concepts of both *Ostalgie* and *Westalgie* were operative in the critical discourse on the art. The thesis examines how these concepts were related and what social-historical significance they were given.

²¹ For the opposing argument that the East German special path of annexation was an opportunity, see the account of historian Konrad Jarausch: “[A]ll of Eastern Europe is facing the post-communist transition, but only Germans have the chance of being able to incorporate a bankrupt region into a functioning Western state” (Jarausch 1997: 16). At the other end of the continuum to Jarausch stand authors who used the metaphor of “colonisation” for the unification process, see Dümcke and Vilmar (1995), and Cooke (2005).

3.2 Germany's post-1989 memory culture

The recent academic interest in different forms of nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany has emerged together with more general debates about shifts in German memory culture since Unification. Scholars from German History, German Studies, and Memory Studies have suggested that since the events of 1989, West Germany's memory politics of "*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*" (coming to terms with the past), which was established in the late 1960s, has been undergoing a gradual transformation.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the focus on the Nazi past and Holocaust of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* needed to be broadened to include "two more recent [6] pasts, that of the FRG and the GDR, each with their own discontents, troubling legacies and peculiar nostalgic attractions" (Huyssen, Jung et al. 2003: 5-6). At the same time, the firm institutional control over representations of the German past during the 1970s and 80s, began to loosen in the decade following Unification. Subjectively inflected and emotionalised historical narratives increasingly passed into mainstream public discourse, causing intense public controversies over the relationship between collective and personal memories in Germany's national memory culture. The controversies that arose over the memory function and legitimacy of nostalgic representations of life in the GDR, and later also the Bonn Republic, touched on this issue. However, as will be detailed below, it came to the fore much more explicitly in the public debate sparked by a wave of literary novels and television documentaries, which placed personal narratives of German suffering during and after World War II on a par with the discourse of collective guilt of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Crucially, the latter debate took place across the same pages of German newspapers in the years 2002-2003 as the debate on nostalgic representations of Germany's divided history.

3.2.i *Postwar "Vergangenheitsbewältigung"*

Vergangenheitsbewältigung was a concept coined in the late 1960s, with reference to West Germany's attempts to confront the Nazi past and Holocaust. Following the

“silence” and “forgetting” of the 1940s and 50s,²² a shift occurred in the West German collective memory, which coincided with the public disclosure of the crimes of the Nazi regime through the news coverage of the Adolf Eichman trial (1961) and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (1963-65). The shift in collective memory was further driven by the intergenerational conflict between the 68ers, who had only witnessed National Socialism as children or were born after 1945, and their parents, who had passively and actively supported the Nazi regime. With the 68-generation maturing to become the opinion formers and political decision-makers of the Federal Republic in the 1970s and 80s a new cultural and political elite emerged, for whom the critical confrontation of the Nazi past and the Holocaust became an integral part of West Germany’s self-understanding.

By the 1980s the Federal Republic’s cultural, political, and academic discourse on the Nazi past was dominated by two firmly established paradigms: “first a psychoanalytic narrative [that] tells a drama of repression, acting out and repetition compulsion, and a second narrative [that] restores the Enlightenment paradigm through its story of the critical engagement with the past” (Fuchs 2006: 169). These two paradigms roughly correspond with the psychoanalytic approach to the problem of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* established by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in their ground-breaking study “*Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*” (*The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behaviour*), published in German in 1968, and with the critical political philosophy of Jürgen Habermas.

Two concepts central to Habermas’ political philosophy in particular found their way into debates in the mutually constitutive fields of West German memory and identity politics. The concepts of a “post-conventional” national identity and “constitutional patriotism” (“*Verfassungspatriotismus*”) came to form the basis of the domestic and foreign politics of the left-liberal consensus that dominated West German cultural and political life from the late 1960s until the 80s.²³ For the German political left, the national question had become anathema. Many on the left considered national

²² Counter to dominant condemnatory accounts of the culture of forgetting that predominated the immediate post-World War II period, Lübke (1983) has argued that the silence about the Nazi past was a necessary precondition for western Germany to rebuild itself economically and as a functioning civil society.

²³ On the history of the concept of “constitutional patriotism” and its basis for post-1945 West German national identity, see Müller (2000: 93-98).

division a punishment for the Holocaust (Huyssen 1992: 69). It was believed that the only legitimate collective identity Germans were permitted after Auschwitz was a negative, post-conventional one, which proceeded via rational discourse and was based on western Enlightenment values. As Matthias Zimmer (1999) observed, the Federal Republic found a post-Holocaust identity in “her enlightened spirit that had transcended the parochial confines of national identity” (22). Rather than subscribing to conventional patterns of positive national identification, West Germans were to draw their sense of collective identity from a constitutional patriotism that centred on liberal values. The only positive national specificity this post-national patriotism contained was that “the driving forces behind loyalty to the constitution would be memory of the Holocaust and German responsibility” (Niven 2001: 240).

As John William Niven indicates in the above quotation, the critical approach to German post-1945 collective identity found its psychoanalytical counterpart in a politics of memory that demanded a continuous “working-through” of the Holocaust and German collective guilt. The psychoanalytical approach to the German past was built on a concept of national history as collective trauma, which is passed on trans-generationally and therefore needs to be repeatedly confronted (see Santner 1990; LaCapra 1994). The destabilizing effects of the traumatic event were to become an integral part of post-1945 German self-perception (Santner 1992). Underlying this memory politics were dichotomies of critical perpetrators and victims, confrontation and repression, redemption and perpetuation, which were built on the idea that “public knowledge of the Third Reich and the transparency of a reckoning with the past will have a cathartic effect; and that remembering the Holocaust will prevent the recurrence of National Socialism and of the attending evils of racism and anti-Semitism” (Geyer 1996: 169).²⁴ Thus, broadly speaking, the critical-psychoanalytic paradigm that underpinned West Germany’s identity and memory politics in the 1970s and 80s, was directed at leading Germany back into the western community of nations, after its deviation from Enlightenment rationalism during its historical “*Sonderweg*” (path of exception) of the 1930s.

²⁴ For a discussion of the concepts of redemption and perpetuation in the West German memory politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, see also Jackman (2004: 343).

3.2.ii *The broadening of German memory*

The historian Konrad Jarausch (2002: 9) coined the term “*dreifache Vergangenheitsbewältigung*” (threefold coming to terms with the past), to speak about the post-1989 extension of Germany’s troubled history from the Nazi past to the period of division. Jarausch’s term suggests an approach that confronts the dictatorial history of the GDR, and also the more uncomfortable chapters in the history of the old Federal Republic, from within the established paradigm of West German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. It reflects how West Germany’s memory politics was carried into the Unified Germany as a normative framework, thereby establishing “the forty years of ‘successful’ West German history between 1949 and 1989 as the ‘norm’ from which a united Germany might derive its identity and socio-political stability” (Taberner 2002: 1).

Since the late 1990s, this transfer of memory politics, which was widely left uncommented on and seemed to have been accepted in the first years following Unification, has caused much controversy.²⁵ Critics have argued that the specific demands placed on German collective memory and identity since reunification, are not recognised within the discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The collective identity derived from *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was based on the West German political culture that emerged with 1968 and which was “delimited by age, intellectual and ideological affinity, political standpoint, social and geographical mobility, ethnicity, class, and gender” (Taberner 2002: 3). Marginalised from this culture are, above all, younger generations who did not experience the social-political upheaval of the 1960s, Eastern Germans, immigrants, and other minority groups, who make up a considerable part of post-1989 German society (see Taberner and Cooke 2006: 4). Addressing this “new multiplicity of cultures”, Michael Geyer (1996: 195) was one of the first to argue that the memory politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was no longer tenable as an anchor of collective identity in the unified Germany.

The recent interest of a cross-disciplinary body of literature in different forms of nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany can be considered part of a wider academic interest

²⁵ The use of the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* particularly with regard to the dictatorial history of the GDR gave rise to much resistance because it implied an equation of the GDR regime with that of the Third Reich.

in memory practices that testify to the limitations of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, both, as a paradigm for coming to terms with the German past and as an anchor for German collective identity after 1989. Alternative memory discourses have been examined as attempts to create new historical referents for the formation of a post-Unification German cultural identity. In particular, the literature has focused its attention on an emerging generation of cultural producers “who are pushing at the boundaries of cultural taboos and political correctness and probe the complex collective consciousness with a view to ascertaining what constitutes the German nation today” (Anton 2010: 16). The novels, films and other productions of these artists, who reached maturity after the *Wende*, have been analysed as signalling a new generation of debates, which negotiate the question of the German past, present, and future from new perspectives.

Above all, this new generation of debates has broadened the historical focus of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* on the Nazi past, to also address the “axis of East and West, divided versus unified Germany”, which corresponds with a “new stage in the remapping of a country that was once divided [and, which] is at this moment entangled in a new wave of nostalgia that forces both past and present, East and West, into close proximity” (Hell and Moltke 2005: 87). Further, and as the preceding quote indicates, in place of the predominant critical-psychoanalytic approach of art that confronted questions of national history and identity in West Germany since the late 1960s, many of the recent productions employ the lens of nostalgia. Characterised by “a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life” (Boym 2001: xiv), the latter constitutes an aesthetic device that helps portray an image of contemporary Germany as located at the intersection of a divided past and unified present. However, to complicate matters, such new perspectives have not only been applied to the history of the GDR and FRG, but have also been used to reassess the period of National Socialism and the question of collective guilt. Following the collapse of the GDR the debates that emerged about life under a totalitarian regime, about right and wrong modes of remembrance, and about German identity, sparked reconsiderations of the German sense of self in light of the Nazi past.

Crucially, the rise in nostalgic representations of the German past in the 1990s is symptomatic of one of the defining characteristics of the new generation of memory debates: their embrace of personalised and emotionalised historical narratives, which attained a new level of public attention and legitimacy in the decade following Unification (see Jarausch 2002: 10).²⁶ Whereas the representation of German history (in both Germanys) was highly regulated by public-official and academic bodies during the postwar decades, the decade following Unification witnessed an increasingly open and uncensored debate: “[T]he task of coming to terms with the past, long the preserve of historians and politicians, was taken up by the population at large” (Niven 2001: 4). The release of German memory politics from its Cold War politicization has widely been considered the driving force behind this decrease in the regulation of historical representation.²⁷ By the 1990s the persistently felt need to legitimise the Federal Republic through scientific modes of historical representation, had given way to a new sense of national self-confidence, derived from the peaceful and democratic proceedings of the East German “revolution” and the process of reunification. In this context more public tolerance and room was provided for personal historical accounts that did not always square with the national memory politics of collective guilt, which had previously been closely allied with Germany’s foreign politics. In 1998, the newly elected Red-Green coalition, led by two representatives of the 68-generation, Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer, introduced a new rhetoric of “normality” into German memory politics, which, only ten years earlier, politicians from the liberal left had strongly opposed as reactionary.²⁸ As Reinhard Mohr (1998) commented in *Der Spiegel*, the vocabulary Schröder chose to speak about the German past implied a “*neue Unbefangenheit*” (“new ease”).

However, the heated public debate that was unleashed by Martin Walser’s controversial acceptance speech of the Peace Prize of German Booksellers, at the

²⁶For the argument that the rise in private historical narratives was a gradual development that began in the 1970s with the establishment of “*Alltagsgeschichte*” (“history of the everyday”), see Huyssen (1992: 67-68) and Geyer (1996: 179-181).

²⁷ Jeffrey Olick has further suggested that it was the firm institutionalisation of the commemoration of the Holocaust by the 1990s, which led to a relaxation of the public-official control over representations of the German past and the transfer of “responsibility for commemoration to nonofficial initiatives” (Olick 1998: 569).

²⁸ See the “*Historikerstreit*” (“historians’ debate”) of the years 1986 to 1988. For an introduction to the debate, see Torpey 1988.

Frankfurt Book Fair in the same year, clearly demonstrated that the new ease in relation to the national socialist past had been declared too hastily (see Gay 2004). Walser's speech, which criticised the increasing institutionalisation and political instrumentalisation of the Holocaust memory as emptying this memory from individual experiences and blocking individual attempts to deal actively with the Nazi past, rang in a national debate on the question of collective versus personal memory (see Fuchs 2002). On a smaller scale this debate had been anticipated in the responses to W.G. Sebald's Zurich lecture series "*Luftkrieg und Literatur*" (translated as *On the Natural History of Destruction* upon their publication in English in 2004) in which he thematised the silence of German novelists of the postwar periods about the traumatic destruction of German cities through the Allied air attacks. Sebald raised a subject which had been taboo in German memory politics since the 1960s and which had since been confined to the private realm of family memories: the suffering endured by Germans during and after the war.

Although articulated within the seemingly marginal cultural realm of literature Sebald and Walser's challenges to the boundaries and taboos of German memory politics set in motion a national public debate. By the early 2000s the deeply personal and emotionally charged stories of German suffering had made their way into mainstream public discourse.²⁹ Whilst sceptics warned of a blurring of the distinction between the "real" victims of National Socialism and those who were only victimised as a consequence of their prior participation in the Nazi regime, the stories told of Germans as victims of the war in television documentaries, the press and novels met

²⁹ Although recollections of German victimhood were an integral part of family narratives and identities in the old Federal Republic, they were largely confined to the private sphere (see Assmann 2006; Frevert 2003). From the 1960s onwards and within the political climate of the Cold War only certain groups were permitted a self-portrayal as victims. Whilst the "*Vertriebenenverbände*" from Silesia and Czechoslovakia were tolerated, and their claims for the restoration of their lost "*Heimat*" were met with financial compensation, the narratives of suffering caused by the aerial bombing of German cities during the final months of World War II were largely silenced. The difference was that the "*Vertriebenen*" (expellees) were the victims of "the Soviet forces and the peoples of the Warsaw Pact countries, now West Germany's 'adversaries' in the Cold War, [which] made *their* public recollection possible" (Jackman 2004: 345, italics in original). By contrast, the horrors of the firestorm on German cities "had been inflicted by the Western Allies, now their protectors and NATO partners" (ibid.). Referring to the GDR, Graham Jackman notes that here the situation was the reverse: "it was possible to speak of the bombing, because that had been the work of the capitalist West, but 'Vertreibung' was scarcely spoken of" (345). On the situation in the GDR, see also Jansen (2004).

with intense public resonance.³⁰ It was the new “*Opferliteratur*” (“victim literature”), which had its high-point in the years 2002-2003, that stood in the foreground of the phenomenon. Novels such as Günter Grass’ *Im Krebsgang* (2002), Jörg Friedrich’s *Der Brand* (2002), and the anonymous diary *Eine Frau in Berlin* (2003), addressed the full breadth of topics of German suffering, including the flight and expulsion from the East, the firestorms and carpet bombings of German cities, and the rape of German women.³¹ However, whilst the impetus for the turn to personal memories of suffering was given by authors of the postwar generation, such as Grass, Walser and Sebald, who had previously been known for their unforgiving attitude and critical confrontation of the “brown” crimes of their parents, it was above all the generation of grandchildren of those who had experienced and witnessed the Third Reich, that embraced the subject in family and generational novels (see Noak 2002; Hage 2003). As shown in the following paragraphs, the critical debate that emerged around the novels of the younger generation stands out for its clear articulation and framing of some of the central issues at stake in the controversy over the relationship between collective and personal modes of recollection.

A principal focus of the debate was the seeming susceptibility of the recent family and generational novels to blurring the distinction between the victims and perpetrators of the Nazi regime. Unlike the “*Väterliteratur*” of the 1970s and 80s which sought to break with the generation that experienced National Socialism, the third generation is unified by the desire to establish historical continuity and to define their own identity in terms of long-term family narratives, no matter how troubled these may be (see Assmann 2006: 192-93). Although this concern of the younger authors does not translate into “reinvesting in genealogy and restoring family honour”, “there is a tendency to replace the readiness for critical confrontation [...] with increasingly apologetic attitudes” (Assmann 2006: 193) that sits uncomfortably alongside questions of guilt and “*Täterschaft*” (perpetration). Harald Welzer (2004), one of the principal critics of the recent family novels, has argued that their personal and private modes of recollection provide an “*unscharf*” (blurred) view of the

³⁰ See the ARD-documentary *Die Vertriebenen: Hitler’s letzte Opfer* (2001) and the ZDF-documentary *Die große Flucht: Das Schicksal der Vertriebenen* (2001). For press coverage of the subject, see the four-part *Spiegel* series *Die Flucht: Spiegelserie über die Vertreibung der Deutschen aus dem Osten*.

³¹ For a comprehensive account of the turn towards the subject of suffering in German literature after Unification, see Taberner and Berger (2009), Beßlich and Grätz et al. (2006), and the issue of *German Life and Letters*, 57 (4), 2004.

National Socialist past, which dilutes the guilt of parents and grandparents in an empathic picture of subjective motives, forced circumstances, and, most significantly, their struggle for survival. Like the critics of Martin Walser and W.G. Sebald's late works, Welzer belongs to a group of commentators for whom personal memories of German suffering are irreconcilable with the public memory of collective guilt, because such a pairing lends itself too easily to balancing out German *Täterschaft* with German victimhood.

A second issue that had arisen in relation to the recent family and generation novels is that of authenticity. The novels stand, as Caroline Gay (2004) suggests, for "a new generation of debates which stem from *interpretation* rather than *memory*" (410, italics in original). The memories that are recounted by the authors born in the 1960s and 1970s are not so-called "primary memories" but they are the result of multiple mediations. They fall into what Marianne Hirsch (1997) has termed "postmemory", a form of memory defined by "its connection to its object or source [being] mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (Hirsch 1997: 22).³² Echoing Hirsch's concept of postmemory, Friederike Eigler (2005), in her study of generation novels from the post-*Wende* period, described how the novels "approach the past through arduous research, external memory media [*Gedächtnismedien*] and they rely on the memory fragments [*Erinnerungsfragmente*] of previous generations, in short, [they approach the past] through multiply mediated 'memories' [*'Erinnerungen'*]" (26). This perspective, Eigler suggests, is not only the result of the authors' historical distance from the events they are writing about, but is also related to the increasing envelopment of memory in the technologies of the new media and the changes in the mechanisms of memory this has caused more broadly. With these developments questions of the representation and construction of history and memory, as well as the play with the border between fact and fiction, have taken on new meaning and significance for cultural producers, whose concerns with memory have become more self-conscious and often ironic.³³ Whilst sceptics have

³² See also LaCarpa (1998: 20-1) who distinguishes between primary memory as 'that of a person who has lived through events and remembers them in a certain manner,' and secondary memory as 'the result of critical work on primary memory, whether by the person who initially had the relevant experiences or, more typically, by an analyst, observer, or secondary witness such as the historian'. For a critical analysis of the concept of 'postmemory' and its limitations see Long (2006).

³³ On the changing mechanisms of memory and how cultural producers have contributed and responded to these developments, see Huyssen (2003).

rejected the new generation of interpretative literature on the German past as not serious because of its mediated nature and its proclivity to distort historical truths, Ute Frevert (2003: 11) has argued that rather than assessing these recollections in terms of the criterion of authenticity, more will be learned from examining whose interests they serve.

Frevert's suggestion leads to the principal concern of much of the recent cross-disciplinary literature on Germany's post-1989 memory culture, namely, the concern to map and analyse an emerging plural landscape of memories and its corresponding social groups. Echoing Michael Geyer's (1996) earlier diagnosis that the memory politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* can no longer be reconciled with Germany's "new multiplicity of cultures", Jarausch and Geyer (2003) observe that the memory culture of post-Unification Germany is marked by a tension between the normative framework of public remembrance and narratives of German history told as "a set of competing counter-stories, stressing social diversity" (Jarausch and Geyer 2003: 37). The German Studies scholars Anne Fuchs and Marianne Cosgrove (2006) have gone a step further in suggesting that the tension between public and personal memory in post-Unification Germany constitutes a paradigm shift in the German memory culture.³⁴ They introduced the term "memory contests" to distinguish a new "pluralistic memory culture which does not enshrine a particular normative understanding of the past but embraces the idea that individuals and groups advance and edit competing stories about themselves that forge their changing sense of identity" from the "old paradigm of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*" (164).³⁵ Aleida Assmann (2006) is more cautious in her call for a social memory discourse that incorporates personal recollections of the past and which secures the distinction of such recollections from reactionary attempts at historical revisionism: "it would be wrong to interpret any reference to suffering as a strategy to avoid, or even to deny, guilt" (196). Rather than endorsing a paradigm shift in German memory politics, as Fuchs and Cosgrove do, she argues for the need to "broaden" German memory from within the normative national memory framework of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and its focus on the Holocaust and questions of collective guilt. Assmann insists on a hierarchical memory discourse which accommodates divergent and contradictory

³⁴ See also Fuchs and Cosgrove et al. (2006a).

³⁵ On the contested nature of German identity after Unification, see also Pickel (1997).

accounts of the past, yet is always in a position subordinate to that of the discourse of collective guilt. The advantage of this hierarchical structure, she proposes, is, that it “can both set limits to social memory and help national memory to gain greater complexity, [200] subtlety and flexibility” (199-200). Approached from this perspective, personal recollections are not irreconcilable with the normative public memory, but they “can only contribute to a greater diversification, energy and complexity of German memory” (200).

Although different in the extent of reforms they call for, this range of arguments on Germany’s normative memory politics is unified by the underlying thesis that, whilst the discourse of collective guilt was an adequate response to establishing the legitimacy of the West German nation in the postwar decades, the demands placed on Germany’s mutually constitutive memory and identity politics in the post-*Wende* Republic require a broadening, if not revision, of German collective memory. In place of a highly regulated monologic discourse, a more dynamic and open debate is needed that provides a space in which different social groups can formulate personal historical narratives, to help them define their subject positions within the still uncertain cultural fabric of the reunified Germany. This argument clearly resonates with the analyses of forms of *Ostalgie* and *Westalgie* as counter-memories, discussed above. Such analyses have highlighted the failure of German memory and identity politics to integrate the experiences of East Germans, which were not reducible to a life lived under an oppressive regime, as well as of a younger generation, for whom the moral-political foundations of the Bonn Republic were more a historical rather than acute social-political reference point. Yet, as Assmann (2006) emphasises, the challenge facing the reunified Germany, is to establish such a more inclusive memory and identity politics, without removing the discourse of collective guilt as the underlying narrative of German collective memory and identity post-Auschwitz.

3.3 Conclusion

As the preceding discussion indicates, what is at stake in the debate on different forms of nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany is not only the historical representation of the GRD and the Bonn Republic. Instead, any assessment of the nostalgic forms of recollection proliferating in popular culture and art since the *Wende*, also needs to

take into account how these forms of remembrance are tied into broader questions of German collective memory and identity, and the attendant issues of personal and public modes of remembrance, as well as the changing relation between guilt and suffering, critical and emotional approaches to the past, and authentic and mediated memories since the 1990s.

Whilst some of these issues have been addressed in the public and academic debate on different forms of post-*Wende* nostalgia, others still remain largely unexplored. The critics of *Ostalgie* and other forms of post-*Wende* nostalgia have conventionally identified them as modes of memory that repress guilt and trivialise the victims of the SED regime. However, these issues have rarely been problematised in terms of the relationship between personalised and emotionalised forms of memory, on the one hand, and public memory, on the other, which has been fundamental to the recent memory contests waged in Germany. The academic reappraisal of *Ostalgie* has partly worked against this blind spot in the debate by theorising *Ostalgie* as a form of counter-memory that challenges dominant public narratives of German collective memory and identity. Yet, whilst manifestations of East German counter-memories have been read as reactions against the West German portrayal of the GDR as a totalitarian state, they have hardly been looked at as challenges to the memory politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* more generally. In contrast, the relationship between authentic and mediated memories has been examined in more detail. Especially in the field of literary studies, scholars have turned to examining novels about life in the GDR, and also the old Federal Republic, written by young authors who themselves only experienced these social-political systems as children. In the novels the histories of the two Germanys are constructed through the lens of childhood memories, fictional recreation, and, often, ironic commentary.³⁶

The aim in the following empirical chapters of the thesis is to examine in what ways the phenomenon “New German Painting” raises fundamental questions about the subject of post-1989 German collective memory and identity, in particular with regard to the complex relations between the former East and West that characterise these

³⁶ See, e.g., the special issues “Contemporary German Literature” of *New German Critique*, 88 (Winter), 2003, the issue of *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 40(3), 2004, Eigler (2005), Beßlich and Grätz et al. (2006).

subjects. Underlying interactions between the painting's aesthetic content and the social-political context of post-1989 Germany are analysed by drawing on some of the central concepts and arguments formulated in the literature on post-*Wende* nostalgia. Yet, as suggested in the second part of this chapter, these concepts will be approached from a perspective that sees them in the context of the wider debate on changing modes of historical representation in the reunified Germany. This includes considerations of the changing relationship between personal and public memory, guilt and suffering, critical confrontation and empathy, and, finally, authentic and mediated memories.

Chapter 4 A New Kind of German History Painting?

German-American artistic relations strongly shaped the “New German Painting” and its art critical reception. The German debate on the painting was largely prompted by the successful sale of the art in the American market. For many German critics the high financial value the painting had acquired in the American market by far exceeded its art historical significance. Reflective of this view was the catalogue for an exhibition of the artist Norbert Bisky, at the Berlin contemporary art museum Haus am Waldsee in 2007, which observed:

“While the realist paintings by the artist born in 1970 in Leipzig and living in Berlin since 1980 count amongst the most sought after properties on the international art market, the reactions of the institutionalised art criticism in Germany are rather muted.” (Blomberg 2007: 78).

Trying to account for the artistic and cultural attraction of American dealers and collectors to the “New German Painting”, domestic commentators often argued that the painting corresponded with established American concepts of twentieth-century German art as charged with the nation’s traumatic history.

Indeed, in the American art press the new body of art was regularly portrayed as a new kind of German history painting which confronted the country’s recent history of division and reunification. In particular, the American debate paid much attention to the painting’s nostalgic aspect. The objects, places, and people it depicted were established as cultural relics from the two postwar Germanys. The focus here was on the “New Leipzig School”, artists who were educated and based in post-*Wende* East Germany, and whose painting was claimed to express an air of *Ostalgie* that reflected the dystopian mood in post-Unification East Germany. The Leipzig painting was established as expressing the disappointment of the utopian hopes eastern Germans had placed in Unification, and their longing for a return to the GDR in the face of growing unemployment and social disintegration. Overall, the American discourse tended to reify the new painting’s nostalgic aspect as reflecting actual social-cultural conditions in post-*Wende* Germany. The assumption was that the nostalgic content of the art embodied a nostalgic mood in real cultural life.

This chapter examines American receptions of the “New German Painting” and its nostalgic aspect, and the responses they received from domestic German critics. In each case it is examined how the discourse on the art was conditioned by underlying art historical continuities as well as broader social-cultural factors. To provide a historically grounded analysis, the chapter compares both discourses with the earlier American and German debate of the 1980s, on the memory function of the so-called German “Neo-Expressionist” painting that was steeped in Teutonic and Nazi symbolisms.

The first part of the chapter focuses on the American reception of the new painting. It is suggested that the tendency of American critics to reify the painting’s nostalgic aspect as “collective mood”, was coherent with established American art historical narratives of twentieth-century German art, as unified by an underlying expressionist impulse. Within US art history and criticism, Expressionism has predominantly been established as a distinctly German version of modern art, which was primarily valued for its revealing of a German cultural spirit, rather than its aesthetic modernism. The American portrayal of the nostalgic aspect of the “New German Painting”, as expressing a certain truth about the post-1989 German condition, was congruous with such established cultural determinist American concepts of modern German art.

Turning to other cultural and historical factors that influenced the positive American receptions of the painting’s nostalgic aspect, it is argued that the cultural attraction of US audiences to the painting was motivated by an American desire for self-affirmation. The “New German Painting” emerged in the US market in the early 2000s, when the first signs of the disintegration of the US political and cultural world hegemony were becoming apparent. In this atmosphere especially, the painting of the “New Leipzig School” which American critics established as portraying the ruins of the GDR, offered a nostalgic return to the period of the Cold War and an American golden age of world power.

The second part of the chapter examines German responses to the success of the painting in the United States. Again, the focus is on the reception of the painting’s nostalgic aspect. It is analysed how, for the majority of German observers, stereotypes of the German artist as equipped with a strong historical consciousness fuelled the

American trade with the new painting. More specifically, the historical dimension of the painting was said to cater to American fascination with Germany's fascist history, which now included not only the myths of Nazism but also of the GDR dictatorship.

Taking a comparative-historical perspective, the chapter shows how, like the German reception of the neo-expressionist artists in the early 1980s, domestic negative responses to the memory function of the new painting were still conditioned by the postwar West German memory and identity politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Crucially, the new painting did not fulfil the critical aesthetic of abstraction and displacement prescribed by the latter for artistic representations of the German past. At the same time, it is suggested that the dismissiveness with which many German commentators approached the nostalgic aspect of the new painting bears close affinities with the post-Unification German newspaper debate on *Ostalgie*. The discussion of the affinities of the German debate on the new painting with the memory and identity politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and of the newspaper debate on *Ostalgie* both build on the prior exploration of these subjects in Chapter 3.

4.1 The American reception of the “New German Painting”

It was especially in New York that the “New German Painting” sold for increasingly high prices at contemporary art galleries, fairs, and auctions from the early 2000s onwards. Commenting on the financial success of the painting at New York auctions, an article published in *Der Spiegel* in 2005, entitled “New German Painting. The Boom is Paying Off” observed: “300.000 Euro for Matthias Weischer, 180.000 for Tim Eitel, 193.000 Euro for Daniel Richter – international auction houses are mad about the new German painting” (Illies 2005).³⁷ In the same year another article in *Der Spiegel* spoke of a “Kraut Art” craze amongst American collectors, who were buying up “paintings that are nostalgic, grimly gaudy – and unmistakably German” (Knöfel 2005).

The financial success of the painting in the American market coincided with the establishment of “Young German Art” as a brand on the international art market. At

³⁷ On the high prices some of the “New German Painting” fetched at New York auctions in 2006, see Lubow (2006).

the New York contemporary art fair *Armory Show* in the years 2004 to 2007, participant German galleries initiated a collective marketing campaign (supported by the German Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour), which united their fair booths through signs designed in the colours of the German flag that spelled out “Young German Art”, and in later years “Made in Germany” (see Fricke 2005). In a public statement, the president of the Association of German Art Galleries, Bernhard Wittenbrink, explained that the joint marketing campaign was a response to the high demand for art from Germany in the international, and particularly American, market.³⁸

Many of the artists associated with the label “New German Painting” had one gallery representing them in Germany (mostly in Berlin, Leipzig, Cologne, or Hamburg) and another in the United States (mostly in New York, and some in Los Angeles). Neo Rauch and other artists associated with the so-called “New Leipzig School” were the most in demand by American art dealers and collectors. *The New York Times* critic Arthur Lubow, reported that “[e]ven in today’s superheated art market for painting, the Leipzig artists stand out. Collectors jockey to be wait-listed for their new works, while in the secondary market, their prices rise vertiginously” (Lubow 2006). Commenting from Germany, the magazine *Der Freitag* described what it called the “New Leipzig Figuration”, as Germany’s “most significant high cultural export hit” (Kube Ventura 2007: 11). Alongside the “New Leipzig School”, names much sought after in the American market were Daniel Richter (who trained at the Hamburg *Hochschule der Bildenden Künste*, with the painter Werner Bütnner, and who is today based in Berlin), Norbert Bisky (originally from East Germany, and trained at the former West Berlin *Universität der Künste* with Georg Baselitz), the Dresden-trained Eberhart Havekost, and Kai Althoff, who lives and works in Cologne.

The kind of painting labelled “New German” in the United States was more homogenous than the work grouped under the same label in Germany. Most of the painting associated with the label in the United States was of a distinctly figurative-representational style and by male artists. Further, the work was usually characterised by an iconography and symbolism that conjured up subjects of German history. The

³⁸ See: http://pages.german-pavilion.com/gp/armo_01/home/index.cfm (accessed: 09/011/2008)

figure of the male German painter who engages with the nation's troubled history and identity is well established in American perceptions of modern German art. Artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, Max Beckmann, Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, and Gerhard Richter, have all been perceived through this lens. By contrast, in Germany, the definition of the "new painting" was usually broader. It ranged from figurative to abstract positions and the work of female artists was more widely acknowledged. Exemplary of this variety of positions are the artists and works featured in Tannert's book *New German Painting – Remix* (2006), as well as in the overview exhibition *deutschemalereizweitausendunddrei* ("german painting two thousand and three"), held at the Frankfurter Kunstverein in 2003.³⁹ Further, the American inclination to read the paintings as concerned with subjects of national history was often missing in its presentation in Germany. Tannert, for example, describes the paintings as post-national in orientation: "Questions dealing with 'the nation', the German spirit, appear to be taboo or of little interest [...] for the generation of painters born between 1965 and 1975" (Tannert 2006: 12).

Considering the American approach to the "New German Painting" it is not surprising that the "New Leipzig School" stood at the centre of the American discourse. Among the "new painting" the Leipzig work stood out as unified by a figurative-representational style (especially the artists' early painting until ca. 2006). In addition it seemed to be the most historical of the painting. Much of the Leipzig work portrayed ruinous interiors, urban landscapes, and abandoned factory spaces that resonated with the post-1989 German historical condition and conjured up ideas of post-socialist East Germany. Yet, as the next section shows, as with the "New German Painting" more broadly, the American discourse portrayed a very specific and limiting image of the "New Leipzig School", which suited the notion of a new wave of painting from Germany charged with national history.

4.1.i *"New Leipzig School" & "Ostalgie"*

The "New Leipzig School" became a well-known label in the American market between 2004 and 2005. American interest in the painting began with the appearance of Neo Rauch, generally seen as the forerunner of the group, on the New York art

³⁹ http://www.fkv.de/frontend_en/archiv_ausstellungen_detail.php?id=36

scene. Rauch had his first solo exhibition at the commercial gallery David Zwirner (New York) in 2000. Reviews typically emphasised Rauch's East German origin and, what was claimed, the post-socialist aesthetic of his painting. In *The New York Times* Roberta Smith (2000) described the work as marked by a nostalgic colour palette and liberally borrowing from Socialist Realism. In 2003 the first institutional solo exhibition of Rauch's work at The St. Louis Art Museum also contextualised the painting in the socio-historical milieu of post-1989 East Germany. More specifically, the exhibition introduced the concept *Ostalgie* to the debate. The exhibition brochure suggests that "[t]he antiquated quality of [Rauch's] protagonists might also relate to Ostnostalgie (east nostalgia), a term coined shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall that refers to a longing for the objects and images of the former East Germany". This framing of Rauch's painting as *Ostalgie* anticipated the American positioning of the "New Leipzig School" as art that reflected the collective consciousness of post-socialist East Germany.

In 2004 the first group exhibition of artists a generation younger than Rauch, later labelled the "New Leipzig School", was presented at Marianne Boesky, a New York commercial gallery.⁴⁰ The exhibition *Clara Park – Positions of Contemporary Painting from Leipzig*, which was curated by the German gallerist Christian Ehrentaut, included work by Tilo Baumgärtel, Stephanie Dost, Franziska Holstein, Martin Kobe, Tobias Lehner, David Schnell, Christoph Ruckhäberle, and Matthias Weischer. Whereas Rauch studied at the Leipzig Academy during GDR times, these artists had begun their studies in the 1990s, after Unification. Some of them had been taught by Rauch, who became an assistant at the Academy's Department of Painting in 1993. Notably, this first exhibition of the "new Leipzig" artists in the United States, presented a relatively varied and open impression of the artists and their works. Although the exhibition's subtitle implies only painting, it also showed photography (Stephanie Dost and Franziska Holstein), as well as abstract painting (Tobias Lehner), which clearly diverged from the later American limitation of Leipzig painting to a distinctly figurative style. Further, it is to be noted that female artists (although in a minority) were included in the exhibition.

⁴⁰ http://www.marianneboeskygallery.com/exhibitions/2004_9_clara-parkpositions-of-conte/pressrelease/

Only one year later, by 2005, the American definition of the new Leipzig work had significantly narrowed: two major survey exhibitions: *From Leipzig: Works from the Ovitz Family Collection* and *Life After Death: New Leipzig Paintings from the Rubell Family Collection*,⁴¹ portrayed the work predominantly through the cultural and art historical concerns that had formerly been identified in the work of Rauch. In both exhibitions Rauch was shown alongside what, in the United States, came to be perceived as the core group of Leipzig painters: Tilo Baumgärtel, Tim Eitel, Martin Kobe, Christoph Ruckhäberle, David Schnell and Matthias Weischer. The “New Leipzig School” was now defined as a male group of artists whose work was unified by a nostalgic-historical subject matter and a figurative-representational painting style.⁴²

To the present day, *Life After Death* remains the largest American exhibition of the “New Leipzig School” in terms of the number of works shown and institutions toured. The catalogue for the exhibition (Coetze and Heon 2005) presented the works as emblematic depictions of post-*Wende* East Germany. The painting was claimed a product of its time and place and as affording, not just an aesthetic, but also a social-historical encounter. In particular, the exhibition pointed to the nostalgic aspect of the painting, which it singled out as speaking to the post-*Wende* East German situation. The ruinous places and disoriented figures portrayed in the works were described as emanating a “feeling of world-weariness and ennui” (24), which was claimed to reflect the mood amongst eastern Germans after the utopian hopes they had placed in Unification had subsided and given way to a grim social-economic reality.

Two of the major review articles of the exhibition *Life After Death* reiterated this interpretation of the painting as marked by a dystopian outlook that was endemic to

⁴¹ *From Leipzig* was shown at The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio. *Life After Death*, toured a number of institutions between 2004 and 2008: Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams; Site Santa Fe, Santa Fe; the Katzen Arts Center Museum, Washington; Salt Lake Art Center, Salt Lake City; Kemper Art Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City; and Frye Art Museum, Seattle.

⁴² By contrast in the German discourse the “New Leipzig School” was more often portrayed as a diverse group of artists in terms of artistic style, subject matter and also gender, see e.g. the German survey exhibition *Made in Leipzig* (Schmidt 2006), and also the series of interviews published under the heading “Leipzig, ein Tor zur Malerei?”, in *Kunstforum International*, 176 (2005).

the former East Germany. In *The New York Times* Arthur Lubow (2006) described the painting as unified by a melancholy subject matter, which was inspired by “the mood of Leipzig [...] Like other cities in the former GDR, Leipzig is plagued with high unemployment and depopulation”. Similarly, Gregory Volk (2005), writing for *Art in America*, portrayed the painting as depictions of post-*Wende* Leipzig, filled with the cultural and urban ruins of socialism.

Although this American framing of the “New Leipzig School” painting at first seems coherent with the aesthetic specificity of the painting itself, when critically examined it shows signs of over-determination. There was a tendency in the American debate to reify the nostalgic aspect of the painting as reflecting actual social-cultural conditions in post-*Wende* East Germany. This propensity becomes particularly apparent when claims that the painting reflected a dystopian mood endemic to post-*Wende* Leipzig, are positioned against the social-economic reality of the city in the years following Unification. In contrast to the American reading of the city through the dystopian lens of the “New Leipzig” painting, Leipzig developed into the East German “boom town” and was held up as a model example for post-socialist urban and economic regeneration in the 1990s.

The next section of the chapter shows that the American portrayal of the paintings’ nostalgic aspect as emblematic of the post-*Wende* East German condition was, in fact, not so much grounded in the social-economic realities of post-Unification Germany, but rather in established American art historical approaches to modern German painting.

4.1.ii Expressionist continuities

The art historical positioning of the “New German Painting” followed a similar pattern to the introduction of the German neo-expressionist painters, such as Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer, to the USA three decades earlier. Both generations of artists were introduced as the contemporary heirs to early twentieth-century “German Expressionism”. In the case of the neo-expressionists, the first museum exhibition of the artists at The St. Louis Art Museum: *Expressions: New Art from Germany: Georg Baselitz, Jörg Immendorf, Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lüpertz, A.R. Penck* (Cowart 1983),

was held only three years after a major review exhibition of early twentieth-century “German Expressionism” at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, which was titled *Expressionism: A German Intuition, 1905-1920* (Neugroschel 1980). Charles Haxthausen (1989), who commented on this curatorial strategy, observed that the “link between German national identity and expressionism” (144), which was reaffirmed in the Guggenheim show, also became essential to the American promotion of the neo-expressionist painters.

In the 1980s the American institutional discourse on twentieth-century German art presented it as unified by an underlying expressionist continuum. This establishment of Expressionism as modern Germany’s national artistic style was embedded into a broader Anglo-Saxon museum discourse on modern German art. Six years after the Guggenheim show, *Expressionism*, the Royal Academy of Arts in London presented the survey exhibition *German Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1905-1985* (Joachimides and Rosenthal, et al. 1985). Reviewing the London exhibition, Rosalin Deutsche (1996) criticised it for presenting modern German art history as limited not only to the traditional artistic media of painting and sculpture, but also to “a chronicle of the durability of expressionism: its emergence in the early twentieth century, suppression by the Nazi regime, and postwar, post-occupation resurfacing” (109).⁴³ Positioning the West German neo-expressionist painters within this tripartite chronology, the exhibition celebrated the artists as rediscovering the German national artistic heritage decades after the end of World War II and the West German embrace of international modernism since the 1950s.

In an essay that analysed the American discourse on the neo-expressionist artists of the 1980s, Joan Fowler (1984) revealed how it was characterised by distinctions between national artistic characteristics and international styles. The broad spectrum of positive and negative American reviews positioned the artists within the former category. In particular, a group of pro-conceptualist critics (most of whom were

⁴³ In another critical response to the 1985 London exhibition, Walter Grasskamp (1991) suggested that its constructions of modern German art as a coherent continuity unified by an underlying German expressionist impulse, was an attempt to “compensate for the *discontinuity of the nation*” (23), an attempt which, however, ignored the very specificity of modern German art as a “continuity of disjunctures”.

contributors to the art journal *October*),⁴⁴ played on American perceptions of “German Expressionism” as closely linked with national identity in order to undermine the painting. They labelled the national cultural identity of the painting – which they located in its figurative style, Teutonic iconography, and promotion of a male artistic culture – as a regressive artistic position, which not only worked against progressive artistic movements of international abstract modernism, but which was equally supportive of contemporary authoritarian and reactionary political forces. Its American promoters, such as Donald Kuspit ([1983] 1984), who tried to distance the painting from its limiting nationalist framing as Expressionism, through re-labelling it “New German Painting” and establishing it as addressing universal aesthetic questions concerning the nature of modern art and the rift between abstraction and figuration, ultimately returned to a nationalist terminology (Fowler 1982: 9).

Similar to the introduction of the neo-expressionists onto the American scene, that of the “New German Painting” coincided with a curatorial interest in early twentieth-century “German Expressionism”, especially in New York. The *Museum of Modern Art* (MoMA) alone mounted four exhibitions on the subject between 2002 and 2004, including *Artists of Die Brücke* (2002), *Masters of German Expressionism* (2002-03), *Max Beckmann* (2003), and *From Expressionism to the Bauhaus* (2003). That the “New German Painting” was promoted as the contemporary heir to the German expressionist tradition was particularly evident in how Neo Rauch was introduced to American audiences. As mentioned above, in 2003 Rauch’s first institutional solo exhibition in the United States was held at The St. Louis Art Museum. The museum is one of the leading Germanist art institutions in the United States and it has often been the first to show emerging artists that would later become central figures in the canon of modern German art. In particular, it is known for holding the world’s largest collection of Max Beckmann, one of the protagonists of early twentieth-century “German Expressionism”, as well as for hosting the first museum exhibition of “German Neo-Expressionism” in the United States (Cowart 1983). The presentation of Rauch within the institutional framework of The St. Louis Art Museum, established a receptive climate for the artist’s work, as the latest incarnation in a lineage of modern German expressionist painting.

⁴⁴ Key contributions to the critique of “Neo-Expressionism” in American art criticisms were Buchloh (1981), Owens (1982), and Foster (1983).

However, the American positioning of the “New German Painting” within the tradition of “German Expressionism” was less obvious than in the case of the “neo-expressionists three decades earlier. With the post-*Wende* painting there was usually no evident stylistic continuity with first generation early twentieth-century “German Expressionism”. Whereas artists such as Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer had consciously appropriated the painterly techniques (including an expressive brushstroke and woodcut) of the expressionist group “*Die Brücke*” (see Weikop 2011a: 203-04), this was not the case with the “New German Painting”. Comparing the “New Leipzig School” with the neo-expressionists of the 1980s, the catalogue for the survey exhibition *Life After Death* distinguished the Leipzig style of figurative painting – which is described as characterised by control, restraint, and repression – from the expressive brushstrokes that marked the canvases of the previous crop of German painters (Coetze and Heon 2005: 22). Whilst the Leipzig artists were said to be no less dedicated to the act of painting than their neo-expressionist predecessors, their painting style was presented as mediated through the classical academic training they had undergone at the Leipzig Academy.

Yet, if the American discourse on the “New German Painting” is examined more closely it shows that, although it distinguished it stylistically from the German expressionist tradition, it positioned the painting firmly within this tradition by focusing on its social-psychological dimension: its nostalgic aspect. This approach cohered with the American concept of “Expressionism” as a distinctly German version of modern art, not only on grounds of art historical criteria of style, but also on social-psychological criteria of emotionality, irrationalism, and myth.⁴⁵ As Pamela Kort (2001) has shown in her overview of the history of the twentieth-century American reception of “German Expressionism”, US art history and criticism has valued the style as a modern art form primarily for its revealing of a German cultural spirit – characterised by inward feeling, fierce desire, alienation, anguish, and primitivist myth – rather than its aesthetic modernism. According to Kort, the art was in the first place “linked with *human behaviour* rather than aesthetics, a mode of behaviour that was (and to a large extent still is) understood as distinctly and

⁴⁵ For this definition of Expressionism, see two of the canonical American art historical accounts of the movement published in the 1950s, Selz (1957) and Myers (1957).

endemically German” (260, emphasis in original). Similarly, Rose-Carol Washton Long (2011: 23) has observed that prominent American art historians, who wrote on “German Expressionism” in the late 1950s and 60s (see, Selz 1957; Myers 1957; Gordon 1966) tended to emphasise the emotionality of the art, its dealing with interior feeling and anti-intellectual nature. Referring to the title of the 1980 exhibition on “German Expressionism” at New York’s Guggenheim Museum: *Expressionism: A German Intuition, 1905-1920*, Washton Long suggests this approach extended into the 1980s.

The American promotion of the “New German Painting”, as an art that reflected collective sentiments in post-1989 Germany, continued this social-psychological paradigm. It was the debate on the “New Leipzig School” and its nostalgic aspect, which most explicitly illustrated this continuity in American conceptions of modern German art. Representative of the larger American debate on the Leipzig work, the catalogue for the survey exhibition *Life After Death* suggested that, like earlier German expressionist painting, the Leipzig painting was “full of feeling” (Coetze and Heon 2005: 22). At the same time, the figures in the paintings of Tim Eitel, Tilo Baumgärtel, and Christoph Ruckhäberle are described as marked by a sense of alienation “stand[ing] around awkwardly, never belonging to the place they are in”, as “ill at ease, as though they were marionettes or mannequins” (26, 28). In a similar vein, Gregory Volk (2005), refers to the ruinous urban scenes portrayed in the painting as “quotidian circumstances [that] are subtly charged with complex psychological nuances, including a sense of nagging loss, unease and dislocation, but also of inward voyaging and stubborn desire” (156). The language used by the catalogue *Life After Death* and Volk to describe the paintings clearly echoes the social-psychological terminology of most American accounts of early twentieth-century “German Expressionism”, and the neo-expressionist works of the 1980s.

The close proximity of the terminology of the American debate on the “New German Painting”, with earlier debates on “German Expressionism” was also evident in the use of the social-anthropological concept “lifeworld”, rather than the more customary art historical categories “genre” or “history painting”, to convey what was considered to be the painting’s social communicative value. Thus Donald Kuspit (2006) – one of the principal art critical authorities on post-World War II German painting –

described the scenes portrayed in Neo Rauch's painting as lifeworlds that reflected the distinctly East German cultural context of its production. The notion that the ruinous urban habitats portrayed in the paintings of the "New Leipzig School", were emblematic of the post-*Wende* East German social-cultural condition was also articulated by Volk (2005), who, in his analysis of the painting's representation of the city of Leipzig, claimed it was "intensely communicative, probing issues of belonging and alienation in a reunified Germany" (156). In particular, the critics' focus on the urban landscapes depicted in many of the paintings, as representative of the post-socialist condition, echoed established Anglo-Saxon art historical accounts of the Berlin street scenes of early twentieth-century German expressionist artists, such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and later of the neo-expressionist group "*Neue Wilde*" (see Deutsche 1996). As with the earlier expressionist street scenes of Berlin, which had been claimed as typically expressing the universal modern urban condition (Deutsche 1996: 114-115), the Leipzig paintings were put forward as providing a unique insight into the post-socialist condition. In each case, the German work was lauded for its ability to artistically express contemporary collective emotional and psychological states in an authentic manner.

4.1.iii Memories of an American golden age

As indicated above, the traditional figurative style of the "New Leipzig" painting was repeatedly emphasised in the American discourse. In an essay that was a first attempt to review the American reception of the "New German Painting", Graham Bader (2006) observed how, when it came to the Leipzig works, "critics, from *Art in America* to *The New York Times* insistently focus on these artists' centuries-old academy [and] their dedication to traditional figurative technique" (Bader 2006: 54). The two US survey exhibitions of the Leipzig work from 2005 also focused on this aspect of the art. Whilst the foreword to the exhibition *From Leipzig* described the artists as "unified in their shared concern with the once outmoded idea of the act of painting as an end in itself",⁴⁶ the *Life After Death* catalogue suggested the works expressed a "nostalgia for painting" (Coetze and Heon 2005: 28). Both exhibitions established the painting as marked by a desire to return to a time when most visual art

⁴⁶See: <https://clevelandart.org/exhibit/pastExhib.asp?eID=101> (accessed: 03/05/2008)

was painting and when the quality of it was measured by such technical criteria as paint handling, perspective, and colour palette.

Generally there was a tendency in the US debate to present the traditional style of figurative painting of the Leipzig artists as an art historical anachronism, the product of the four-decade-long isolation of the GDR from western art discourses. Accounts of the painting established the Leipzig Academy as an enclave of older artistic values that had long been left behind in western contemporary art. Comparing the situation at the Leipzig Academy with artistic developments in western Europe, Arthur Lubow (2006) observed how “the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall were effective windscreens [...] Figurative art that was deprecated as hopelessly passé in Paris and Düsseldorf never lost its grip in Leipzig”.

However, despite its seeming discordance with developments in contemporary western art, the American discourse usually portrayed the Leipzig artists’ traditional mode of figurative painting as a culturally attractive post-socialist exoticism. Exemplary of this image of the Leipzig painting was an early review of the work of Neo Rauch by *The New York Times* critic Roberta Smith (2002), which depicted Rauch’s painting as standing out through its Eastern German difference:

“Neo Rauch is a painter who came in from the cold. He was born, reared and trained as an artist in East Germany, and continues to live in his hometown, Leipzig. When the Berlin Wall fell he was 30, aware of art outside East Germany but cut off from it [...] Since then he has played a careful game of catch-up, absorbing contemporary and modern art without losing his cool.”

Whilst Smith’s portrayal of Rauch as catching-up with western art discourses implies a notion of East Germany as artistically backwards and requiring modernisation, at the same time the review promotes the artist’s work as having a certain exotic value.

Scholars, who have critically examined the cultural attraction of western audiences to post-socialist art since the collapse of the East Bloc, have drawn widely on post-colonial theory (see Erjavec 2003; Stallabrass 2004). Claudia Mesch (2007), in her analysis of the cultural attraction of US audiences to the “New Leipzig School”, argued that an “othering” process underpinned this attraction. Similar to the objectivising and exoticising gaze shed on non-white cultures in the European

reception of the art of figures such as Paul Gauguin in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the American reception of the “New Leipzig School” was marked by a “fetishising of the sign systems of the former Soviet bloc” (Mesch 2007: 55). Analogously to the concept of modernist primitivism, Mesch argues the US discourse constructed the Leipzig painting as a form of “socialist primitivism”.

The concept of socialist primitivism strongly resonates with Julian Stallabrass’ (2004) more general analysis of the cultural appeal of art from post-socialist countries for western audiences as driven by a fascination with “the sudden birth of a white European Third World; of the romance of a crumbling ‘evil’ Empire and a fallen enemy [...]; and of an ideology passed into history” (50). The latter part of this quote from Stallabrass suggests that western audiences gained satisfaction from seeing in post-socialist art the collapse of communism and, by implication, the West as historical victor of the Cold War. Christian Janecke and Alexander Koch (2005) applied this argument to the cultural attraction of US collectors and curators to the “New Leipzig School”, arguing it constituted an instance of self-affirmation. Echoing Stallabrass as well as Mesch’s position, the authors suggest that the ruinous “lifeworlds” depicted in the Leipzig painting served not only the western self-celebration as victor of the Cold War and the defeat of communism, but also to exoticise what was considered typical of communism in the eyes of US audiences.

Other commentators looked at the cultural appeal of the “New Leipzig” painting and its nostalgic aspect for American audiences from another, more contemporary perspective. Bader (2006) has suggested that American audiences were drawn to the Leipzig painting because of the art’s capacity to arguably evoke not only memories of a more stable social and economic existence in the GDR, but also to transport American audiences back to their own better times: “One could say that many in the US seem to suffer from their own particular brand of ‘Ostalgie,’ longing for a not-so-distant past before our current age of never ending global warfare and the totalized world market” (Bader 2006: 57). The Leipzig painting entered the American market in the early 2000s, following 9/11 and a time when America’s position as the world’s hegemonic political and cultural power was showing first signs of disintegration. In this context of uncertainty and anxiety about the American future, art which facilitated a nostalgic return to the American golden age of the Cold War decades,

when the world was clearly divided along lines of East and West, and the USA's position as a world leader firmly established, was a welcome distraction.

This last interpretation of the cultural appeal of the Leipzig painting for American audiences also shares much with post-colonial theory. In his book *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (2004), Paul Gilroy made a similar argument about a contemporary British melancholic mood (which he locates in yearnings for lost British world dominance and imperial pre-eminence) in the face of the social and political difficulties posed by the multi-cultural society of today's post-imperial Britain. However, examined art historically, this last interpretation also bears strong resemblances to earlier accounts of the positive reception of the German neo-expressionist painting in the United States in the 1980s.

As Benjamin Buchloh ([1981] 1984) observed, the American attraction to the neo-expressionist painting seemed to be related to the sense of American artistic self-affirmation it permitted. The style of the neo-expressionist painting not only contained references to early twentieth-century "German Expressionism", but also demonstrated the influence of American "Abstract Expressionism" on Western European art post-World War II. In the words of Buchloh: "Who would not be seduced by the reflection of one's own national culture in the art of a succeeding generation, especially in a different geo-political context?" ([1981] 1984: 133). Christian Weikop (2011) supports this argument by showing how Georg Baselitz and other artists' visions of first-generation "German Expressionism" were "refracted through American abstract expressionism" (203). Baselitz and other artists of his generation, who began to formulate their artistic positions in the 1950s and were later labelled neo-expressionists, were visibly influenced by the work of Jackson Pollock, DeKooning, and others painters of the so-called "New York School". The latter artists were shown at the second international art exhibition *documenta* in 1959, in West Germany, where they were promoted by the USA during the Cold War in order to strengthen America's cultural hold on the region.⁴⁷ Thus, analogous to the argument that the positive American reception of "Neo-Expressionism" was due to the art

⁴⁷ The two travelling exhibitions *Jackson Pollock, 1912–1956* and *New American Painting* organised under the auspices of MoMA and shown in Europe in 1958 and 1959 were essential to the American promotion of Abstract Expressionism in Western Europe.

permitting US audiences a nostalgic return to a high point in US art history, it can be suggested that the “New Leipzig School” afforded American audiences a nostalgic return to a high point in US cultural and political history.

4.2 “Germanness” made for American eyes

For many German commentators the positive American reception of the “New German Painting” boiled down to an enthrallment with a new wave of art from Germany that was typically German by American standards. The high financial value the painting had acquired in the US market was considered not to reflect its actual artistic and art historical value but rather, it was claimed, the result of established American interests in German art that was charged with the nation’s difficult history. The persistent nostalgic outlook of the painting and its often overtly German iconography catered to such homogenous conceptions of German art.

Art historical scholarship that has identified American interests in modern German art as grounded in a more general fascination with the country’s troubled past abounds. Referring to the American reception of art from the GDR, Marion Deshmuckh (1998) observed how the “American interest in German art generally appears to coincide with major if not seismic historical shifts and [5] developments” (4-5). The first exhibition of GDR art in the United States: *Twelve Artists from the German Democratic Republic* (Nisbet 1989) was shown from 1989-1990 at the Busch-Reisinger Museum of Harvard University, a date that coincided with the collapse of the GDR. However, scholars who have examined post-World War II American perceptions of German art as representing national historical subjects, have generally focused on the American familiarity with the art of Joseph Beuys (e.g. Germer 1996), and the painting of the neo-expressionists (e.g. Saltzman 1999); both of which were promoted in the United States as confronting Germany’s Nazi past and the Holocaust. Following German Unification, commentators such as Bader (2006) have transferred earlier arguments about the positive American receptions of post-World War II German art that engaged with the country’s troubled past to the American reception of the “New German Painting” as charged with Germany’s history of division and reunification. As with the American interest in Joseph Beuys and the neo-expressionists, for Bader, US interests in the “New German Painting” were motivated

by the assumption that the art projected a “historical awareness that comes with the country’s ongoing coming-to-terms with its traumatic past” (Bader 2006: 59).

However, viewed from Germany, for many observers, established American expectations of German art as charged with national history, led to a situation in which stereotypes fuelled the US trade with the “New German Painting”. Writing for the magazine *Cicero*, Paul Kaiser (2005) argued that the iconographic arsenal of German history has become a “unique selling point” in the American market. The newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* was more specific in its description of the kind of romantic, mythological, and militant German historical iconography the American market was arguably looking for. It referred to the enthusiasm of American collectors for “the deeply serious riddle paintings of Neo Rauch, Jonathan Meese’s myth-fragments thrown onto canvas, or the evil snipers of one Eberhard Havekost” (Buhr 2005).

Domestic observers suggested the German identity of the painting corresponded with the imagination of international audiences, rather than with the actual social and political reality of contemporary Germany. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* distinguished between traditional notions of “*Deutschtum*” and the “instrumentally refined ‘Germanness’” that was used in the promotion of the painting in the international market (Buhr 2005). In the newspaper *Die Zeit* the critic Hanno Rauterberg (2008) elaborated on this distinction. Whereas the “*Deutschtum*” of the nineteenth-century Romantic artists was inwardly directed at the project of creating a cultural nation where there was no political one, the “Germanness” of the contemporary artists was directed at the international export of their work. In contrast to the nineteenth-century Romantics, who themselves created the national clichés they cultivated, the contemporary artists responded to national stereotypes imposed on the nation from outside. According to Rauterberg, in today’s global art market, artists from Germany draw on the specific German history to distinguish themselves from “the uniform and exchangeable”.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ See Oguiibe (2004) for a discussion of cultural identity as a means for artistic distinction in the global art market.

Above all, it was the painting of the “New Leipzig School”, which German commentators considered to match the American perception of the typical German artist as equipped with a strong historical consciousness. In particular the Leipzig painting was said to tap into American fascination with German fascist history, which had become dual since Unification, now including “the myths of national socialism and the GDR” (Kaiser in Jocks 2005: 153). In the 1970s and 80s scholars such as Susan Sontag (1979) and Saul Friedländer (1982) dissected American fascinations with new cultural productions about European fascism, and especially Nazi Germany (such as Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s 1978 film *Hitler: A Film from Germany* or *Our Hitler* as the US title read), as giving in to the psychological hold and eroticism of artistic reproductions of images of fascist power, terror, and destruction. Three decades later critics, who commented on the American attraction to the “New Leipzig” painting and its depictions of the cultural relics and memories of GDR socialism, suggested that this attraction was an extension of earlier American fascinations with Nazi fascism. One commentator to make this argument was Christian Saehrendt, who set American interests in art that evoked the dictatorship of the GDR on a par with interests in art made about Nazi Germany:

“It is striking that especially those German artists [...] were or only just became successful in the USA, are either from the GDR, and thus have first-hand experience of a dictatorship, such as Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz, A. R. Penck and Neo [159] Rauch, or they are artists who demonstratively engage with German historical subjects [of Nazi terror], such as Anselm Kiefer or Jonathan Meese. In both cases the totalitarian past serves as an exciting background to life and work” (Saehrendt 2009: 158-59).

The historian of East Germany, Timothy Garton Ash (2007), examined the link between international fascinations with cultural productions that portray life under the GDR dictatorship with established imaginary associations of German history with Nazi terror, more systematically. In a review article of the international success of the film *Life of the Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck), which was released in 2006 – around the same time as the Leipzig painting was enjoying the height of its success in the US market – Garton Ash explains that the film’s story of an East German Stasi officer further consolidated the growing view of East Germany as another evil dictatorship and of the Stasi as the default global synonym for communist terror. However, he asks, why have East Germany and the Stasi taken this place in our

collective imagination, if East Germany was only a sideshow when looked at in the context of larger East Bloc politics, and the Stasi a far less violent surveillance and torture machine than the Russian KGB? The answer to this question for Garton Ash lies in Germany's earlier history of the Third Reich. The image of the GDR as an icon of communist terror plugged directly into the symbolic significance of Nazi Germany as the most evil and murderous regime in modern history in our collective consciousness.

Looking at American reviews of the "New German Painting" shows that Garton Ash's theory applies not only to international receptions of the film *Life of the Others*, but also to American receptions of the "New German Painting". In an essay on Neo Rauch's oeuvre, the critic Donald Kuspit (2006) decoded the iconographic significance of the figure of an executioner with a rifle, which appears in several of the artist's works, as not only a symbol of the terror of the GDR dictatorship but also, more broadly, as one of "the barbarism and brutality for which the Germans have been legendary since Roman antiquity, and which reached a grand climax in the second world war" (Kuspit 2006). This interpretation clearly echoes Garton Ash's suggestion that the image of the GDR as an evil dictatorship overlapped with the violence of the Nazi regime in the global imagination.

4.2.i Historical amnesia post-1945 & post-1989

Although there were isolated voices in the German discourse that concurred with the positive American receptions of the new painting's nostalgic aspect, the majority of critics outright denied the painting had any social or historical significance. As one of the foremost art critical promoters of the work in Germany, Tannert (2006) described it as unified by an "emotionally curbed realism" (5) that conveyed contemporary collective states of feelings. Another critic, Oliver Koerner von Gustorf (2004), suggested the painting was of a "magically charged realism [...] that uses both constructed and construed pasts as a projection field for a present-day perception of reality".

Yet, the tenor of the German discourse was disapproving of the painting's seeming social-historical realism. The reviews of the largest German survey exhibition of the

painting at the Frankfurter Kunstverein: *deutschemalereizweitausendunddrei* (german paintings two thousand and three),⁴⁹ clearly illustrated the reservations with which most German commentators approached the art. Summarising the feuilleton responses to the exhibition in the online art magazine of Deutsche Bank, *db-artmag.com*, Koerner von Gustorf (2003) wrote that although reviews agreed on the painting's decorative value, the consensus was that the new realist painting lacked any critical social, historical, or political function. The art critic of the *Berliner Zeitung*, Sebastian Preuss (2003), was more art historically specific in his dismissal of the painting's realist style. He argued that the artists failed to live up to the social-critical foundations of artistic traditions of realism by being oblivious to the "complex political and aesthetic references that were contained in Realism since Courbet and Menzel up into the socialist context" (Preuss 2003).

In the following paragraphs it will be shown how not only positive American receptions of the "New German Painting" built on the US discourse on the neo-expressionists three decades earlier, but also how the negative German reception echoed the earlier domestic debate on the neo-expressionists. Whilst both generations of artists were mostly well received in the United States and seen as confronting Germany's troubled history – after 1945 and after 1989 – German critics claimed that, despite their overtly historical iconography, the painting of each generation was marked by a certain historical amnesia. In the case of the neo-expressionists the artists were accused of normalising the Nazi past through its aesthetic stylisation. Three decades later the post-*Wende* painters were similarly charged with selective amnesia of the dictatorship of the GDR.

Although most of the artists later labelled "Neo-Expressionist" had been exhibiting in Germany since the late 1960s, their work first became the subject of major art critical controversies in German newspapers in 1980, when Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer represented the Federal Republic at the Venice Biennale. Across the German feuilletons commentators were appalled by the Teutonic and Nazi symbols that pervaded the artists' painting and sculpture, which were decried as embarrassingly reactionary, fascistic, and irrational. Characteristic of this was Baselitz's "Model for a

⁴⁹ http://www.fkv.de/frontend_en/archiv_ausstellungen_detail.php?id=36 (accessed: 10/09/2008).

Sculpture” (1980), a wooden seated male figure, which evoked the ghost of Nazism and German imperialism through its Hitler salute and moustache, and its black-white-red colouring.⁵⁰ Yet although Baselitz’s sculpture, which was the first work to greet visitors at the entrance of the pavilion, caused much irritation amongst German critics, it was Kiefer’s work, which – as Lisa Saltzman (1999: Chapter 4) showed in her analysis of the German reception of the pavilion – incited the more sustained and detailed critique.

Responding to the negative German reception of Kiefer, American promoters of the artist often portrayed him as not properly appreciated in his home country, where he was struggling against a culture of historical repression (see Schjeldahl 1988). However, such accounts were a severe misrepresentation of the scepticism with which domestic reviews approached the problematic “Germanness” of the artist. As Andreas Huyssen (1992a) remarked: “To accuse a predominantly left-liberal German culture of the repression of fascism is ludicrous” (86). The left-liberal memory politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* had been firmly established in the Federal Republic since the late 1960s (see Chapter 3), to the extent that, by the 1980s, questions of aesthetic possibilities of representation had moved into the foreground of German memory and identity politics (Huyssen 1992: 66). This shift in the discourse on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was evident not only in the much-cited “*Historikerstreit*” (“historians’ debate”) of the years 1986 to 1988 (see Torpey 1988) and the *Bitburg* affair of 1985 (see Kansteiner 2006: 254-65), but was also manifest in cultural debates, such as the critical German reception of the US television series *Holocaust* shown in Germany in 1979 (see Huyssen 1980), and a year later in the debate on the Venice Pavilion.

Seen in the context of the 1980s German debate on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, it becomes evident that what German critics were concerned about was in fact not that Kiefer thematised the Nazi past – this position was entirely coherent with the project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – but *how* the artist represented this past. It was Kiefer’s explicit evocation of the Nazi past that caused uneasiness amongst German critics. Echoing the concept of fascinating fascism, Peter Eli Gordon (2002) described

⁵⁰ See the commentary by Werner Spies (1980) in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

the artist's evocative historical iconography as "too often add[ing] up to little more than a series of political *effects* lacking complexity and leaving the viewer little interpretative space" (emphasis in original, 124).

Looking at Kiefer's problematic "Germanness" more specifically within the broader context of postwar German negotiations of identity, Saltzman (1999) indicated how the artist's overt use of Germanic and fascist symbolisms was in conflict with the "aesthetic ethics of visual absence and poetic silence" (19) formulated by Theodor W. Adorno for art after Auschwitz in his 1951 essay "*Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*",⁵¹ and largely adopted by the German left two decades later. This aesthetic regime of abstention has been elaborated on in the scholarly discourse on the "limits of representation" of Nazism and the Holocaust, which only emerged fully in the late 1980s and early 90s.⁵² In line with Adorno's aesthetic ethics, the latter discourse argued for an aesthetic of displacement and abstraction, which established distance between the event and its re-presentation and provided a liminal margin for the unrepresentability of the Holocaust (Friedländer 1992: 17).⁵³ Underlying the prescriptive aesthetic ethic of the left were distinctions between different modes of aesthetic representation that either enabled or blocked the process of mourning. These aesthetic differences, in turn, were linked with a corresponding left-leaning "post-national" identity politics (discussed in Chapter 3), and a right-leaning politics of normalisation that relativized the crimes of the Nazi regime in the context of world history and called for a return to a conventional national identity that permitted sentiments of positive identification and the renewal of national pride. Amongst the left, the politics of normalisation was considered fraud with historical amnesia, for it obliterated the singularity of the violence and terror of Nazism.

For German critics of the 1980s, who looked at Kiefer's art through the problem of mourning or its blockage, and distinctions between left and right images of the Nazi past, the artist seemed to reassert rather than work through the shameful chapters of German history and national identity (Saltzman 1999: 110). The figurative-

⁵¹ Translated into English as "Cultural Criticism and Society" by Samuel and Sherry Weber, published in Adorno (1967) *Prisms*. London: Spearman.

⁵² Key contributors to this debate were Friedländer (1992), LaCarpa (1994), and Hayes (1991). For an overview of the debate, see Kansteiner (1994).

⁵³ See also Gertrud Koch's (1989) discussion of the use of the aesthetic strategy of displacement in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*.

representational style of Kiefer's work evoked the pleasure of historical narration, which critical theories of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* posited as undermining "Trauerarbeit" (the ability to mourn) by simulating a coherent historical narrative and intact and stable identities, which replaced the traumatic event and the process of working through it.⁵⁴ Further, the artist's combination of an expressionist style and indulgence in painterly virtuosity with references to Nazism and the German cultural and political tradition appeared more an affirmation of the latter, rather than their critical confrontation. Perceived in this light, left-leaning German critics set Kiefer's work on a par with the attempts of the recently elected conservative Helmut Kohl administration to normalise German history, through its relativisation and the return to a conventional positive national identity. The newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* went so far as to dub Kiefer "the court painter for the newly conservative Bonn government" (Reuther 1984).⁵⁵

The negative domestic response to Kiefer, and others of his generation such as Baselitz, had largely been positively revised by the early 1990s. In 1991 Kiefer was given a major retrospective at the Berlin Neue Nationalgalerie, which recognised him as one of the most significant figures in twentieth-century German art, in large part because of his innovative engagement with the relationship between German art after 1945 and collective memory.⁵⁶ Saltzman (1999: 114-123) suggested that it was the American – and more specifically Jewish-American – critical and institutional support for the artist throughout the 1980s which made this critical reassessment possible. Within the peculiar postwar conditions in which West Germany reconstructed its

⁵⁴ See Eric Santner's (1992) theory of "narrative fetishism". The German left's rejection of narrative history in cultural productions referencing the Nazi past was illustrated explicitly in the negative domestic reception of the US television series *Holocaust*, which presented German Nazi history through the story of a family. For critics from the left this "emotional melodramatic representation of history" was incompatible with "a cognitive rational understanding of German anti-Semitism under National Socialism" (Huyssen 1980: 118). Historical and political enlightenment via rational argument and strategies of emotional identification with historical actors were considered mutually exclusive, since, as Adolf Lüdtke (1993) put it, it was "emphatic and emotional fervour [which] seemingly had prepared the ground for Nazism" (55).

⁵⁵ In the attempt to rescue Kiefer from such reactionary political affiliations, Huyssen (1989; 1992a) argued that rather than normalising the German past, Kiefer's painting is emphatically about memory and *not* forgetting. Huyssen suggests that the artist's use of Nazi and Germanic symbolisms deliberately broke the taboo the German left had placed on the icons of the German political and cultural tradition in order to demonstrate that the Nazi's exploitation and abuse of this image world could not simply be silenced through an escape into aesthetic abstraction, but had to be worked through as well.

⁵⁶ For an overview of the shift in German responses to Kiefer with this exhibition, see Huyssen (1992a).

national identity under the gaze of the international community, perceived signs of a renascent or lingering Nazism in Kiefer's art shown at Venice were a threat to West Germany's international reputation as a constitutional democracy cleansed of its National Socialist past. It was only after the American approval of the art, that Germans were able to positively engage with its ambiguous historical iconography.

However, two decades after the art historical revisionism of Kiefer and his generation of neo-expressionist artists had gained a foothold in Germany, similar arguments about right and wrong aesthetic representations of the German past re-emerged in the German discourse on the post-*Wende* painting. Again, a majority of German critics disputed the legitimacy and relevance of the painting for Germany's post-1989 memory culture, which, as the first part of this chapter showed, was mostly assumed in the American discourse. Similar to the early domestic reception of Kiefer, many German critics dismissed the post-*Wende* painting on grounds of what was considered its selective amnesia regarding Germany's history of postwar division, and, more specifically, of the dictatorship of the GDR. Arguments about the normalisation of German history were reiterated, this time with regard to the new Leipzig painting and its *Ostalgie*, which, it was claimed, trivialised the East German dictatorship and its victims.

This continuity in the German reception of the historical dimension of the neo-expressionist and the post-*Wende* painting signals that the German art critical debate still largely approached the question of how to deal artistically with the German past from within the postwar West German memory politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Shifts in German memory culture after 1989 went almost unrecognised. The proliferation of personal representations and narratives of the past, told from different subject positions that often bordered on the fictional, were still discarded as lacking objectivity and criticality. Rather than being recognised as a serious form of memory, the painting was often discarded as merely catering to a growing post-socialist nostalgia-industry. As the next section argues, the reluctance of German critics to see any historical value in the painting's nostalgic aspect was entirely in agreement with the German newspaper debate on *Ostalgie*, which was equally a symptom of the prevalence of the paradigm of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in post-Unification German public discourses.

4.2.ii *Catering to a post-socialist nostalgia industry*

Whilst the preceding section gave some idea of the art historical background from which the German scepticism towards the memory function of the new painting evolved, the concern in this section is to show how this scepticism also cohered with the broader German public discourse on *Ostalgie*. The German art critical debate on the painting began around 2003, the same year that the public discourse on *Ostalgie* underwent a paradigm shift: from being debated as a localised East German nostalgia, which guarded collective experiences and identities, to being debated as a lucrative culture industry (see Chapter 3). The reluctance of many German commentators to consider the painting's nostalgic aspect a relevant contribution to Germany's post-Unification collective memory was consistent with this paradigm shift. As with the discourse on *Ostalgie*, many German critics dismissed the painting's nostalgic aspect as a commodification of the recent German past and marked by selective amnesia.

The emergence of the "New German Painting" in the shadow of the "New Leipzig School" and its *Ostalgie* in the American market, led many domestic commentators to discredit the US financial and cultural-artistic interests in the painting as feeding off a growing post-socialist nostalgia industry. In the international art market this niche industry was manifest, above all, in the success of artistic work from post-Soviet Russia and art from China (Erjavec 2003; Stallabrass 2004: 29-72). Addressing this situation, Weikop (2007), in a review of *New German Painting – Remix* suggested that it was the post-socialist dimension of the Leipzig painting, which had catalysed the international interest in the "New German Painting" more broadly:

"[I]t is significant that a number of [the 'new German painters'] were trained in the academies of East Germany, albeit (with the exception of Neo Rauch) in the post-*Wende* period and in many cases their teachers were former 'stars' of the GDR's cultural system. The success of these 'New German Painters' is [...] somehow wired into the current art historical and curatorial interest in the failed utopia of the GDR, and a curiosity cabinet fascination for the exoticism of communist times, a phenomenon that is now often referred to as *Ostalgie*" (Weikop 2007: 10).

Taking a similar approach, *Der Spiegel* observed how painting from across post-Unification Germany – no matter whether from the former East or West – thrived on

the popularity of the “New Leipzig School” and its perceived *Ostalgie*: “painters like [Till] Gerhard, [Cornelia] Renz and [Kai] Althoff hail from western Germany – but are all profiting from a continuing ‘Eastalgia’ trend in international art, that foible for all things from former East Germany” (Knöfel 2005). According to *Der Spiegel* three criteria demarcated the nostalgic style of the “New German Painting” as it was sold in the American market: a colourful palette, a figurative-representational painterly idiom, and retro elements.

The notion that the nostalgic aspect of the “New German Painting” constituted an artistic style that was easily transferable, and which existed independently of collective experiences of historical loss and sentiments of longing, stood in sharp contrast to its positive American reception, as reflecting the collective consciousness of post-1989 Germany. This disparity in the American and German receptions of the painting’s nostalgic aspects is consistent with Paul Grainge’s (2002) theory that discussion of nostalgia tend to veer towards one of two conceptual poles, which he identifies as nostalgia “mood” and “mode”: “If the nostalgia mood is feeling determined by a concept of longing and loss, the nostalgia mode is a consumable style that has been commonly characterised as amnesiac” (11). German receptions of the painting’s nostalgic aspect as nothing more than an artistic style, which catered to a growing market for artistic products that were marked by a post-socialist aesthetic, clearly belonged at the latter end of this spectrum of discussions. It was an approach that resonated strongly with post-modern critiques of nostalgia as aestheticisation and stylisation of history that is representative of a culture of historical amnesia (see Jameson 1991; Foster 1984).

Anthony Enns (2007) has pointed to affinities between post-modern critiques of nostalgia as idealising the past and incapable of engaging with history and the German public debate on *Ostalgie*. Echoing the former, the public discourse on *Ostalgie* disqualified it as a form of memory that was relevant to the critical coming-to-terms-with the history of the GDR. *Ostalgie* was declared an a-political form of memory, which celebrated the normality and innocence of everyday life in the GDR, whilst trivialising the GDR dictatorship and its victims. Critics writing in the German art press not only reiterated these arguments in their commentaries on the “New

German Painting” and its nostalgic aspect, but they also explicitly decreed the painting a part of the *Ostalgie* culture industry and its selective historical amnesia.

For critics such as Paul Kaiser (2005) the nostalgic aspect of the post-*Wende* painting amounted to little more than a “banal recycling of German dictatorial history”, which represented not a generation’s shared experience of history, but a shared “feeling of one’s own lack of history”. The post-modern notion of history as pastiche that underlies Kaiser’s critique was reiterated in a review of the “New Leipzig School” in the magazine *Der Freitag*. The magazine depicted Rauch’s painting as portraying recent East German history as a diffuse collection of stylised and glossy images that invited subjective interpretations and distorted historical truths (Kube Ventura 2007: 11). This a-political approach to recent German history was also seen as characteristic of the “collage” and “riddle” painting of other representatives of the “New Leipzig School”, who filled their work with the cultural relics of socialism (ibid.). Christian Janecke and Alexander Koch (2005) also emphasise the a-political nature of Rauch’s painting, which they dismiss as providing “*Geschichtsanmutung ohne Geschichte*” – a look-and-feel of history without history. Going a step further in their critique, the authors declare the new Leipzig painting a part of the *Ostalgie* industry. The art was said to go along with the “playful engagement with socialist relics that has become pervasive in eastern Germany”.

4.3 Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the German and American critical discourse on the “New German Painting” provided in this chapter served to demonstrate what Jeffrey Alexander (2012) called the “hermeneutical power” of art critics. High art is a cultural realm in which the aesthetic quality and social communicative value of artefacts is explicitly mediated and controlled by critics. Critics get in between the aesthetic specificity of artistic work and its public reception, either augmenting or downplaying its art historical and social relevance. They participate in a process Alexander terms the “reification of iconic consciousness” – the naturalisation of an object’s collective symbolic meaning in the view of an audience.

In the case of the art critical reception of the “New German Painting”, it was, above all, the American discourse that tended to reify the painting’s symbolic relevance by portraying its nostalgic aspect as reflecting collective sentiments in post-1989 Germany. In contrast, the German discourse on the art usually downplayed its collective and historical symbolic relevance by declaring it little more than an art market phenomenon. German critics, who addressed the painting’s nostalgic aspect, and attendant questions of how to deal with the recent German past artistically, largely approached it from within the postwar West German memory politics of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, with the result that the paintings were not taken seriously as contributing to coming-to-terms-with Germany’s recent past. By proceeding with a comparative analysis of these two distinct art critical approaches to the painting, the chapter demonstrated how each was conditioned by pre-existent art historical traditions, as well as broader social-cultural structures.

The next chapters reconsider the historical dimension of the painting by bringing a more social-politically informed debate about different forms of nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany to it, which was explored in Chapter 3. The aim is to take the nostalgic aspect of the paintings seriously, without, however, buying into the American reception of them as reflecting real existing social-cultural conditions in post-1989 Germany. As Fred Davis (1979: 73-74) has shown in his sociology of nostalgia, although nostalgic styles in cultural production are often a symbolic expression of nostalgic moods in a society, they do not reflect such moods in a straightforward manner. Rather they are, as this chapter has begun to indicate, the product of a series of mediations that are embedded in specific histories of artistic production, perception, and representational economies. In the following these specific histories will be examined in more detail by turning to the conception and production of the “new painting”, in particular the work of the representatives of the “New Leipzig School”. Whilst the concept of post-*Wende* nostalgia is considered central to understanding the wider social-political significance of the artists’ concerns with regard to questions of German collective memory and identity, it will also be analysed how relatively autonomous art historical developments and phenomena shaped the artists’ practices.

The next chapter turns to the traditional figurative style of painting of the “New Leipzig School” and how this was widely promoted and received as a specifically eastern German artistic position. Much of the debate about the “new Leipzig” artists revolved around their continuation of local East German artistic traditions of painting, which continued to be taught at the Leipzig Academy after 1989. As discussed above, American commentators especially dwelt on the exotic anachronism of this peculiar artistic development. The intention of the next chapter is to move away from such labels as “exotic” and “anachronistic” and consider how the artistic choices of the Leipzig artists were entangled with the wider debates of the “*Bilderstreit*” about the value and role of East German art in the new Germany.

Chapter 5 The “New Leipzig School” in Light of the “*Bilderstreit*”

The painting of the “New Leipzig School” stood at the centre of both the American and German discourse on the “New German Painting”, standing out amongst the new painting because of its pervasive nostalgic aspect and its unified traditional figurative style. Chapter 4 showed that American critics especially repeatedly emphasised the artists’ traditional mode of figurative painting, which some described as “nostalgia for painting” (Coetze and Heon 2005: 28) – a desire to return to a time before concepts of painting as (re)presentation were overtaken by the critical reflection of painting as a medium. For American commentators this artistic position was an attractive post-socialist exoticism, a leftover of the isolation of the GDR from western art discourses since the 1960s.

In turn, German observers, who sceptically watched the financial and popular success of the “New Leipzig School” in the United States, suggested that the artists were merely catering to a growing international market for post-socialist art that overtly displayed its eastern “otherness”. As discussed in the previous chapter, there was a tendency in the German discourse to look at the Leipzig painting mostly in terms of its export to the international art market. Little attention was paid to the significance of its emergence from the post-1989 German artistic field.

This chapter examines the specific East German artistic identity of the “New Leipzig School” by returning to the time before the international export of the art began. Rather than looking at the painting’s East Germanness as catering to a growing post-socialist nostalgia industry, it examines how this artistic identity was formulated in the context of the post-*Wende* German artistic field, where the artistic heritage of the GDR widely suffered art historical devaluation. The motives of the staff and students at the Department of Painting/Graphics of the Leipzig Academy in continuing the artistic heritage of the GDR, as well as their social, political, and artistic significance, are complex and multiple. To gain a critical understanding of these motives it is necessary to analyse: the broader marginalisation of GDR art from national art museums and art historical narratives during the *Bilderstreit* of the 1990s; the institutional history of the Leipzig Academy since Unification; and the artistic

discourse that developed at the Department of Painting/Graphics amongst faculty and students during the 1990s. The chapter explores these issues in the order in which they are listed here.

Following an overview of the *Bilderstreit*, it examines how, after an educational review in 1990, the Leipzig Academy moved between the preservation and replacement of educational structures and teaching methods established during the GDR. Preservation was most prevalent at the Academy's Department of Painting/Graphics, where those East German professors permitted to stay in office continued the syllabus of traditional figurative painting. The faculty's politics of preservation coincided with the artistic interests of a growing number of West German students who joined the Department. Between them, staff and students formulated a regional artistic position of East German distinctiveness that was premised on the continuation of the local, East German artistic heritage. The question that arises with regard to this artistic position, is whether it constituted a first step towards the integration of parts of the artistic heritage of the GDR into the artistic culture of the unified Germany; or, whether the emphasis on an artistic identity that was distinctively East German further segregated GDR art from the larger West German art discourse.

By examining the discourses of staff and students at the Department of Painting/Graphics during the 1990s (accessed through published and self-conducted interviews) it is argued that both dynamics were at work. Faculty often positioned local East German artistic traditions in an antagonistic relationship with a perceived dominant West German artistic culture. Many of their public statements are marked by an anti-western rhetoric which resonates with concepts of *Ostalgie* as a defiant cultural identity ("*Trotzidentität*") as formulated by political sociologists. It is suggested that the faculty's politics of preservation was driven to a large extent by fear for their professional survival in a post-Unification artistic field in which the larger artistic heritage of the GDR had been devalued, as well as by the reactions of self-defence and sentiments of resentment that were in many cases the consequence of this development. Contrasting with the faculty's position, it is argued that students at the Department, especially those who had come from the West, generally had a purely aesthetic interest in the preservation of the East German mode of figurative painting.

Although they differentiated their East German artistic position from western contemporary art, their explanations of this position usually lack the hostile tone of their teachers.

5.1 The marginalisation of GDR art after Unification

Following the collapse of the GDR and the Unification of Germany, German art museums, art historians, and cultural officials were confronted with the problematic question of how to deal with the artistic heritage of the GDR. The public debate unleashed on the pages of German newspapers by this question is commonly referred to as the “*deutsch-deutscher Bilderstreit*” (“German-German painting dispute”), a term that implies the concentration of the debate on painting, which was “the central art project of the GDR” (Rehberg 2003: 45). Although Article 35 of the “*Einigungsvertrag*” (Unification Agreement) specified that: “art and culture were—despite the different development of the two states in Germany—a basis of the continuing unity of the German nation” (in Deshmukh 1998: 13) museums and art historians in the unified Germany showed “an unwillingness to incorporate GDR art works into longer-term narratives of German cultural history” (Kelly and Wlodarski 2011: 1). Instead GDR art moved between “*Verdrängung*” (“repression”) and “*Skandalisierung*” (“scandal”) (Rehberg 2005).

Repression was manifest foremost in the removal of GDR art from public view. In museums in former East Germany, works were taken off the walls and locked away in storage. On the one hand, this withdrawal of GDR art from public visibility was part of an approach that sought to come to terms with the GDR past by means of forgetting: “Public interest in GDR art receded as Germans attempted to leave an unpleasant past behind them” (Wagler 2011: 239). On the other, this “*Wende an den Wänden*” (*Wende* on the walls) (Rehberg 2005a), as some referred to the rehangings of collections in East German museums, was the consequence of the implementation of West German artistic standards in these institutions. Commenting on the situation in the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the art critic Eduard Beaucamp observed:

“Western curators who occupied the management positions at museums in the East after 1990, took their missionary business

seriously and tried to adapt the museums to the latest West-aesthetic as quickly as possible” (Beaucamp 2000).

Historical scholarship on the “German” in German art, which experienced a renaissance with national unification, also mostly ignored the artistic heritage of the GDR.⁵⁷ If scholars did examine the art of the “other Germany”, for example, Hans Belting in his book *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship* (1998), GDR art was put in a separate category and set up as an exception rather than an integral part of German national art history. Its history was also limited to the postwar period whereby it was reduced to, what Christian Saehrendt (2009) described as, a “marginal” and “passing, regional phenomenon” (154).

Isolated curatorial attempts to integrate the East German artistic heritage into the canon of twentieth century German art met with public outrage. In 1994 Dieter Honisch, then director of the Berlin *Neue Nationalgalerie*, caused a scandal when he announced the inclusion of GDR paintings in the museum’s permanent display collection.⁵⁸ Shortly afterwards, the contribution of the painter Bernhard Heisig, a member of the so-called “*Leipziger Schule*” (a group of artists who studied and taught at the Leipzig Academy between the 1960s and 80s), to the artistic decoration of the newly renovated “*Reichstagsgebäude*” in Berlin (soon to become the seat of German parliament) reanimated the debate. Not only West German art critics and historians frowned at the choice of Heisig, who had previously decorated the foyer of the “*DDR Volkskammer*” (the parliament of the GDR). Art historians from the former GDR, who had already been critical of the SED regime in its time, also protested that “now the holy cows of SED-cultural politics are again placed in front of our eyes for adoration” (in Saehrendt 2009: 153). By contrast, East Germans who advocated the inclusion of Heisig’s work in the *Reichstagsgebäude* collection, argued that it was a symbolically important gesture that established the artistic culture of the GDR as an integral part of the cultural heritage of the unified Germany, it was “about the ‘dignity of the East’” (cited in Rehberg 2005a).

⁵⁷ E.g. Belting (1998), Warnke (1999), Hofman (1999), and Gebhardt (2004).

⁵⁸ In 1993 Hans Belting observed on the inclusion of the painting of three East German artists in a *Neue Nationalgalerie* exhibition: “periodicals and newspapers were full of angry protest about it, even though it encompasses a mere two per cent of the total number of works, the remaining ninety eight per cent being by West German artists” (Belting 1997: 3).

5.1.i Aesthetic and political disqualifications

Justifications for the marginalisation of the artistic heritage of the GDR from national art collections and art historical narratives moved between moral-political and aesthetic reasoning. GDR art was denied the status of “art” either on grounds of its proximity to the SED regime, and consequent classification as propaganda art, or for lagging behind western post-war modern artistic developments (see Vilmar 2003: 1027; Elliott 1991: 25). The debate revolved around the question as to what extent GDR art was “ideologically contaminated and maybe also even aesthetically inferior” (Wiegand 2003).

In the years following Unification GDR art was predominantly evaluated in political terms. The question of whether an artist supported or resisted the SED regime became the central criterion in the evaluation process. Matthias Flügge (1998) observed: “[A]ccording to the new standards, only the art which is able to legitimize itself through criticism of the [SED] system has a right to exist” (24). The political evaluation of GDR art was often underpinned by an unreflective, assumed connection between state-commissioned art (“*Staatskunst*” or “*Auftragskunst*”) and “bad” art, on the one hand, and dissident and “avant-garde” art, on the other (Kelly and Wlodarski 2011: 7). In the early years of Unification state-commissioned works were almost exclusively treated as historical documents (“*zeitgeschichtliche Dokumente*”), not aesthetic entities. Academic research examined this work in the context of “state art policy and the collections of the parties and mass organisations” (Osmond 2011: 221). At the same time, the works were transferred from art museums to historical museums or abandoned to decay in storage rooms. A large amount fell victim to a “practice of non-conservation and a reluctance to spend state resources on preserving overwhelming amounts of material” (Jampol 2011: 260). Whilst the failure to preserve was in part the consequence of a lack of resources, it was also the result of a lack of expert art historical debates on the aesthetic value of GDR art and qualitative differences between works (Wagler 2011). GDR art was treated as a single undifferentiated body, whose historical-political function was to illustrate the ideology and control apparatus of GDR cultural politics (Goeschen 2009: 46).

Morally, the disqualification of aesthetic criteria in the post-1989 re-assessment of GDR art was spurred by the classification of the GDR as a “totalitarian” regime in the

mould of the Third Reich, by the parliamentary commission of inquiry “*Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland*” (“Working-Through the History and Consequences of the SED Dictatorship in Germany”), set up in 1994 (see Yoder 1999; Beattie 2008). Political comparisons of the GDR and Nazi Germany also reanimated the comparisons of GDR and Nazi art, popular during the Cold War.⁵⁹ The setting on a par of GDR art with Nazi art only came under public attack late in the process of Unification, towards the end of the 1990s. In particular the exhibition “*Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne*” (“Rise and Fall of Modernism”, 1999) in the city of Weimar, which crudely positioned Nazi and GDR art alongside each other as representing “the fall of modernism”, caused a scandal. Critical reviews accused the Weimar curators of repeating “a *scandalous relapse* into the Cold War era” and as expressing “the West German victor’s mentality” (in Wolbert 2001: 57, emphasis in original).

5.1.ii *The continuation of Cold War cultural politics*

From the perspective of the western German art world, the artistic situation prevalent in East Germany immediately after Unification was usually perceived as an anachronism. In the case of painting, the realist style of the East German works was held to lag behind western postwar modern artistic developments. In a defence of the artistic value of GDR painting, Fritz Vilmar described its dominant negative perception by West German critics and art historians as based on their view of it as an “art from yesterday”, which “in the shadow of Soviet socialist realism, remained on the ‘pre-modern’ aesthetic stage of realism” (Vilmar 2000: 1027). In the context of the embrace of abstraction in postwar West German art – an aesthetic choice favoured because it permitted the escape from a tainted German identity and because it was supported by the cultural dominance of the United States in the postwar FRG – “realism of any kind came to be considered culturally backward as it was anti-Modernist and tended to become associated with the art of the GDR” (Elliott 1991: 33).

The *Bilderstreit* showed that the West German Cold War evaluation of figurative-realist painting from the GDR, as aesthetically “pre-” or “anti-modern”, outlived the

⁵⁹ For such a comparison dating from the time of the Cold War, see Damus (1981).

political constellation that had given birth to it. As Andreas Huyssen suggests: “When museums and curators began to compare East and West German art after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification resulted in something like a last fling of Cold War cultural politics” (Huyssen 2010: 226). In the 1990s East German traditions of realist painting, rather than being valorised as an autonomous art historical development that existed independently of western art discourses, were considered by most West German commentators (and also many from the East) to require modernisation.

The common view was that the anachronistic situation of East German art after Unification would resolve itself once the East had “caught up” with artistic developments in the West. What is striking about this view is that it is premised on a singular concept of artistic modernism. As Elaine Kelly and Amy Wlodarski established in their recent volume on GDR art, in the 1990s GDR art was judged according to “aesthetic frameworks that preference[ed] western aesthetic as a universal norm”, with the effect that GDR art “automatically appear[ed] as a deviation” (Kelly and Wlodarski 2011: 1). Flügge (1998) suggested that this bias towards western concepts of artistic modernism “did not lie in western arrogance —as was often used as a defense in the East”, but in the cultural contingency of aesthetic judgements: “Criteria, such as internationalism, authenticity, quality, or innovation, are bound to the aesthetic systems in which they are developed” (23). Yet, even if the western German dismissal of GDR art as anti-modern was not primarily due to a sense of cultural superiority, it demonstrated the failure on the part of the West German art establishment to “develop a sense of equality” (Vilmar 2000: 1031) between the artistic cultures of the GDR and the pre-unification FRG. The West German art establishment failed to replace the singular concept of artistic modernism of the Cold War period with a plural concept of co-existing artistic modernisms.

5.1.iii Art academies: Spaces of preservation

Art academies in former East Germany were one of the few artistic spaces during the post-Unification years in which discrimination against the artistic heritage of the GDR was more limited. As part of the East German higher education system, art academies were spared some of the institutional restructurings, including the redesign of syllabi and replacement of faculty, imposed on other institutions under the “higher education

renewal laws” passed for the new Federal States in 1991 (see Ash 1997).⁶⁰ Together with the reform of the East German political system, the educational sector was one of the first to be restructured. In West Germany “[t]he prevailing image of higher education and science in the GDR was that of a system thoroughly dominated by ideological indoctrination” (Ash 1997: 85). In the years 1990 and 1991 institutions of higher education were subjected to a review by evaluation commissions that mostly consisted of West German members. Cultural officials responsible for the review of art academies appreciated some of the artistic traditions that had developed at these institutions during the GDR and counter to the overwhelming aesthetic disqualification of GDR art during the *Bilderstreit*, in many cases the decision was taken to leave parts of the educational structures set up during the GDR in place.

The next part of this chapter examines how elements of the artistic heritage of the GDR were preserved at the Leipzig Academy and in particular at the Academy’s Department of Painting/Graphics. It goes on to analyse how the artistic position of Eastern German distinctiveness of the “New Leipzig School” developed out of this politics of preservation.

5.2 The post-1989 Leipzig Academy

The Leipzig Academy, *Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst*, was one of the East German art academies permitted to preserve the majority of its older structures following the education reforms. A considerable number of the Academy’s East German faculty were allowed to remain in office, including the director Arno Rink (the only director of an East German higher education institution to keep his position after Unification).⁶¹ Further, whilst the subjects of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, Scientific Socialism, Political Economy, and Russian Language were removed from the syllabus, a large part of the course structure remained unchanged (Schulz 2006: 187). In an interview conducted for this thesis, Rink recalled the visit of the official evaluation commission in 1990. The members of the evaluation commission, especially its head, valued the Academy’s classical artistic training, which was focused on mastering the problems of figuration and craft techniques:

⁶⁰ On the education reforms passed in eastern Germany following Unification, see also Ash (2001).

⁶¹ Rink was director of the Leipzig Academy from 1987 to 1994.

“[W]e had an evaluation commission [visit the Academy], which was headed by the former Bavarian Minister of Education [...] And we got on very well. We talked about quality and tradition and so on, and he gave the recommendation – which wasn’t mandatory, but which had an influence – that the structure of the school should be maintained. Well, and he was a ‘*Westmann*’ [West German], the whole commission mainly included people from the old Federal States... yes, and the structure [of the Academy] was fundamentally affirmed.”⁶²

Viewed against the background of the *Bilderstreit*, the official support for the continuation of the East German artistic traditions at the Leipzig Academy was by no means foreseeable. As the Leipzig art historian Claus Baumann observed retrospectively, the classical artistic training the Academy offered seemed out of date when compared with trends in artistic education in the West:

“Was the emphasis on handcraft and figuration [...] still valid? Or did this development embody a hopeless anachronism, which was only the result of the world political situation and which would not have existed anymore under normal conditions? If one considered the ideological arguments West and East [...] exchanged on this issue, and if one also consulted the western art market, one could have sworn that [the] East German development hopelessly went into the wrong direction, and that only the path taken in the West led into the future” (Baumann 2001: 12).

Yet, the West German officials who reviewed the Leipzig Academy saw a contemporary relevance in the artistic education the school offered. This positive evaluation was one of the few instances in the western German re-assessment of GDR art, in which aesthetic criteria overruled political ones and in which parts of the GDR artistic heritage were considered as worthy of preservation for the unified Germany.

Examined historically, the West German aesthetic appreciation of the artistic traditions established at the Leipzig Academy was not a new phenomenon. Already prior to 1989 a notable West German curatorial and collector interest existed in the painting of the so-called “*Leipziger Schule*”, a group of painters who studied and taught at the Leipzig Academy between the 1960s and 80s. From the 1970s onwards these artists’ works were exhibited and sold in the FRG. What this development indicates, is that prior to 1989 painting from Leipzig was already recognised in West Germany as a cultural production that existed in relative independence from the SED

⁶² Interview conducted with Rink, 15 November 2009, Leipzig.

State and socialist ideology. The next section, which contains a brief historical excursion, discusses some of the art historical motives that underpinned this judgement.

5.2.i Inheritor of the German artistic tradition

Jonathan Osmond (2011) described the niche market that developed for art from the GDR, and above all the *Leipziger Schule*, in West Germany as overwhelmingly based on aesthetic tastes rather than political views. The painting of artists from the GDR “appealed because of the figurative subject matter and the painterly styles – expressionist in the case of Heisig and Sitte, old-masterly in the case of Tübke, and with touches of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and surrealism in the case of Mattheuer” (Osmond 2011: 220). Comparing these artistic positions with the situation in West Germany, it can be argued that the painting of East German artists appealed because it continued earlier German artistic traditions, which had largely been abandoned by artists working in the FRG.

Following the political division of Germany in 1949, the two Germanys also took divided artistic paths – “progressive abstraction” in the FRG, and “restorative realism” in the GDR. Like other discursive fields of the postwar years, the West German art discourse was dominated by the concept of “*Stunde Null*” (“zero hour”), which represented a collective desire to break with the German past. The Federal Republic sought not only its political, but also cultural legitimacy in the formulation of a new, post-national ethos. Abstract art offered an international artistic language that allowed German artists to escape from their own, tainted, cultural past (Barron 2009: 15). Whilst the late 1940s were still marked by a diverse landscape of artistic styles in the western occupied zone, 1950s West Germany was on the way to establishing a narrative of modern German art as inseparable from the paradigm of international abstraction (Hermand 1984). Emphasising the desperation with which German artists wanted to distance themselves from German artistic traditions, Hans Belting (1998) observed that Germany’s “cultural identity was supposed to become synonymous with [the international modern movement], regardless if it was to be found in Paris or New York, and not in Cologne or Berlin” (4).

Besides serving a collective will to forget, the embrace of abstraction in the art of the early Federal Republic was also intimately related to Cold War politics. The United States initiated a campaign to promote abstract art in the West German zone as part of the “de-Nazification” process, with a secondary aim of strengthening its cultural hold over central-western Europe by separating it ideologically from the bordering Soviet territory and its cultural politics of Socialist Realism.⁶³ At the same time the political and cultural differentiation from the “other” Germany also became a central concern of the FRG. Susanne Leeb (2009) employs the metaphor of “a double movement of delimitation” (19) to describe West Germany’s attempts to distance itself not only from the National Socialist past but also the totalitarian state and the artistic doctrine of the GDR.

In contrast to the FRG, the GDR sought political legitimation in presenting the socialist regime as the rightful historical successor (politically and culturally) to the so-called “better” German traditions of the pre-Nazi era (Grasskamp 1991: 21). As Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (2008) have shown, the construction of a socialist modernity in different areas of GDR social and cultural life “entailed the reconfiguration of older ideals or practices into [...] [14] ‘specific amalgams’ of old and new” (13-14). In particular, the authors point to how, in its concern to ground socialism in Germany’s national history, “the state invoked traditional and even patriotic vernacular German concepts” (Pence and Betts 2008: 14).

In the case of visual art, the cultural politics of the GDR prescribed a synthesis of Soviet Socialist Realism with older German artistic traditions. This combination of cultural elements was modelled on the Stalinist definition of Socialist Realism as proletarian in its content and national in its form. Following the nineteenth-century bourgeois concept of art that constituted the basis of Soviet art theory (see Groys 1992), in the early years of the GDR the national “*Kunsterbe*” (artistic heritage) was declared to be the German Renaissance (conceived around the figures of Albrecht

⁶³ The two travelling exhibitions *Jackson Pollock, 1912–1956* and *New American Painting* organised under the auspices of MoMA and shown in Europe between 1958 and 1959 were essential to this project. The Cold War political history of American “Abstract Expressionism” has received extensive scholarly attention since the 1970s. The seminal essays in this field were Max Kozloff, “American Painting during the Cold War” and Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War”, both reprinted in Frascina (2000). Later key references include Guilbaut (1983) and Stonor Saunders (1999).

Dürer and Lucas Cranach) and German classical realist art of the nineteenth century (above all Adolph Menzel, Ludwig Richter, Wilhelm Leibl, Hans Thoma and Anselm Feuerbach) (see Gillen 2005: 41-43). The Formalism Campaign (1948-1953), which was initiated with the rise in Cold War tensions, further consolidated the conceptualisation of the national artistic heritage around the classical humanist, bourgeois tradition (Gillen 2005: 51-54).⁶⁴ The intention of the campaign was not only to counteract the influence of contemporary artistic developments in western countries on artists working in the SBZ/GDR, but also to suppress the instinct of artists to return to the progressive artistic movements of the Weimar years, violently interrupted by the National Socialists, and to steer them along the line of Soviet Socialist Realism. Many artists in the early GDR, who had been forced to emigrate or were persecuted during National Socialism because of their leftist political sympathies and classification as “degenerate”, found it difficult to conform to the doctrine of Socialist Realism given its evident affinities with Nazi cultural politics. In order to assert the Soviet view in spite of these doubts, the Formalism campaign waged a severe attack on the progressive artistic movements of the Weimar period. Following the 1937-1938 “Expressionism Debate” in the Soviet Union, the campaign used the term “Expressionism” as a general synonym to condemn not only to the painting of the *Brücke* artists, but also *Neue Sachlichkeit*, critical realism, Dada and constructivism (Goeschen 2009: 47). It conflated these highly diverse artistic movements under the same charges; that they projected a critical-pessimist worldview and an expressive artistic subjectivity, which elevated the isolated concerns of the artist genius over the social needs of the common people.

In considering art in the GDR, it is difficult to keep cultural politics apart from actual artistic production. Yet, as Rüdiger Thomas (1996: 17) has emphasised, what needs to be examined is the relationship between the “*Weltbilder*” (world views) propagated by the SED and the “*Bildwelten*” (image worlds) of artists in the GDR.⁶⁵ From the

⁶⁴ See Saehrendt (2009: 154-55) on the paradox of the GDR’s self-portrayal as a progressive and modern society and its adoption of a cultural politics that was tightly controlled by traditional bourgeois concepts of art, which prioritised the classical media of painting and sculpture and set in place a system of art education that centred on an academic training in figurative-realist modes of representation and craft techniques.

⁶⁵ See also David Elliott (1991) who makes a distinction between art theory in the GDR, which was strongly influenced by the Stalinist rhetoric of the 1930s and 40s and actual artistic practices, which “have from, the mid-1950, consciously taken a separate path and have vigorously asserted their place within a continuing tradition of European art” (25).

start, the relationship between the GDR's art system was characterised by a battle between doctrinaire cultural policies and artists seeking to establish a certain degree of autonomy. The history of the SBZ/GDR, from the late 1940s to 1989, shows that, although state control of artistic production hardly decreased over time and one can also not speak of a liberalisation in cultural politics, the GDR progressively became a "dictatorship of consensus" in which artists were given the space to develop their practices in relative independence (see Kaiser and Rehberg 1999). After Stalin's death in 1953 and the subsequent uprising of 17 June, the official organs of the GDR's cultural politics were more inclined to give in to artists' demands for moderate reform. With the leadership change from Walter Ulbricht to Erich Honecker in 1971 and the introduction of a more open cultural politics under the slogan "*Weite und Vielfalt*" (Breadth and Diversity), the late GDR became characterised by a diversity of artistic styles which could only be accommodated within the concept of Socialist Realism in the very broadest sense. However, this change in cultural politics, rather than a move towards liberalisation by choice, was a response to already on-going challenges to the party's imposed "*Stilkonformismus*" (style conformism) regarding artistic practice, which could not be reverted or stopped without causing severe unrest.

An increasing diversity in artistic styles and an expansion of the conception of heritage started to become apparent in the early 1960s. By this time artists and art historians were making efforts to connect the classical realist heritage with a lineage of modern twentieth-century German realist art through a narrative that traced a "line of development from the nineteenth century, by way of the stages of bourgeois social-critical, realist art, anti-fascist art, and Socialist Realism since 1945, to the Socialist Realism of the present" (Goeschen 2001: 139). In this narrative the proletarian revolutionary art of the 1920s and early 30s, and in particular the figures Käthe Kollwitz, Ernst Barlach and later also Hans Grundig, came to occupy a prominent position (see Feist [1975] 2013: 109), illustrating the focus of the heritage debate on individual artistic figures rather than artistic movements. A further expansion of the recognised German left-wing avant-garde artistic heritage became evident by the mid-1970s, with exhibitions such as "*Realismus und Sachlichkeit: Aspekte deutscher Kunst 1919 – 1933*" (*Realism and Objectivity: Aspects of German Art*), 1974 and "*Die Collage in der Kunst der DDR*" (*Collage in the Art of the GDR*), 1975, both at

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Representatives from Berlin Dada and photomontage (John Heartfield, Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann), Verism (Otto Dix, Georg Grosz), *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and political constructivism (Cologne Progressives) were gradually established as legitimate predecessors to the critical realism of GDR art. Artists from the Dada movement, but also the earlier much despised historical Expressionism, were gradually appreciated for their collage and montage techniques,⁶⁶ in the case of the former, and, in the case of the latter, their modes of artistic expressivity and symbolism,⁶⁷ which were recognised as vital tools in the process of breaking up form and developing a critical perception of reality.

Crucially, much of the early impetus in the 1960s for challenging and overcoming artistic tendencies that conformed to the party line came from artists working at the Leipzig Academy, who were later unified under the label *Leipziger Schule*. Henry Schuman (1996: 510) suggests that it was the seventh regional Leipzig art exhibition, “7. *Leipziger Bezirksausstellung*” of 1965, which marked a turning point in the artistic culture of the GDR.⁶⁸ In particular the works by Bernhard Heisig (“*Pariser Kommune, III Fassung*”), Werner Tübke (“*Lebenserinnerungen des Dr. Jur. Schulze, III Fassung*”) and Wolfgang Mattheuer (“*Kain*”), demonstrated a new artistic variety which fundamentally broadened the imposed classical and Soviet concepts of “realism”. The artists introduced a new experimental attitude towards issues of subjective expression, abstraction, critical realism, metaphor and allegory, as well as religious and mythological motives.

In his landmark study *Malerei und Grafik in Ostdeutschland (Painting and Graphics in East Germany*, first published in 1978), Lothar Lang (2002: 133-144) distinguishes between two strands of figurative-realist painting within the *Leipziger Schule*: one expressive, sensual strand, led by Heisig, which bears strong echoes of historical Expressionism; and one “*sachlich*” (objective) strand, which encompasses the sober allegorical painting of Mattheuer that was inspired by the art of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and its engagement with the social conditions of the day, as well as the detailed,

⁶⁶ See März (1975 ; 1978).

⁶⁷ On the distinction that was established between “historical Expressionism” and “expressivity in art”, which was already recognised as a legitimate artistic form in the cultural debates of the 1960s, see Goeschen 2001: 93-116.

⁶⁸ Also Thomas (1996: 30-31) identifies this exhibition as a turning point in the art history of the GDR.

drawing-like painting of Tübke with its mannerist influences. These two strands were continued and further diversified by the second generation of artists who became associated with the group, and who were students of Heisig, Tübke and Mattheuer at the Leipzig Academy. Whereas artists like Hartwig Ebersbach, Sighard Gille and Gudrun Brüne followed the “New Expressionism” of Heisig, the artists Arno Rink, Volker Stelzmann, Ulrich Hachulla, Petra Flemming and others followed in the footsteps of the *sachlich* strand, adding surrealist and epical elements to it. Another tendency Lang distinguishes in the second-generation *sachlich* strand, are the neo-veristic urban landscapes of Kurt Dornis, Günter Thiele and Günter Richter. The paintings of urban housing, facades and streets, clearly continue the social realist tradition of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* but are also highly metaphorical representations of notions of birth and decay.

Apart from substantially contributing to the expansion of the conception of national artistic heritage, to include elements from progressive artistic movements of the Weimar years, the *Leipziger Schule* also came to stand for what Thomas (1996: 30-31) has called a paradigm change from the “socialist *Agitationsbild* [agitation painting]” to the “historical *Reflexionsbild* [reflexive painting]”. The artists’ historical paintings were variously summarised under the concept of “*Simultanbild*”, a mode of historical painting originally developed by Tübke that involved the simultaneous representation of different historical events arranged in a dialectical manner, and “*Problembild*”, which used allegory and mythological or religious metaphors to portray the social and historical contradictions of the GDR and to raise subtle criticisms of the living conditions in real existing socialism.⁶⁹ Whilst these paintings still caused much controversy in the 1960s and resulted in attempts to discipline the artists, they became widely accepted by the cultural functionaries in the 1970s. This increase in tolerance came with the realisation that the *Problembilder* served as a substitute for a critical public discourse that was increasingly being demanded by the citizens of the GDR, but which would have been difficult to control and contain.

⁶⁹ “*Simultanbild*” and “*Problembild*” can be translated as “painting of simultaneous images” and “painting of problems”. The East German art historian Peter Feist ([1975] 2013) further speaks of the “new kind of history painting” developed by artists in the GDR, as “epoch painting”, which he defines as “a painting in which the artist attempts to represent processes of historical development, the clash of societal forces and the resolution of societal contradictions in the context of their reciprocal interdependence. Thus it is an attempt to get away from the sort of classical history painting where historical events are represented in dramatic form” (108).

Further, in the face of the growing international political pressures on the East-Bloc countries to introduce social reforms (e.g. freedom of movement and press), official support of a moderately critical artistic culture was a way to signal the GDR's willingness to reform without actually amending its policies (see Gillen 2005: 43-44).

In a paradoxical situation of a simultaneous increase in artistic autonomy and the tightening of state control over cultural production (see Regberg 2003: 58) the moderately system-critical art of the *Leipziger Schule* became the GDR's principal cultural export product, above all to West Germany.⁷⁰ West German interest in the *Leipziger Schule* developed partly out of a growing interest in new forms of realist art, such as Critical Realism, Photorealism, and Pop Art from the 1960s onwards. Thus, Peter Sager, in his book *Neue Formen des Realismus: Kunst zwischen Illusion und Wirklichkeit* (*New Forms of Realism: Art between Illusion and Reality*) from 1973, positioned the *Leipziger Schule* in the context of these emerging artistic developments in the countries of the West.⁷¹ Further, in 1977 the international art exhibition *documenta 6* in Kassel, which had as its central theme the media society and realist tendencies in contemporary art, included the work of Heisig, Tübke, and Mattheuer.⁷² The inclusion of artists from the GDR caused a storm of protest. In particular Georg Baselitz, Gerhard Richter, and also Markus Lüpertz,⁷³ who had escaped the GDR and immigrated to West Germany, objected to this decision by withdrawing their own works from the exhibition.

Leaving the question of the political and ethical legitimacy of *documenta*'s curatorial choice aside, the presentation of the painting of the *Leipziger Schule* alongside that of

⁷⁰ Saeherendt (2009: 98-100) and Pätzke (1990) discuss how the government-run "*Staatlicher Kunsthandel der DDR*" sold the painting of the *Leipziger Schule* and other GDR art to West Germany and other western countries as a means of raising foreign revenue.

⁷¹ The interest in affinities between Socialist Realism and Pop art has also repeatedly been named in discussions of the West German art collector Peter Ludwig and his equal collecting of Pop art and the art of the GDR, specifically the *Leipziger Schule* (see, e.g., Rehberg 2003: 57). Ludwig was an ardent promoter of the painting of the GDR. In 1979 he organised the exhibition "*Kunst heute in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*" (*Art Today in the German Democratic Republic*), first shown at the Neue Galerie Aachen and later at the Wiener Kulturhaus (see Becker and Becker-Brock, 1979). Further, the Ludwig Institut für Kunst der DDR (Ludwig Institute for Art of the GDR) was founded in Oberhausen in 1983. Approximately half of the works in the collection are from Leipzig. For a critical account of Ludwig's support of the art of the GDR, see Grasskamp (1981).

⁷² Other artists from the GDR shown at *documenta 6* were the painter Willi Sitte and the sculptors Fritz Cremer and Jo Jastram.

⁷³ Whereas Baselitz left the GDR in 1958 and Richter in 1961, Lüpertz had fled the Soviet occupied territories as a child with his family in 1948 to settle in the Rhineland.

artists working in West Germany emphasised the dynamics of cultural transfer between East and West, shedding light on the artistic affinities between the two Germanys as opposed to the differences.⁷⁴ Ironically, the approximation of East and West German painting in the 1960s and 70s was significantly advanced by those artists who had left the GDR for West Germany and who vehemently protested the inclusion of the Leipzig painters in *documenta*.⁷⁵ Artists such as Georg Baselitz and Gerhard Richter, who had been trained in the figurative-realist academic painting style of the GDR, substantially shaped the West German avant-garde art scene with their explorations of the possibility and legitimacy of representational painting within the context of the self-reflexive abstract and conceptual artistic discourses and practices of the time.

A second significant reason as to why West German curators and collectors were interested in the painting of the *Leipziger Schule*, besides its resonances with a broader return to artistic realism, was the artists' engagement with the German cultural tradition. West German critics such as Eduard Beaucamp and Günter Grass praised the Leipzig paintings for pursuing a long overdue return to the German artistic heritage of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In contrast to the dominant mode of modern art in the FRG, the painting of the *Leipziger Schule* was positively (rather than negatively, through denial) anchored in earlier German artistic traditions. Emphasising this quality in his foreword to the catalogue for the exhibition "*Zeitvergleich: Malerei und Grafik aus der DDR*" (*Comparing Times: Painting and Graphics from the GDR*), at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1982 and which included mostly artists associated with the Leipzig Academy, Grass made the controversial statement that "*In der DDR wird deutscher gemalt*", in the GDR artists paint more German (Grass 1982: 12).

⁷⁴ Commenting on this approximation of East and West German painting in the 1970s, Klaus Herding (1991) observed: "Ever since the GDR introduced the 'expanded realism concept' in the 1970s and immediately enlarged it to include earlier art, there has been astonishingly large movement in the same direction" (13).

⁷⁵ The majority of the literature on the cultural transfer between East and West has focused on the influence of the western avant-gardes on artists working in the GDR. Recently the question of how artists from the GDR influenced the West German artistic field was explored at the Third Annual Conference of the "Arbeitskreis Kunst in der DDR", at the Philipps Universität Marburg: "*Emigranten aus der DDR und ihr Weg in die westdeutsche Kunstszene*" (*Emigrants from the GDR and their Passage into the West German Art Scene*), organised in cooperation with the Kunstfonds des Freistaates Sachsen, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and Residenzschloss Dresden, 28.-29. Oktober 2010. See Hofer (2012a).

Examined against the background of a longer history of West German interest in the *Leipziger Schule*, the post-1989 official approval of the majority of the syllabus and teaching structure of the Leipzig Academy can be understood as continuing this interest in the art of the “other” Germany. Nevertheless, as the next section discusses, the preservation of the artistic heritage of the GDR at the Leipzig Academy was not guaranteed by its official sanctioning in 1990. Over the course of the post-*Wende* decade students and faculty increasingly challenged this politics of preservation from within the Academy. The Department of Painting/Graphics, whose professors and students continued to adhere to most of the pre-1989 course structure, was an exception to this development and led to its increasing marginalisation within the Academy.

5.2.ii Between preservation & renewal

Following the official post-Unification approval of the majority of its educational structures and teaching methods, the Leipzig Academy developed an educational approach under the directorship of Arno Rink, which combined “preservation and renewal” (Rink in Blume 2003: 22). The sanctioning of the Academy’s structures gave Rink the freedom to initiate “changes, while at the same time allowing traditional teaching methods and a conservative classical training approach to prevail” (Gerlach 2008: 18).

Changes were introduced above all in response to the demands of students, who called for the adjustment of the local East German artistic traditions to western art discourses. In 1992 students at the Academy boycotted classes to express their disagreement with the continuation of the pre-1989 course structures. Sophie Gerlach (2008), in an essay on the post-Unification institutional restructuring of the Leipzig Academy, comments on how students “opposed the older methods and demanded that renewal, change and an orientation to more contemporary teaching methods and aims should be used [as] at Western German academies” (15). In response to students’ demands for innovation, educational reforms were introduced from 1993 onwards (Schulz 2006: 187-88). Twenty-eight new professors were appointed, eleven of whom came from West Germany and other parts of western Europe. New courses in

philosophy, media theory, and the history of photography were introduced, a Department of New Media Art was founded, and the existing Department of Photography was entirely restructured through the appointment of three new professors.

By 1993 the *Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst* comprised four departments: Painting/Graphics, Book Art/Graphic Design, Photography, and New Media Art. This list is reflective of how, over the course of the 1990s, the profile of the Academy was expanded, from an institution that provided training in the traditional arts-and-crafts of painting, graphic design, and book design, to an institution that was aspiring to also become a centre for new media art. It was the Department of Painting/Graphics, with Arno Rink as Head of Department (1987-2005), which stood out as the conservative pole of the Academy's new profile. Whereas Rink in his role as director of the Academy supported the introduction of changes in other departments, at the Department of Painting/Graphics (at which he himself studied in the 1960s) he followed a strict politics of preservation. The East German professors in office, Sighard Gille, Ulrich Hachulla, Rolf Münzer, and Dietrich Burger, who art historians have often described as part of the second and third generation of the *Leipziger Schule* (see Lang 2002: 136), kept their positions. Further, the syllabus of life drawing classes and nature studies was maintained for the foundation course in painting. Thus, even post-1989, the teaching at the Department was largely structured by artistic concepts and values, which had their origin in the artistic debates and practices of the GDR.

However, the politics of preservation of the Department of Painting/Graphics was not only imposed top-down by the faculty. As discussed above, in 1992 students had called for innovation in the teaching syllabus of the Academy. At the time most of the Academy's students were from East Germany. By 1993 this situation had changed, with almost one-third coming from West Germany (Gerlach 2008: 16). A considerable number of the latter had decided to study in Leipzig "specifically because it was well known for excellent training in craftsmanship and technical skills and had a strong commitment to traditional figurative painting" (15). As the preceding quotation indicates, in contrast to their East German colleagues, students who arrived from the West were interested in continuing the artistic heritage of the GDR,

especially the traditional mode of figurative painting taught at the Academy. Arno Rink recalls that it was with the arrival, and support of, the cohort from the West, that the politics of preservation became firmly established at the Department of Painting/Graphics:⁷⁶

“There were two to three years after the *Wende*, during which the students understandably wanted to paint abstractly, finally. There was a certain pressure, they always perceived it as forbidden during the GDR, which it wasn’t, one’s work just wasn’t exhibited [laughs]. And, ah, well it was this feeling that now ‘we can’. Well, not all of them, maybe three out of ten. And then there was a turning point with the arrival of those students from the old Federal States, Tim Eitel and [Christoph] Ruckhäberle, and who knows what they were all called.”⁷⁷

Over the course of the 1990s the politics of preservation pursued at the Department of Painting/Graphics by faculty and students led to the increasing marginalisation of the Department within the wider Academy (see Schulz 2006:188). Staff and students at the remainder of the Academy who were concerned with “catching up” with western contemporary art discourses, often dismissed the Department of Painting/Graphics as stuck in the GDR past. An artist interviewed for this thesis, who studied at the Department in the 1990s, remembers: “One day someone said, in your Department it looks like in the Workers and Farmers Academy [...] everything is so dowdy and mouldy and quirky.”

In particular, the conservative outlook of the Department contrasted sharply with the embrace of innovation at the Departments of Photography and Media Art and in the new art theory courses that were introduced in 1993. From the perspective of representatives of the latter, the teaching at the Department of Painting/Graphics was considered ridiculously anachronistic and disconnected from contemporary international art discourses. Emphasising the anachronism of the painting taught in Leipzig, Ricarda Roggan, a photography student, recalls: “Painting was the most boring department in the school, and everyone was making jokes about the painters, because they were so old-fashioned in the East German style” (in Lubow 2006).

⁷⁶ By the mid-1990s approximately half of the students registered at the Department were West Germans. Interview conducted with Rink, 15 November 2009, Leipzig.

⁷⁷ Interview conducted with Rink, 15 November 2009, Leipzig.

Other members of the Leipzig Academy who were interviewed for this thesis stressed the defensive attitude of the Department towards art discourses they identified as western and international. An Assistant on one of the art theory courses argued that teaching at the Department was deliberately ignorant of western postwar art history: “There were professors of painting who had never heard the name [Mark] Rothko. And if a student said I am referencing Rothko the response was to quickly forget about such things.” Instead, this interviewee claimed, the Department cultivated a bourgeois artistic culture that stemmed from the nineteenth century and which had been propagated by the cultural politics of the GDR: “It was a very classical stance, to withdraw into a studio-community, nineteenth century, a very romantic image of the artist, a retarded image of the artist, where the other students said, ‘good God, we’re living at the beginning of the twenty first century, what’s going on!’”. Echoing this sceptical view of the painters’ conservative artistic approach, another interviewee, who had been a student (and later Assistant) at the Department of Painting/Graphics but who broke with its figurative-representational painting style, portrayed its artistic position as a reaction to western post-modern art theory and its grounding in notions of relativity, appropriation and irony: “[This was] a very aggressive reaction to the postmodern, ah, theory-talk, I mean, it really is a very clear position: back to painting *as* painting, painted by the painter.” In the eyes of their critics from within the Academy, students at the Department of Painting/Graphics were perceived as cultivating their outsider status. They isolated themselves from contemporary art theoretical discourses at the Academy, and claimed to occupy a courageous avant-garde position, which resisted the mainstream and defied the devaluation of the local East German artistic traditions (see Schulz 2006: 189; Janecke and Koch 2005).

As the interviews conducted for this thesis and other published statements demonstrate, the criticisms of the politics of preservation followed at the Department of Painting/Graphics were locked in a set of discursive binaries that revolved around the distinction East *versus* West. Through this rhetoric the artistic practices at the Department were summarised as figurative-realist painting with an emphasis on craft techniques which was highly traditional and regional in outlook. This artistic position was set up in opposition to contemporary international art discourses that were based on a more conceptual and immaterial approach to artistic production.

The final part of this chapter examines how faculty and students at the Department of Painting/Graphics, rather than resisting this portrayal of their art as provincial and outmoded, tended to further emphasise the regional and traditional aspects of their work in their self-presentation. Their language and discourse was trapped in the same binary partitions as that of their critics, however, with the difference that they transformed the “eastern half” of these binaries into positive values from which they formulated a collective artistic identity of “East German distinctiveness”. This artistic image was further consolidated by the efforts of local curators and art historians who supported the artists. By turning to literature from the field of sociology, which has analysed the phenomenon of a rise in a distinctive East German cultural identity since Reunification more broadly, the final part of this chapter will examine some of the social and political implications of the artistic position of the Leipzig painters.

5.3 Formulating a regional East German artistic identity

Whereas in the international art market the “New Leipzig School” was often perceived as a part of the “New German Painting”, in the German discourse it was usually treated as an independent regional artistic genre. In particular, local advocates of the artists in Leipzig, and the artists themselves, defined the painting as separate from the broader national artistic phenomenon. In 2006 the local newspaper *Leipziger Volkszeitung* celebrated the label “New Leipzig School” as proving the strength of the Leipzig artists in the national and international competition:

“Doubts about whether the concept of the New Leipzig School would assert itself were still permitted a good year ago. The Leipziger could have been absorbed into the Young German Art(ists) or the ‘new representational painting’, but evidently they were strong enough for their own label” (in Modes 2007: 62).

In public interviews Neo Rauch usually defined his artistic identity in regional, East German terms rather than national ones. Asked about his German artistic identity by the newspaper *Tagesspiegel*, Rauch characteristically responded that he considered himself “a middle-east-German [painter]” (in Kuhn 2006), a geographical description that refers to the East German federal state of Saxony.

The image of the “New Leipzig School” as a regional, East German artistic phenomenon was also cemented by local curatorial efforts. In 2003 the exhibition

“*sieben mal malerei: Baumgärtel, Busch, Eitel, Kobe, Ruckhäberle, Weischer*” (“seven times painting”) at the Neue Leipziger Kunstverein and Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig (Filipp and Schmidt 2003), worked towards this end. The exhibition took place in the same year that the survey show “*deutschemalereiweitausendundrei*” (*german painting two thousand and three*) at the Frankfurter Kunstverein provided an overview of the artistic phenomenon, which had been summarised as “New German Painting” in the international art market – a survey that, however, largely excluded painting from Leipzig.⁷⁸ Yet, whilst *sieben mal malerei* was relevant as an East German response to the Frankfurt show, its contribution to the local promotion of the “New Leipzig School” as a regional artistic genre, lay more in its presentation of the artists as the post-Unification successors to the old *Leipziger Schule* of the GDR. A review of the exhibition in the Berlin newspaper *Die Tageszeitung* critically observed the exhibition’s attempt to create a genealogy between the old and new Leipzig schools of painting (Werneburg 2003). At the Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig the younger artists were shown next to their teachers, the second and third generation members of the GDR *Leipziger Schule* (Arno Rink, Sighard Gille, Wolfram Ebersbach and Neo Rauch), who were represented in the parallel exhibition – “*In aller Freundschaft*” (“In all Friendship”).⁷⁹ Notably, by failing to include any female artists, *sieben mal malerei* also continued the masculine image of the *Leipziger Schule*, which was representative of the male chauvinism of much of GDR cultural politics.

The Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig, under the directorship of Hans-Werner Schmidt, played a central role in the presentation of the “New Leipzig School” as the post-*Wende* heir to the *Leipziger Schule*. It was one of the first public institutions to acquire works by representatives of the “New Leipzig School” (Jocks 2005a), and to position them within its larger collection, which also contains a substantial body of work by the *Leipziger Schule*. The museum portrays the oeuvres and biographies of both generations of artists as intimately linked with the city of Leipzig and the Leipzig Academy.

⁷⁸ The only artist associated with the “New Leipzig School” represented in the exhibition was Tim Eitel.

⁷⁹ Neo Rauch is often considered the linking figure between the “old” and “new” Leipzig schools.

However, Schmidt's attempt to create an artistic genealogy, leading from the old to the new Leipzig school, was most evident in the exhibition *Made in Leipzig* (Schmidt 2006), which he co-curated with the Austrian art collector Karlheinz Essl. The exhibition, which was comprised of work from Essl's collection, was shown in Leipzig and Vienna and provided an overview of artists educated at the Leipzig Academy, beginning with the *Leipziger Schule* and ending with the "New Leipzig School". By emphasising shared stylistic and thematic concerns of the two "Schools", the catalogue for the exhibition constructs a line of continuity between paintings that emerged from the Leipzig Academy across the historical divide of 1989/90.⁸⁰

Notably, references to the artists' shared stylistic concerns, which are explained as grounded in the figurative-classical and craft-based painterly traditions of the Leipzig Academy, are heavily emphasised in these comparisons. Although both generations are portrayed as concerned with social existential subjects, which they address through the use of the allegorical, the catalogue acknowledges substantial differences between the overt social, political, and historical "messages" of the painting of the *Leipziger Schule*, and the "mood" painting of the younger artists, which portray personal stories with multiple entry points, rather than aspiring to the representation of objective historical forces (Schmidt 2006: 30). Instead, it is the concept of painting as craft which is presented as the underlying element that unifies the artists' works. Schmidt (2006) positions this craft-based artistic approach in opposition to, what he describes as, "self-referential art discourses that tread ephemeral and interactive paths" (31), indicating a more conceptual artistic work that prioritises discourse over material execution.⁸¹ Although Schmidt (2006) does not explicitly refer to the distinction he draws between the craft-based approach of the two Leipzig schools and more conceptual artistic approaches as one between eastern and western German art, this differentiation is implicit in his account. As the next section discusses, the aesthetic differentiation of painting from Leipzig from contemporary western art practices was essential to the formulation of a regional, East German artistic identity for the work coming out of the Department of Painting/Graphics since the 1990s.

⁸⁰ Whilst the perspective of the exhibition was broad and included more abstract painting and photographic work, its emphasis was on the figurative-representational painting characteristic of the old and new Leipzig schools.

⁸¹ For a twentieth-century history of the different concepts of artistic skill as craft and as conceptual competence, see Roberts (2007).

Above all, this aesthetic difference was established through the distinction formulated by Schmidt, the craft-based *versus* the conceptual artistic approach.

5.3.i *East German craft vs. western conceptual approaches*

In a historical study of painting at the Leipzig Academy, the Leipzig art historian Claus Baumann (2001) traces the concept of painting as “*Handkunstwerk*”⁸² back to the *Leipziger Schule*, which he contrasts with western German postwar traditions of conceptual art:

“Whilst this [western German] development [of conceptual art] culminated in the incarnation of the idea with Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf at the beginning of the 70s, its antipode, the incarnation of *Handwerk*, experienced its climax in Leipzig with Werner Tübke’s paintings. And Tübke was only the tip of the iceberg that had been developing in Leipzig” (Baumann 2001: 11).

Such opposition between an East German craft-based approach and a West German conceptual artistic approach also structured much of the discursive self-presentation of representatives of the “New Leipzig School”. For example, Christoph Ruckhäberle (who is originally from Bavaria and studied painting at the Leipzig Academy between 1995 and 2000), refers to this opposition to distinguish the artistic training at the Painting/Graphics Department from that at western German art schools: “The difference between Leipzig and the other schools in Germany is that here there is more discussion about how to build the painting and less about what and why” (cited in Lubow 2006). Also Matthias Weischer (who studied painting at the Leipzig Academy between 1995 and 2003), underscores the importance of painterly technique and craft over conceptual approaches in the teaching at the Department: “It wasn’t so important what to draw, it was just important to draw and paint - just to keep on working without having any concrete subject or big vision” (in Lubow 2006).

In elaborations on the distinctive practice of painting as craft at the Leipzig Department of Painting/Graphics, representatives of the “New Leipzig School” often further singled out the disciplinary work ethic that prevailed at the Department, which

⁸² The nearest English equivalent to the term “*Handwerk*” is craft. As Stefan Muthesius (1999) explains in his analysis of the concept: “Like craft, *Handwerk* can be seen in opposition to the products of ‘industry’, i.e. it is perceived to possess values which are different from, and better than those of industry” (85). Muthesius defines “*Handkunstwerk*” as “the equivalent of [the British] Arts and Crafts movement, and [...] today’s studio crafts” (86).

they contrasted with a perceived western bohemian culture. An artist labelled “New Leipzig School”, interviewed for this thesis, described the work ethic at the Department in the 1990s as follows:

“[I]n the case of the people who now fall under this label ‘New Leipzig School’, well there it was the case, that every day from ... I don’t know, from nine in the morning till ten in the evening, all the time in the studio. And, well sometimes things certainly got painstaking, endless portrait drawing, life drawing ...”

The artist proceeded to contrast this disciplinary work ethic with a more disorderly working attitude, which he experienced as predominant at West German art academies: “I [had] the feeling that...so I come from Cologne originally...that things were different at other art schools [in the West] [...] disorientation seemed to dominate there.” Similarly, Tim Eitel, another of the core artists associated with the “New Leipzig School” draws a comparison with the art academy in Düsseldorf to establish two oppositional artistic habituses, a disciplinary and a bohemian one: “Being an artist is much more important in Düsseldorf than the art itself [...] The old clichés of painting at night with a bottle of wine, taking drugs and being excessive - a lot of people in Düsseldorf think this is what it means to be an artist” (cited in Lubow 2006). Another interviewee, a Berlin-based gallerist who represents a number of artists associated with the label “New Leipzig School”, explained that comparisons of the Düsseldorf and Leipzig academies have become a common means to illustrate two opposite ends of the spectrum of modern forms of artistic practice:

“Of course the most popular comparison [is] Düsseldorf, because there it’s just total freedom and drawing classes are not even compulsory! [laughs] So on one side it is artistically very free, everyone is an artist and so on... and on the other side it’s not free at all, but very structured, and there are clearly stated responsibilities.”

Like their critics from within the Academy the representatives of the “New Leipzig School” defined their artistic position by relying on binary opposites that revolved around the distinction East *versus* West. Eastern tradition was opposed to western innovation, figuration to abstraction, craft to concept, and discipline to bohemia. Whereas for the critics of the artists the left side of these binaries represented a regressive and often reactionary artistic position that had no contemporary relevance, the artists and their promoters reversed this evaluation by establishing it as a marginal

and avant-garde position. The question that arises with regard to this reversal is whether it constituted a first step towards the integration of parts of the artistic heritage of the GDR into the artistic culture of the unified Germany, and consequently its establishment as equal to the artistic heritage of the FRG. Or, did the emphasis on an artistic identity that was distinctively East German further segregate GDR art from the larger German art discourse? The next section explores this question.

5.3.ii From defiant marginalisation to differentiation

In her work on the imaginative aspects of cultural production, Georgina Born (1993) has argued that artistic strategies of institutional, discursive, and aesthetic self-positioning have not only an artistic, but also a sociological and political meaning: they formulate and project social-cultural identities and communities. Born proposes that there are “two fundamental, potential forms of imagining at play” in strategies of artistic self-positioning. One set of strategies constructs “alterity, difference, marginality, the small scale, the ‘local’, the ‘independent’, the ‘avant garde’”, and another projects “submersion into the dominant collectivity, which constructs the mainstream, the ‘global’, the communal and consensual” (236). For Born, these strategies represent two ends of a continuum.

The regional, eastern German artistic identity that was formulated at the Leipzig Department of Painting/Graphics over the course of the 1990s, clearly sits at the former end of this continuum. The above analysis of the discursive differentiation of Leipzig painting from the broader western (German) field of contemporary art, confirms Born’s observation, that the “strategy of alterity enjoys the sense of constituting difference, of defining the (collective) self against others, the small and hard-to-find as opposed to the widely available” (Born 1993: 236). However, pointing to the social and political significance of such artistic strategies of differentiation, Born suggests that, whilst they can proceed “without any necessary antagonism”, they also have a “darker side: defensive phantasies of fragmentation, of the destruction of ‘unity’, and the splitting involved in denigrating the ordinary and dominant while self-idealizing the different” (ibid.). In what follows it will be shown that the social-cultural identity and community that was projected by the artistic position of eastern distinctiveness, which developed at the Leipzig Department of Painting/Graphics,

moved between the simple differentiation and preservation of the local East German artistic traditions, and it's deliberate positioning in an antagonistic relationship with a perceived dominant West German artistic culture since Unification. A distinction is made between the discourse of eastern distinctiveness that developed amongst the students and the faculty at the Department.

The artistic position of eastern distinctiveness that was formulated at the Department of Painting/Graphics had its beginnings in the decision of its Head, Arno Rink, to maintain its teaching staff and structure dating from the period before 1989. Despite the radical changes that had taken place in the cultural-political conditions of artistic production since the fall of the Berlin Wall, faculty at the Department intended to preserve the particular artistic culture that had developed there since the late 1960s with the emergence of the *Leipziger Schule*. For Jochen Gerz, who was the only West German appointed professor for painting at the Department in 1994, this situation led him to leave the Department after only one year. His explanation was that “the differences between East and West are still too crass amongst the faculty” (in Schulz 2006: 187).

In an essay that examines the transition years following 1989 at the Leipzig Academy, Tina Schulz (2006: 188) suggests that the attitude of preservation on the part of the faculty was an attempt to sustain their artistic integrity at a time when this was being strongly challenged. For artists working in the GDR, who had no choice but to formulate their artistic positions in conjunction (not necessarily conformity) with the socialist regime and its cultural politics, the overnight collapse of this regime also meant that the cultural-political framework which had determined the meaning of their art, as political affirmation, critique or a deliberately a-political artistic position, had irreversibly vanished. Addressing the system change of 1989/90 and its effect on his artistic practice and self-perception, Rink, in the interview conducted for this thesis, observed: “[I]f you live under a system for 40 years, no matter what this system looks like, it shapes you. Well, so I ... and also Tübke, Mattheuer and all the others, we made our art in this system, and well ... because there was no total freedom, there was always an area of friction with the [political] power, what is

allowed, what not, where do I overstep the border of what is still tolerated”.⁸³ Yet, Rink emphasises, more than the system change, what brought about the artistic crisis he went through during the 1990s, was that the legitimacy and value of his art were called into question: “maybe the worst thing was, ahm, the questioning of my artistic abilities [...] So after the *Wende* the question was, ah, what about me and my art had been determined by the GDR, and what did really belong to me?” In an analysis of how the *Wende* affected the art of Neo Rauch, April A. Eisman (2012) has shown that even for a younger artist such as Rauch who completed his studies at the Leipzig Academy in the 1980s and who belonged to a generation usually perceived as welcoming the fall of the Berlin Wall as a positive experience that brought greater artistic freedom the system change “meant having to start over and create a new voice and identity for himself in an environment that denigrated much of what he had previously learned about art” (236).

Post 1989, artists in the former GDR were confronted with an art discourse in the new Germany which questioned both the legitimacy of their artistic experiences and their professional qualifications gained in the GDR. Compared with other artistic fields, such as literature, theatre and music, in the field of visual art it was not only the proximity of artists and works to the SED regime that was debated, but, as shown in the above analysis of the *Bilderstreit*, the very status of these works as “art” was called into question.⁸⁴ For those professors teaching at the Department of Painting/Graphics of the Leipzig Academy, who were part of the second generation of the late GDR’s most esteemed group of artists, the *Leipziger Schule*, this development was a particular blow. Although they had managed to keep their positions at the Academy, they had lost the cultural status they held in the GDR. By the early 1990s the prestigious reputation the Department had enjoyed during the GDR, as home to

⁸³ Interview conducted with Rink, 15 November 2009, Leipzig.

⁸⁴ For a comparative analysis of how the different parts of the artistic heritage of the GDR were dealt with after Unification, see Kelly and Wlodarski (2011). One explanation for the intense critique of GDR visual art was that, even before 1989, the cultural exchange between visual artists in eastern and western Germany was far less than in other fields of artistic production, such as literature. As Huyssen observes: “The degree of separation of East from West German literature has never been as thorough as that in the visual arts. East German authors could be published in West Germany and vice versa; in the visual arts there was no such direct contact and exchange. West German art was like a black box in the East. The West German art scene, for its part, simply ignored developments in the East, and museums, galleries, collectors and the media, with few exceptions, shunned East German art” (Huyssen 2010: 227). This situation of non-communication also accounts for the divergent artistic development in East and West German visual art from the 1960s onwards, with the former under the influence of the cultural politics of Soviet Russia and the latter under the influence of the USA.

the “*Malerfürsten*” (“Painter Princes”) of the *Leipziger Schule*,⁸⁵ had given way to an image of out-datedness. Artists such as Rink, who were previously recognised as artists in their own right, were reduced to the position of simply teachers. The sentiments of disappointment and bitterness many of the artists who had been part of the *Leipziger Schule* felt about this development surfaced in an interview with Rink from 2005. Fifteen years after Reunification Rink still expressed resentment about his loss in cultural status:

“[O]ne is primarily perceived as a teacher and not as a painter, the reason for this is probably a political one, which is related to the *Wende* period. Just the other day I read that GDR art is still excluded from West German museums. This is a scandal. Reading this I ask myself why we were incorporated [into the FRG], if we are at the same time ghettoised” (Rink in Jocks 2005b).

Yet, in the case of the faculty teaching at the Leipzig Department of Painting/Graphics, the “ghettoization” Rink refers to was partly self-inflicted. The faculty’s response to the devaluation of the East German artistic heritage in the new Germany was to aggressively reaffirm their “eastern difference” by positioning it in an antagonistic relationship with a perceived dominant West German artistic culture. The key organs of this anti-western rhetoric were the two most public figures from amongst the faculty: Rink and Rauch. In public statements both regularly reanimated Cold War notions of East and West German artistic cultures as irreconcilable, whilst, at the same time, elevating the former over the latter. For example, Rink is cited in *The New York Times*, as suggesting that East German artists, shielded from western German art discourses (in the below quote personified in the figure of Joseph Beuys) by the Iron Curtain, were protected from “pollution” and able to continue the traditions of classical modernism:

“The disadvantages of the wall are well known [...] If you want to talk of an advantage, you can say it allowed us to continue in the tradition of [Lucas] Cranach and [Max] Beckmann. It protected the art against the influence of Joseph Beuys” (in Lubow 2006).

Rauch, who became Rink’s assistant at the Department of Painting/Graphics in 1993 and succeeded him as Head of Department in 2005, drew a similar picture of the artistic culture in Leipzig as a local specimen at risk of western colonisation after the disappearance of the Wall: “The danger that an academy with entirely new ideational

⁸⁵ See Kaiser (2007)

and cultural principles would be established was extremely high [...] If one had carried out a full *Rheinlandisierung*⁸⁶ the Academy would be an *Allerweltsinstitution* [ordinary institution]” (in Kuhn 2006). Continuing Rink’s approach, Rauch presented Leipzig as an enclave of authentic artistic values surrounded by a threatening western artistic culture.

Returning to Born’s analysis of the social-political significance of strategies of artistic positioning, the artistic identity and community of “eastern difference” that was projected by Rink and Rauch was clearly underpinned by a defensive attitude that denigrated the dominant and mainstream whilst self-idealising the different. This position resonates strongly with the analysis of *Ostalgie* as a defiant cultural identity, or “*Trotzidentität*” (defiant identity), in the sociological literature (see Hogwood 2000). Concerned with questions of post-1989 German nation building and national identity, political sociologists have grappled with the paradoxical phenomenon that, since the collapse of the real existing GDR, there has been a growth in a distinct sense of East Germanness. Considering that attempts by the SED regime to create “a socialist national consciousness” had largely failed (McKay 2001: 25; see also Jarausch and Seeba, et al. 1997: 41-44), the emergence of sentiments of eastern German distinctiveness post-factum came as a surprise. Whilst the literature tend to agree that the emergent East German identity does not amount to separatist forces that are a threat to national unity, it has been analysed as signalling deep-seated sentiments of inferiority, instilled by the political, economic, and cultural devaluation of the GDR in the 1990s. Unification, rather than a coming together of equals, had proceeded according to a “transfer paradigm” (Lehmbruch 1993) in which the FRG’s social-political system was imposed on East Germany (see also Mayer 2006). By 1995, critical commentators spoke of the “colonisation” of the East by the West, to articulate the asymmetrical power-relations of the process of German unification (Dümcke and Vilmar 1995; Cooke 2005). This loss of sovereignty on the political level was paralleled by the public construction of East Germans as “second-class citizens” whose professional and social experiences were inferior to those of westerners (see Ross 2002). In the western media the “*Ossi*” stereotype, who was undemocratically minded, inefficient and under-individualised – a personality

⁸⁶ The term refers to the artistic culture of the Rhineland cities Cologne and Düsseldorf, which were the centres of contemporary art in the FRG during the time of German division.

structure that was said to reflect the totalitarian architecture of the SED regime (Pollack 1999: 92) – became the dominant image of East Germans. Seen against this backdrop, the emergent East German cultural identity has been understood as an “anti-West” identity, motivated by perceived treatment through by western Germans (Zelle 1997: 13). For Detlef Pollock (1999), it is the product of a desire to be recognised as equal: people “will distance themselves from those who exclude them, and they will try to denigrate those who denigrate them” (97).

The anti-western rhetoric that structured the discourse of East German artistic distinctiveness of the faculty at the Department of Painting/Graphics, illustrates precisely this double dynamic of a desire to be recognised as equal and a simultaneous distancing from those who appear to block the passage to equality. Whilst resenting the discrimination and marginalisation they experienced in the artistic field of the new Germany, faculty at the Department further augmented their marginal position by re-emphasising the eastern distinctiveness of their art via a strategy of antagonistic differentiation. However, when politically assessing the anti-western rhetoric of the faculty, it is important to consider the precarious artistic and professional position in which the faculty found itself following the *Wende*. In a moment of empathy the Assistant on one of the art theory courses at the Leipzig Academy interviewed, suggests that the faculty’s politics of preservation was not so much artistically motivated, but driven by their fear for their own professional survival:

“[I]f Arno Rink had gone outside and looked for a discourse about his work with national and international colleagues, he would have encountered little confirmation. [...] [A]s an artist one was extremely fragile in this historical situation after the *Wende*. [...] [I]t is not surprising that [the faculty] withdrew into their professorships, continued their sensual *peinture* [...] [and] well, let the business continue as before.”

Rink himself affirms this interpretation. In the interview conducted he argues that, after the *Wende*, faculty at the Department had no choice but to press for the continuation of an education that was centred on a figurative-realist style, if they did not want to lose their positions as professors in addition to their cultural status as highly esteemed artists. Any attempt to compete with their colleagues from the West

for positions in a Department that was reformed according to the standards of international contemporary art discourses would have been futile:

“We didn’t have this, let’s say, this line of tradition: American modernism, western modernism, German modernism, yes, so the abstract etc. we had.... well, one realises at some point that one stands more in the tradition of Grünewald, Dürer, Kollwitz, Beckman and so on, and this has its consequences.”⁸⁷

Following the *Wende* the consequences that their artistic heritage would have for their future career and financial subsistence were all too well known to the East German professors at the Department.

Compared with the social-political and economic motives of their teachers, the reasons why students at the Department of Painting/Graphics chose to support a politics of preservation were very different ones. They mainly had an interest in the local East German traditions of figurative-realist painting for aesthetic reasons. As discussed above, many had come to Leipzig from the old Federal States especially to be trained in this style. Their approach to the artistic heritage of the GDR and its devaluation after the *Wende* was thus an entirely different one from that of the faculty. Rather than infusing them with sentiments of resentment and disillusionment, this development seems to have engendered an attitude of curiosity and fascination with the local East German artistic traditions they encountered at the Department. Over the course of the 1990s they collectively formulated an artistic position that aimed to answer to the very artistic traditions that they were being trained in. Although, they operated with the same East/West distinctions as the faculty in their public self-presentation, these distinctions usually lacked the aggressive and defensive anti-western rhetoric characteristic of the latter. Instead students fell back on the East/West distinctions as a means to position their work in the artistic field of the new Germany, and any defensive attitude in their discourse of eastern difference, was mainly directed at internal Academy conflicts between Departments.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined the social-political relevance of the preservation of a traditional figurative style of painting, passed down from the GDR, at the post-*Wende*

⁸⁷ Interview conducted with Rink, 15 November 2009, Leipzig.

Department of Painting/Graphics of the Leipzig Academy. It was shown how, positioned against the historical background of the *Bilderstreit*, the Department's politics of preservation gained significance as a contestation of the marginalisation of GDR art since Unification. However, the artistic identity of eastern German distinctiveness, which was formulated by the staff and students at the Department, not only worked towards the differentiation and artistic re-valorisation of East German artistic traditions, but also towards their further marginalisation within the post-Unification German art discourse. In particular, East German professors at the Department of Painting/Graphics, who kept their positions following the *Wende*, formulated a defiant and anti-western rhetoric, which was stimulated by sentiments of resentment about their degradation in cultural status from a national artistic elite during the GDR, to simply teachers in the unified Germany. The chapter argued that this aggressive insistence on the distinctiveness and superiority of the East German artistic tradition by the faculty resonated strongly with definitions of *Ostalgie* as a defiant cultural identity by scholars from political sociology.

Returning to Chapter 3, where the concept of *Ostalgie* as counter-memory that protested the asymmetric relationship between the former East and West in post-Unification national memory politics was discussed, it can be argued that *Ostalgie* as a defiant cultural identity constitutes the negative variant of such counter-memories. Rather than working towards an equal relationship in the post-Unification discourse on German cultural identity and memory, the defiant insistence on the difference of the GDR past often resulted in its further marginalisation from the wider German collective identity and memory.

Whilst this chapter focused on the artistic identity of eastern German distinctiveness as formulated by faculty at the Leipzig Department of Painting/Graphics, the next chapter elaborates on the art practices of students at the Department. It is argued that the representatives of the "New Leipzig School", in contrast to their teachers, developed an artistic position which positioned the artistic heritage of the GDR inside, rather than outside of the broader German and international field of contemporary art.

Chapter 6 The New Leipzig “Retro-Garde”

During the early 2000s a paradigm shift occurred in the post-Unification debate on GDR art – from a political to an aesthetic and art historical one. Following the *Bilderstreit*, the early 2000s witnessed the moderate integration of GDR art into national art collections, as well as the emergence of an art historical discourse concerned with the artistic relevance and quality of the works. These changes were both a cause and a symptom of the introduction of a plural concept of artistic modernism into the debate, which no longer permitted the outright aesthetic disqualification of the art of the “other” Germany as pre- or anti-modern. The intention of this chapter is to show how the artists of the “New Leipzig School”, through their continuation of the local, East German traditions of painting they encountered at the Leipzig Academy, contributed to this revalorisation of the artistic heritage of the GDR. Today, two decades after Unification, in particular, the inclusion of a considerable number of these artists’ works in national and international museum collections points towards their involvement in this process. Commenting on these developments, the social and cultural historian of the GDR, Jonathan Osmond (2011) has observed that the museal consecration of the younger East-German trained artists demonstrates “that the legacy of the GDR is fully a part of the serious visual culture of united Germany today” (231).

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the paradigm shift in the post-Unification debate on GDR art. Following this, the analysis turns to examine in what ways the artistic practices of representatives of the “New Leipzig School” potentially contributed to this shift. Building on the analysis of the artistic discourse at the post-*Wende* Leipzig Department of Painting/Graphics in the previous chapter, it is argued that the artistic position formulated by students at the Department differed fundamentally from that of their teachers. Whereas the East German faculty tried to protect the artistic heritage of the GDR from change and the influence of a perceived dominant West German artistic culture, their students sought and explored new ways and directions into which to take the figurative tradition of painting they encountered at the Department. In this endeavour they simultaneously answered to the local East

German artistic heritage of the *Leipziger Schule*, as well as to contemporary practices and debates beyond Leipzig concerning the status of painting and figuration.

To examine in more detail how the artists manoeuvred their way between “eastern” and “western” art discourses and practices, tradition and innovation, and modern and postmodern artistic approaches, the chapter turns to analyse the paintings of six representatives of the “New Leipzig School”, Neo Rauch and five artists from the younger post-1989 generation. It is explored how the artists’ paintings, whilst they address culturally and geographically specific concerns relating to the artistic heritage and cultural memory of the GDR, also combine and compress these with new perspectives on contemporary artistic issues of intermediality, cultural hybridity, the passage between the real and imaginary, and post-modern strategies of citation and irony. By the early 2000s, when a more general interest in, and re-assessment of figuration and painting in Germany and internationally was becoming apparent, the Leipzig works attracted particular attention. It is argued that what made the works stand out in this broader context was precisely the dual relationship they entertained, on the one hand, with the artistic heritage of the GDR, and, on the other, with contemporary artistic debates and practices, merging these in a highly idiosyncratic and productive manner. The chapter concludes by raising the question of the political significance of the artist’s continuation of the artistic heritage of the GDR in the post-*Wende* German context.

6.1 The moderate integration of GDR art

At the beginning of the new century the earlier segregation of GDR art from the German national artistic canon in the first decade following Unification was gradually giving way to practices of moderate integration. As suggested below it was, above all, the passing of time which permitted this re-assessment. Writing in 2005 on changes in the way in which GDR art was approached, Karl-Siegbert Rehberg observed: “an aggressive desire for segregation is increasingly [giving way] to a factually led interest” (Rehberg 2005a). After the scandalous exhibition “*Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne*” (*Rise and Fall of Modernity*) (Bothe and Föhl 1999) in the city of Weimar, which equated GDR art with Nazi art, exhibitions of GDR art took a more differentiated approach. Exemplary were the shows “*Kunst in der DDR*” (*Art in the*

GDR) at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin in 2003 (Blume and März 2003), and *Art of the Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures* of 2009, first shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA and later at Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg and Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin (Barron and Eckmann 2009).

The title of the exhibition, *Art in the GDR*, suggests the presentation of both, official art supported by GDR cultural politics and “unofficial” art (see Wiegand 2003). As Hanno Rauterberg observed in *Die Zeit*, the aim of the exhibition was to introduce a discourse of aesthetic differentiation to the debate on GDR art: “Not the *Einheitsästhetik* [uniform aesthetic] of the *Einheitspartei* [single-party-state] is meant to be presented, but the countless detours and evasions, the unexpected variety” (Rauterberg 2003). What Ulrike Goeschen (2009: 46) has referred to as “the battle between doctrinaire cultural policy and the increasing emancipation of artists” in the GDR since the late 1960s (a development that culminated in the replacement of the concept of “Socialist Realism”, with a more open cultural politics under the slogan “Art in Socialism”, at the last Congress of the Artists Association of the GDR in 1988) was increasingly recognised in the West German re-assessment of the art of the “other” Germany. The second exhibition, *Art of the Two Germanys*, continued this positive re-assessment by positioning art from the GDR alongside that from West Germany. Rather than being enraged by such comparisons, as some fifteen years earlier, German newspapers welcomed this curatorial gesture as reversing the “othering” of artistic work from the GDR through tracing its affinities with its West German counterparts (see Rauterberg 2009; Kimmelmann 2009).

At the same time, the second decade after Unification also saw the inclusion of works by GDR artists in the display collection of Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie, which had caused a public outcry when attempted in 1994. Between 2011 and 2013 the Neue Nationalgalerie is showing the long-term exhibition “*Der geteilte Himmel, 1945-68*” (*Divided Heaven*)⁸⁸, which showcases the museum’s holdings from East and West Germany from the Cold War period. According to the exhibition foreword, the curators aimed to “deliberately [look] beyond barriers, geopolitical and artistic, and

⁸⁸ The title of the exhibition is taken from Christa Wolf’s novel of the same name.

[to] [concentrate] instead on universal artistic ideas, held by both camps”⁸⁹. A review in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* indicates their success, claiming that the show moved beyond “the ruling separation of an abstract West and a figurative East” (Karich 2011).

In turn, in former East Germany works that had been relegated to the storage rooms of museums in the 1990s, once again saw the light of day (see Saehrendt 2009: 154; Osmond 2011: 224-27). Further, a first step has been taken towards cataloguing the artistic works of the GDR; a project that is essential for facilitating a future art historical discourse on these works. In 2009 the *Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung* (Federal Ministry for Education and Research) financed a three-year research project “*Bildatlas: Kunst in der DDR*” (*Image Atlas: Art in the GDR*), to create a database of GDR art, and document its exhibition history pre- and post-1989.⁹⁰ In particular, the aim of the project was to document the large amount of artistic works by lesser-known artists, which were not part of the collections of the GDR’s museums, but had been displayed in public institutions and buildings. Following the collapse of the GDR most of these works were claimed as “special assets” by the *Treuhandanstalt*, the government agency founded in 1990 responsible for the privatisation of state-owned East German enterprises. In 1994, they were passed to the individual Federal States, which however lacked the resources, expertise, and interest necessary for their documentation. The intention of the *Bildatlas* project was to establish a centralised database that encompassed artistic works divided among the Federal States, the whereabouts of which were often poorly documented.

6.1.i Towards a plural concept of artistic modernism

Since the early 2000s the move towards the moderate integration of the artistic heritage of the GDR into German national art museums and art historical discourses signalled a revision of the singular concept of artistic modernism, which had structured the art discourse of the Cold War period, and which still dominated the

⁸⁹ See: <http://www.smb.museum/smb/kalender/details.php?objID=29845>, (accessed 24/04/2012).

⁹⁰ This research project is based at four institutions: the *Technische Universität Dresden* (Research Cluster for Sociological Theory, History of Theory, and Cultural Sociology), the *Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden* (Gallery Neue Meister), the *Kunstarchiv Beeskow*, and the *Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam*, see: <http://www.bildatlas-ddr-kunst.de/> (accessed 22/11/2011).

debate of the *Bilderstreit* (see Chapter 5). The recognition of GDR art as constituting an alternative path of German modern art after 1945 was under way. A plural concept of artistic modernism, which no longer permitted the outright aesthetic disqualification of the art of the “other” Germany as pre- or anti-modern, was being established.

The passing of time had allowed art historians, curators, and critics to gradually move away from the evaluation of GDR art in exclusively political terms, and to begin considering its aesthetic qualities and art historical relevance. Many of the artists who had fled the GDR because of political repression in the 1960s and thereafter, and who had been at the forefront of the vehement protests against the inclusion of the official art of the SED regime in German national museum collections after Unification, had either died by the early 2000s or adopted a more moderate position on the subject. Further, the revelation of the authoritarian nature of the GDR State through the opening of the Stasi files immediately after Unification, had lost some of its terrifying impact a decade later. The relativisation of condemnatory narratives of the GDR as a totalitarian dictatorship, over the course of the 1990s, had also come with the popularisation of *Ostalgie*, and its emphasis on the positive aspects of everyday life in the GDR. It was in this climate that a re-assessment of art from the GDR, in relative independence from the political regime and ideology under which it had been produced, became possible. By the early 2000s the view that it would be blinkered and wrong to excise from German art history the contributions of artists from the GDR, such as Bernhard Heisig, Werner Tübke, and Willi Sitte, was becoming increasingly widely accepted.

6.2 Young art students go East

The shift in paradigm in the post-Unification public debate on GDR art, from a political to an art historical and aesthetic one, only began more than ten years after Unification with exhibitions such as *Art in the GDR* from the year 2003. Seen against this background, artistic developments at the post-*Wende* Department of Painting/Graphics at the Leipzig Academy were an exception. Here an aesthetic engagement with the local, East German artistic heritage had already begun in the early 1990s. As Chapter 5 showed, the preservation of teaching methods and artistic

styles established at the Department during the GDR, was not only imposed from above by the faculty, but the Department's students – especially those who had come from West Germany since 1993 – also supported this politics of preservation because they had an aesthetic interest in the artistic heritage of the GDR.

For external observers the move of young art students from former West to former East Germany in the post-*Wende* years came as a surprise. It went against the dominant pattern of East-to-West migration after Unification, and it also constituted a reversal of artistic relations during the time of division, when artists such as Georg Baselitz, Gerhard Richter, Ralf Winkler (more widely known by his pseudonym A.R. Penck), and many others, emigrated from the GDR to the Federal Republic in search of artistic freedom. What value did young artists see in the seemingly out-dated artistic practices maintained at the academies in former East Germany?

Published interviews and interviews conducted for this thesis with artists who studied painting at the Leipzig Academy during the 1990s, indicate that it was particularly the figurative style of painting with an emphasis on artisan skills taught there, which had attracted many of the students. One artist interviewed, who is originally from West Germany, and who studied, and later became an Assistant at the Department of Painting/Graphics, recalled that it was after his first encounter with the painting of the *Leipziger Schule* – at the exhibition “*Bilder aus Deutschland: Kunst der DDR aus der Sammlung Ludwig*” (*Images from Germany: Art of the GDR from the Ludwig Collection*) at Museum Ludwig in Cologne in 1990 – that he decided to study in Leipzig:

“This was a show specifically on East German painting and [painting from] Leipzig. So above all, Rink, Gille, Heisig, Tübke, Mattheuer, were represented. And I liked this. I liked the narrative approach, the psycho-narrative approach, the literary approach [...] And that's why I applied, directly to Arno Rink.”

Another representative of the “New Leipzig School”, Tim Eitel, recounts that he took the decision to study at the Leipzig Academy, over the academy in Düsseldorf and other West German art schools, because: “I was attracted to the distinct artistic idiom that existed in Leipzig, the tradition of figurative-representational painting” (Eitel in Jocks 2005c: 217). Although Eitel, unlike the previous interviewee, did not have an

interest in the painting of the *Leipziger Schule*, he was drawn to the “traditional understanding of problems of form” that defined the syllabus at the Department of Painting/Graphics: “It begins with learning craft skills, but this is not so much about manual skills, more about learning how to look at or understand the material world” (218).

Also Arno Rink, Head of the Department of Painting/Graphics from 1987 to 2005, remembers that the reason why many students from the old Federal States came to Leipzig was because they wanted to be trained in the representational-figurative style of painting that had been taught in Leipzig since the 1960s:

“[I]n the 1990s I taught two women [...] They told me that they first visited the [Academy in] Düsseldorf, and there they asked where one could study ‘hard’ painting, so figurative-representational painting. And the people in Düsseldorf told them, that if they didn’t want to work with [Markus] Lüpertz they should go to Leipzig to work with Rink, there one could do this. So that’s how these things went, yes.”⁹¹

Examined as a group, it shows that the narratives of the above cited interviewees are implicitly structured by equations of geography with painterly approach: East Germany and Leipzig were equated with a figurative painterly approach, in contrast to West Germany, in particular Düsseldorf, and a more abstract and conceptual approach. By the time the interviews for this thesis were conducted, in 2006, the rhetoric of binary opposites that revolved around the distinction East/West had been firmly put in place in the debate on the “New Leipzig School”. Chapter 5 examined how this rhetoric coloured the discourse of the Department’s faculty, and later that of their students’ public self-presentation, as well as the accounts of curators and journalists exhibiting and writing on the new painting. Especially with the beginning of the international export of the works, around the years 2004 to 2005, East/West distinctions had become a convenient means to position the young Leipzig artists in the wider field of international contemporary art and to align their painting with an emerging interest in post-socialist art that clearly displayed its “eastern otherness”.

However, in some parts of the interviews conducted with members of the Department of Painting/Graphics for this thesis, another, more complex, story of artistic

⁹¹ Interview conducted with Rink, 15 November 2009, Leipzig.

development and position emerged. In certain moments of the interviews the neat partitioning of artistic elements into East and West broke down, revealing a far more varied and fragmentary picture. Thus, for example, counter to those accounts which identified the artistic position that developed at the Department of Painting/Graphics in the 1990s as one that was distinctively East German, a representative of the “New Leipzig School” interviewed, described the Department as lacking a clearly defined artistic identity in the first years following the *Wende*. During this time students were faced with a situation in which the art historical value and political legitimacy of the artistic tradition in which they were being trained had been fundamentally called into question over the course of the *Bilderstreit*. To blindly continue this tradition would have meant the students to navigating themselves into an artistic dead end:

“[T]here was nothing we could latch onto. So figuration was past its time, Socialist Realism was out of the question, people didn’t want to see that anymore [...] but what now? We also didn’t want to paint abstractly, somehow there had to be a way to be in accordance with the *zeitgeist* by painting figuratively [...] Well, and then we tried many things and we experimented a lot.”

Rather than opting for an artistic identity of “eastern difference” which unquestioningly embraced the artistic heritage of the GDR, students at the Department of Painting/Graphics experimented with the figurative style of painting they encountered there, testing it for its contemporary artistic relevance.

Another interview revealed that students in particular began to combine the local figurative painterly idiom with “external” artistic influences. The student, and later Assistant, at the Department of Painting/Graphics cited above explained that especially those students who had come to Leipzig from the old Federal States, tried to integrate the local artistic culture with their experiences of western art discourses and practices:

“West Germans went East, just like East Germans went West, out of curiosity, for the system of the others, the cultural system. That’s also why I went [East] [...] And this changed me, I contributed to the Leipzig context in my way and that’s also what the others did – [Matthias] Weischer and [David] Schnell, they contributed their visions, and in turn they adopted the experiences they made [in Leipzig], and the traditions or approaches they got to know here, into their own practices.”

In contrast to the oppositional staging of eastern and western artistic positions that characterised many of the public statements by the “new Leipzig” painters from around the year 2004-2005, when their international export began, this description of their artistic approach conveys an attempt to try and transcend such East/West divisions. Explaining the artistic approach that was developing at the Department in more detail, the interviewee observed that the students “saw what tendencies and traditions existed in Leipzig and elsewhere, and they brought this together in a kind of synthesis”.

Intriguingly, it was in the interview conducted with Arno Rink, who was the principal advocate for continuing the lineage of the *Leipziger Schule* at the Department of Painting/Graphics, that a more detailed description of this “synthetic” artistic position was provided. Without abandoning his Cold War rhetoric of East/West binaries, Rink described his students from the post-1989 generation as occupying a position “halfway between the hard, thematic painting of the old *Leipziger Schule*, and, let’s say, western modernism [...] where the paintings of Rothko can and must be accepted. If I were to hang these paintings [of the younger artists] next to a Heisig or a Tübke, I would realise that they are worlds apart.”⁹² For Rink, the main difference between the new and old Leipzig schools of painting lies in their different uses and styles of a figurative-representational painterly idiom. The old *Leipziger Schule*, of which Rink considers himself a part, “was highly thematically motivated [...] its central focus was figurative-representational painting [*gegenständliche Malerei*], with the intention, ah, yes, to bring problems onto, ah... into the paintings, and with so much quality and decency that one could continue in the footsteps of Beckmann – who was fundamentally also a *Problemmaler* [painter of problems] – of Dix... and, ah yes, we wanted to continue this tradition”. By contrast, Rink views the “New Leipzig School” as moving away from this social-critical artistic lineage that had its roots in the progressive artistic movements of the Weimar years (see Chapter 5). He argued that this change in artistic orientation becomes most evident in the painting of Neo Rauch, who is the oldest representative of the “new Leipzig” painters and who still completed his studies at the Academy during the GDR. According to Rink, and

⁹² Interview conducted with Rink, 15 November 2009, Leipzig.

many other commentators, Rauch's work constitutes the artistic link between the old and new Leipzig schools of painting:

"In [Rauch's] work this thing, that art can be thematic and have content – ah, so content not just as *l'art pour l'art* but in the sense of a problematic – ... ah, I think that in his case this can still be identified. Even if he, let's say, mystifies it, and often to the point that it becomes incomprehensible. But it is a hard figuration, which also communicates this idea that 'here there are problems', even if I don't understand them."

Whereas Rauch maintains elements of the "*Problembild*" (painting of problems) of the *Leipziger Schule*, for Rink, the younger members of the "New Leipzig School", who were his students in the 1990s, have formulated a figurative-representational painterly idiom that is no longer directed at the thematisation of concrete social-political problems or historical contradictions: "In the case of Schnell and Ruckhäberle and Weischer there it is, ahm, less this explicit thematic, yes, philosophical-thematic and social concern, instead this is more, ah puh, yes, well ...".

Thus, whilst the post-1989 generation of Leipzig painters continued the figurative-representational idiom of the older guard, in the eyes of Rink, their painterly styles and thematic concerns are fundamentally different ones. The artists have softened the "hard" (i.e. naturalistic-academic) style of figurative-representational painting of their predecessors, often by blending it with abstract and other influences, which Rink, in his binary rhetoric of East/West opposites, defines as "western modernism". Further, the younger artists no longer aim to master the problems of figuration with the intention of thematising concrete social-political issues. Although Rink was unable to put the thematic concerns of the new generation of Leipzig painters into words, it emerged from the interview that he viewed them similarly to how Hans-Werner Schmidt (2006) described them in the catalogue to the exhibition *Made in Leipzig* (see Chapter 5). In place of the modernist *Problembilder*, with their overt social-political "messages" and concern with the collective historical forces, the younger artists have their post-modern "mood" paintings, which, whilst they seem to be socially charged, tend to dilute any concrete social or political content in subjective perception, mystification, fiction and fantasy.

In light of the preceding discussion of the paradigm shift in the post-Unification debate on GDR art since the late 1990s, the description of the artistic position of the “New Leipzig School” as halfway between the eastern and western artistic modernisms of the postwar decades resonates strongly with the plural concept of artistic modernism towards which the debate on GDR art has been moving. At the same time, it is an artistic position that stands far apart from the defiant artistic identity of eastern German difference formulated by the East German faculty running the Department of Painting/Graphics in the years following the *Wende*. In struggling to come to terms with their loss in cultural status as esteemed painters in the GDR, the faculty established the local traditions of painting as standing in an antagonistic relationship with a perceived dominant West German artistic culture that threatened the authenticity and survival of these traditions. By contrast, their students were fighting a very different battle. Finding themselves at the intersection of two distinct discourses and practices of post-1945 modern art – on the one hand, the East German traditions which they were being trained in, but which had been called into question with the collapse of the GDR, and, on the other, the western discourses and practices, which ruled the broader German and international field of contemporary art – they were trying to formulate a contemporary artistic position that drew from both these artistic cultures.⁹³ Unlike their teachers who shut down the dialogue with artistic developments beyond Leipzig, withdrawing into a defensive attitude, students at the Department actively engaged in testing the possibilities and contemporary relevance of the local traditions of painting in light of these broader developments. In particular they had an interest in exploring new avenues and directions in which to take the traditional figurative painterly idiom that their teachers had managed to preserve at the Department beyond 1989. Referring to this complex endeavour, of maintaining

⁹³ Notably, the notion of two intersecting discourses of modern art, a dominant western one and a disqualified eastern one, resonates with the literature on alternative modernities, which has proliferated since the 1970s. In her study of the concept of modernity in Turkish political and everyday life, Esra Özyürek (2006) points out how much of this literature, in the attempt to challenge the temporal models of Western modernization theories and their focus on concepts of progress through time, has operated with a vocabulary of spatial variations between modernities in different countries and regions. However, this spatial approach has often reified western concepts of modernity as unchanging and failed to examine the influences western and non-western modernities have on each other over time. Through the re-introduction of a temporal dimension to the debate on alternative modernities, Özyürek formulates a concept of “nostalgic modernity”, which “refers neither to a contained form of modernity nor to its dissolution” (Özyürek 2006: 19). Rather the concept stands for a perspective temporarily held by actors located at historical and cultural intersections of different modes of being modern – local and transnational modes, western and eastern, past and present. Further, the concept invokes forms of modernity that amalgamate different cultural and historical influences and that continue changing over time.

certain formal and technical elements of the artistic heritage of the *Leipziger Schule* whilst at the same time applying them to new ends, the art historian Sophie Gerlach (2008) has described the “New Leipzig School” as a “retro-garde” movement: “new artistic ways and tendencies are sought and explored by using the most traditional of artistic techniques” (17).

The next part of this chapter turns to the paintings of the “New Leipzig School” to examine the positions the artists formulated in the post-*Wende* years in more detail. How did they manoeuvre their way between eastern and western art discourses and practices, tradition and innovation, and modern and postmodern approaches to painting?

6.3 Halfway between “eastern” and “western” modernism

Considering that much has been written about the paintings of the “New Leipzig School” in the form of exhibition catalogues, newspaper articles, and art journal essays there exist surprisingly few in-depth and systematic explorations of where the artists’ works stand art historically. Whilst their relationship with the old *Leipziger Schule* is regularly mentioned, this has hardly been analysed in any detail. Further, discussions of how the paintings of the “New Leipzig School” fit into the broader return to figuration in the field of international contemporary art since the late 1990s are also sparing.

Admittedly these questions are complex to address, let alone answer. However, it is precisely this dual relationship of the works with the artistic heritage of the GDR, on the one hand, and contemporary artistic developments beyond Leipzig, on the other, that makes them art historically interesting and valuable. In what follows, the work of Neo Rauch and the five other artists who have predominantly come to stand for the label “New Leipzig School” in Germany and the United States – Tilo Baumgärtel, Tim Eitel, David Schnell, Martin Kobe and Matthias Weischer – will be examined in light of these complex inter-weavings of artistic influences. The focus of the analysis is on the artists’ early works, dating from around 2000 to 2004. With the exception of Rauch, the works stem from the artists’ final years as students at the Leipzig Academy, or from shortly after they completed their degrees. Crucially, they date

from the period prior to the emergence of the “New Leipzig School” as an international art market label.

6.3.i *Neo Rauch - A “third way” aesthetic?*

The paintings of Neo Rauch, the first of the “new Leipzig” artists to acquire national and international fame in 1999/2000, attracted attention in particular because of what commentators have often described as their “third way” aesthetic, moving between eastern and western styles of the Cold War decades. Thus, a catalogue text accompanying Rauch’s solo exhibition “*Randgebiet*” (*Borderzone*) from 2000,⁹⁴ sees the artist’s painterly idiom as combining “East bloc figurative painting on the one hand and abstract painting of the Western variety on the other” (Wagner 2000: 15). Four years later, the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* suggested that it was Rauch’s ability to visually relate the popular art styles that had developed either side of the Berlin Wall, which drew audiences to his work: “The paintings that made Rauch famous amalgamated the two great objective styles of the postwar period – comic pop in the West and socialist realism in the East” (Maak 2004).

The American art historian April A. Eisman (2012) has suggested that most critics (especially those from western countries) have celebrated Rauch’s experimentation with artistic styles of the postwar East and West as the artist’s liberation from the forced artistic conformity of the GDR following 1989. By adopting a broader historical perspective, which compares Rauch’s works from the 1990s to those that he did earlier, during the GDR of the 1980s, Eisman counters these assumptions, arguing that the fall of the Berlin Wall, rather than being a wholly liberating experience for Rauch, meant a “temporary setback” to his artistic development and career. By the late 1980s the young Rauch was gaining official and public recognition for his then large neoexpressionist canvases, in the tradition of the expressionist strand of the *Leipziger Schule*, and in particular the work of Bernhard Heisig, who had taught Rauch during his master’s degree. These early paintings, characterised by a thick and vibrant brushwork, were exhibited at the prestigious Tenth Art Exhibition of the GDR in Dresden in 1987 and discussed in *Bildende Kunst*, the monthly art journal of the

⁹⁴Between 2000 and 2001 the exhibition was shown at Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig, Haus der Kunst München, and Kunsthalle Zürich.

Verband Bildender Künstler Deutschlands (VBKD), the GDR's national union of visual artists. Thus, when the Berlin Wall fell and the GDR and its cultural system collapsed, Rauch had been on his way to becoming one of the country's next great painters. Rather than experiencing the early 1990s as a time of artistic liberation, Rauch was faced with the challenge of adapting his practice to a very different art world from the one in which he had matured, whilst also having to come to terms with the attack waged on art from the GDR in the *Bilderstreit*.

According to Eisman (2012), it was in these precarious conditions, and under pressure to find an artistic language that was adequate to the new post-1989 artistic context, that Rauch began to fundamentally change his artistic style from 1992 onwards. The expressionist brushstrokes began to disappear, giving way to outline shapes and a hard figuration often reminiscent of Socialist Realism, flat areas and blocks of colour, and a palette of monotone greys and browns, and then the muted colours today characteristically associated with Rauch's oeuvre. Further, Pop Art elements, such as words and speech balloons, entered his compositions. Rauch himself has repeatedly referred to this change in his style as coinciding with his artistic lifecycle; in 1990 he had reached the age of thirty, a point at which an artist needs to find his own voice. Referring to and countering this personal explanation of his artistic development, Eisman argues that, above all, it was the radical transformation of the social-political and cultural conditions in East Germany after 1989, which triggered the changes in Rauch's work. Faced with a situation in which the art system of the GDR had collapsed and was being replaced by West German structures and values, Rauch's practice began to be shaped by "the question of what is art, and more specifically, what is painting in the new Germany" (241). The form in which this question manifested itself in his paintings was, according to Eisman, "the colliding of realism and abstraction, East and West, that was taking place in Germany in the 1990s" (ibid.). One of the paintings Eisman refers to, in order to illustrate her argument is "*Wahl*" (*Choice*) from 1998. It is worth quoting this passage at length to better understand her argument:

"This painting depicts a two-headed man standing in front of a canvas, one of three identical paintings, suggesting the development of a recognised style [241] that can then be sent out into the market; two workers carry one of the paintings away. The painter can be seen as Germany; the two heads as the former East and West now

merged in one body. From this perspective the abstracted black face represents the West and modern art; that his face appears on the canvas reflects the solipsism of western art. This is the side of the body that holds the paintbrush and is thus in control. The white, Socialist Realist-like face, on the other hand, represents the East. It holds the paint can and is, perhaps, the source of inspiration. Not only representing a reunified Germany, this figure can also be seen as Rauch himself as he struggled to understand the western art world” (Eisman 2012: 240-241).

Indeed, it is tempting to read “*Wahl*” and other paintings by Rauch that thematise the collision of a figurative and abstract painterly idiom (see, e.g., also “*Unerträglicher Naturalismus*”, *Unbearable Naturalism* 1998 and “*Modell*”, 1998) as a commentary on the German situation post-1989 and artistic relations between the East and West. Positioned against the backdrop of Rauch’s biography and his repeated emphasis in public interviews on the antagonistic relations between the eastern and western German art worlds, such a reading seems highly plausible. Yet, lost in this interpretation is the art historical complexity and richness of the paintings. A closer look at Rauch’s works shows that, art historically, there is much more at stake in them than the simple juxtaposition of “eastern” figuration with “western” abstraction. Without entirely refuting a social-political reading of the paintings from 1992 onwards in light of the post-*Wende* condition, it can be said that they demonstrate an intense dialogue with twentieth-century modern art history, filtered through the lens of Rauch’s local East German cultural concerns and influences. Elements of *Ostalgie* and questions concerning the post-Unification value of the artistic heritage of the GDR are compressed with a dazzling reservoir of pictorial strategies that stretch from figuration to abstraction and beyond.

That said, in many of Rauch’s works, the artist’s dialogue with art history and his painterly concerns are at first sight often buried under the abundance of seemingly recognizable motifs from East German history and collective memory. The landscapes, people and objects depicted all have an air of familiarity to them. Further, the paintings’ titles (such as “*Landschaft mit Sendeturm*”, *Landscape with Receiving Tower* 1996, “*Händler*”, *Trader* 1999, or “*Kühlraum*”, *Cooling Room* 2002) seem to be descriptions of the settings or situations portrayed, adding to the impression of their depiction of concrete social-historical settings. Yet, any attempt to translate Rauch’s pictures into coherent narratives are either futile or lead to forced and over-

determined readings. As Bernhard Schwenk has put it: “Neo Rauch is no teller of tales, even if he works with narrative elements and motifs” (Schwenk 2000: 24). Countering the overtly social-historical reading of Rauch’s paintings as *Ostalgie*, which predominated in the United States, Schwenk and other German critics have suggested that the representational and narrative qualities of Rauch’s paintings are only a secondary element (see also Broeker 2006 ; Kunde 2000). First and foremost the works are paintings about painting. From this perspective, the inventory of landscapes, figures, and objects Rauch has formulated, and which reappear across his oeuvre, are claimed mere staffages or set-ups for his painterly experiments, his exploration of the possibilities of painting and pictorial space.

However, neither the narrative-historical elements of Rauch’s paintings nor their status as pure “symbols of picture-making” (Schwenk 2000) can alone fully convey what Rauch is doing in his art. Instead, what makes his paintings since 1992 so striking is precisely their ambiguity: their invocation of a perspectival space with iconographic content and narrative continuity that appears to hold some social-historical meaning, and how this humanistic concept of painting as truthful representation is simultaneously led ad absurdum by painterly strategies that break up the illusion of a coherent pictorial space. Especially Rauch’s later paintings, from the early 2000s onwards, in which the stage settings for his figures and their implied actions have become more elaborate and concrete (and also larger in scale), tread a fine line between the illustrative and the abstract-pictorial.⁹⁵ In “*Trafo*” (*Transformer*, 272 x 200 cm, oil on paper, 2003), for example, three figures, two men and what appears to be a boy, are shown in a suburban landscape that resembles the industrial flatlands of Saxony, where Rauch spent his childhood. The cut-open earth in the foreground reinforces the impression of an industrial or mining territory and the scene is dominated by an explosion at the horizon that has the shape of a nuclear mushroom cloud. The white-grey light that penetrates the landscape and the radiating rays that frame the letters “*Trafo*”, appearing in the sky, reinforce the impression of a nuclear explosion. *Trafo*, the title of the painting is German shorthand for “electrical transformer”. It is visually echoed throughout the painting in the multiple allusions to energy production and electricity: the yellow-lit windows in the row of pitched-roof

⁹⁵ On this shift, see Broeker (2006).

houses that runs horizontally through the scene; the over-sized streetlights positioned in front of the houses; a fragmentary view of a petrol station diagonally superimposed on the scene; and again the theme of light production appears in the three figures in the foreground who are busy lighting lanterns.

Going by the above observations, *Trafo* may be read as a commentary on the GDR's wasteful energy politics or possibly the dubious technical conditions prevailing at some of its atomic power plants.⁹⁶ This would place the painting in the tradition of the *Leipziger Schule* and its critical paintings of landscapes scarred by industrial pollution.⁹⁷ In terms of composition, affinities with the large-scale history paintings of the older Leipzig painters can also be identified. The division of the painting into semi-autonomous yet inter-locking segments that are organised according to different perspectives (most evident in the expert-view of the petrol station) recalls the montage and collage techniques used in the older artists' "*Simultanbilder*". Yet, in other respects, *Trafo* stands far apart from the works of the *Leipziger Schule*. Particularly striking is the contrast between the heaviness of its problematic subject matter and its light rendering in formal terms. This tension is characteristic of much American Pop Art and its use of the visual languages of 1950s and 60s comics and advertising to address topics such as war, as, for example, in the paintings of Roy Lichtenstein, or political riots and fatal car accidents in the silkscreen prints of Andy Warhol. Rauch takes recourse to similar pictorial languages. Elements of comics are apparent in the graffiti style of the letters "*Trafo*", as well as in the almost graphic fields of flat colour framed by bold black outlines, as in the explosion cloud or the figures in the foreground. Warhol's silkscreen prints are alluded to in the row of identical pitched-roof houses, painted monochromatically in magenta-red, that stretch horizontally across the canvas in serial reproduction.

Rauch himself has repeatedly cited American Pop Art as one of the main influences on his work in public interviews.⁹⁸ Yet, counter to the common portrayal of his engagement with Pop Art as a "western" style, which he quotes only to hold it up against more "eastern" elements, there are clear indications that for Rauch Pop Art

⁹⁶ On the last issue, see "DDR/Kernkraft: Alles tot", in: *Der Spiegel* 4/1990, 85-87.

⁹⁷ See, for example, the work of Wolfgang Mattheuer, which is discussed in more detail below.

⁹⁸ See for example Rauch in Büscher (2006: 54)

constitutes an art historical moment which opens up a whole terrain of pictorial strategies. An excerpt from an interview conducted in 2002, in which the artist describes his painting, makes this apparent:

“[E]lements like Bauhaus, Vermeer, Tintin, Donald Judd, Donald Duck, agitprop, and cheap advertising garbage with headline character can flow together in a furrow of my childhood landscape and there generate an intermingled conglomerate of surprising plausibility” (Rauch in Gingeras 2002a: 99)

This description indicates Rauch's use of artistic and pictorial strategies that are fundamentally allied with American Pop Art, especially in its (West) German reception since the 1960s.⁹⁹ Crucially, in the Federal Republic, where the reception of American Pop Art coincided with the student movement of the 1960s and the popularisation of the critical cultural theory of figures such as Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, it was interpreted as protest and criticism rather than affirmation of an affluent society, as usually in the United States of the 1950s (see Huyssen 1975). Klaus Herding (2008) has suggested that for young artists and art historians in the FRG American Pop Art symbolised a “*fünffache ästhetische Aufsprengung*”, a fivefold blasting-open of the established aesthetic practices and concepts, which has continued to have a lasting effect on artistic practice in Germany until this day. The most significant aspect of American Pop Art, understood as a critical art form, is for Herding that it revived the project of the Surrealists and Dadaists of the 1920s: to combine the high and low, art and the everyday, art and design, art and popular culture. Following on from this, Pop Art pushed the transgression of the boundaries between demarcated artistic media and genres to a new extreme, thus making intermediality a mainstream artistic phenomenon in its own right. One variant of this new trend towards intermediality was the mixing of cultural and historical influences into hybrid artistic creations. Further, according to Herding, the experimentation with the expansion of sensory perception in psychedelic art (which he identifies as one strand of Pop Art that continued the artistic work of the 1920s concerned with the heightening of

⁹⁹ Research on the very few artists in the GDR, such as Willy Wolff, who worked in a Pop art-like style since the late 1960s, has suggested that there was no culture of an autonomous East German reception of Pop art in the GDR, where it was condemned by official cultural politics. Instead the work of artist such as Wolff was directly influenced by the development of Pop art in western countries (see Hofer 2012).

consciousness) paved the way for the fluid movement between the realms of the real and imaginary in much of today's art. Finally, Herding argues that, for the 68-generation in West Germany the relevance of American Pop Art lay in its use of irony as a critical force against the dominant cultural-political establishment.

In the interview excerpt from 2002, cited above, Rauch demonstrates an acute awareness and engagement with this expansion of the field of postwar modern art. The different influences he cites that shape his painting derive from sources as diverse as the Old Masters (Vermeer), Art and Design (Bauhaus), High Modernism (Donald Judd), Comic (Tintin, Donald Duck), Socialist propaganda art, and advertisement. This range of sources indicates that Rauch does not only cite Pop Art as one style amongst many – by imitating its use of, for example, the visual languages of comics and advertising –, but that he entered into a dialogue with it, absorbing some of its aesthetic strategies as received in Germany since the 1960s: the mixing of high and low, intermediality, cultural hybridity, the blending of the real and imaginary, and critical irony.

Yet, as a more detailed analysis of his paintings shows, Rauch adapts these strategies to his own specific artistic context, needs, and interests. In *Trafo*, for example, the low or trivial cultural motifs of American Pop Art: objects of consumer culture and the mass media that are invested with artistic qualities are replaced by personal memories and everyday experiences of life in the GDR, dreams and fantasies. Although these motifs are rendered in a style that is reminiscent of the work of Pop artist such as Warhol and Lichtenstein, their source in the personal imagination of the artist is in fact much closer to Surrealism. Further, even where *Trafo* appears to imitate American Pop Art stylistically, this is often a culturally specific adaptation. Thus the row of identical pitched-roof houses that stretches diagonally across the canvas, although it evokes Warhol's silkscreen prints, the effect of serial reproduction is here not used to idealise or iconicise the represented object (as in the Marilyn or even Campbell Soup series), but rather for the opposite effect: the serially reproduced house facade projects dullness and emptiness, invoking the monotony and regulation of everyday life in the GDR. Further, whilst the monochromatic colouring of the facades and their flat and over-exposed look, are reminiscent of Warhol's silkscreen prints, the painting indicates that the source of this aesthetic effect is the radiant light

of a nuclear explosion, not the technique of printing. Following on from this, it can be observed that even when Rauch uses aesthetic elements deriving from popular or mass media, he does not embrace their technical possibilities as Pop artists did. Instead academic painterly refinement continues to dominate his canvases. In the tradition of the artists from the *Leipziger Schule*, and their intense concern with handcraft, he continues to insist on defining the artistic value of his painting in terms of masterly execution, not conceptual dexterity alone.

Another of Rauch's paintings from the early 2000s, "*Kühlraum*" (*Cooling Room*, 210 x 300, oil on canvas, 2002), clearly illustrates his adaptation of Pop Art strategies (as defined by Herding above) such as the movement between the real and imaginary, intermediality, cultural hybridity, and critical irony. The painting is one of a number of works in Rauch's oeuvre that takes recourse to the Socialist Realist genre of artistic representations of industrial labour.¹⁰⁰ The figures portrayed echo the physiognomy of the strongly-built men and women at work in factories in the official art of the GDR from the 1950s and 60s. Yet, their actions do not add up to any comprehensible task. They have their eyes closed and seem to be "sleep-working"; a detail that reinforces the painting's overall affinity with a surrealist dream sequence in which the real has been turned fantastic and bizarre. Similar to some surrealist painting, the division of the canvas into various picture-fragments appears to transgress the representational techniques of modern painting, moving instead into a more filmic perspective as well as the representational techniques of non-narrative, eccentric comics.

The painting's individual picture-fragments are held together by a consistency in the colour palette: a range of blues, greens, yellows and pinks,¹⁰¹ as well as by their various resonances with the painting's title, *Cooling Room*. In the left half of the canvas a man wearing yellow work-boots kneels by what seems to be a frozen lake turned cooling pond for fuel rods. Behind him stands a woman pushing a trolley between rows of industrial freezer cases. On the right side two men who are dressed as meat-packers are freezing (or perhaps defrosting) organic creatures that have the shape and colouring of ginseng roots. Above them icicles grow out of shapes that

¹⁰⁰ On this Socialist Realist genre, see Wolle (2012)

¹⁰¹ Boehm (2006) discusses the colour palettes of Rauch's paintings as creating the "*Zusammenhang des Unzusammenhängenden*", coherence in the non-coherent.

move in the liminal space between figuration and abstraction. The latter fragment is characteristic of how Rauch interlocks figuration with an abstract and minimalist painterly idiom throughout *Kühlraum*. For example, the two men in the foreground stand in front of a tiled wall that invokes Donald Judd's sculptures; the female figure pushing a trolley in the left is framed by almost flat fields of turquoise and white. Whilst such juxtapositions of a figuration that bears strong resemblances with Socialist Realism and abstract elements can indeed be read as Rauch holding up an "eastern" against a "western" style of painting, it is hard to overlook a certain irony in this visual play. Rauch himself has stated in interviews that "I may borrow certain motifs [from Socialist Realism], but I only use them with irony" (in Falconer 2008: 44). Looking at *Kühlraum* a post-modern game of citation, in which some of the typical traits of Socialist Realism (e.g. the physiognomy of the figures) and Abstraction (e.g. the dynamic movement of abstract shapes implied in the top of the canvas) are exaggerated and caricatured with the intention of creating stereotypes of "eastern" and "western" art styles, is easily revealed.

The paintings *Trafo* and *Kühlraum* are only two examples from Rauch's oeuvre since 1992, which indicate how Pop Art and its particular German reception provided him with a set of artistic strategies through which he could explore the status of painting and figuration at the turn of the twenty-first century without compromising his very own specific cultural position as a painter trained in the art system of the GDR. The results of these artistic explorations are not only new blends and perceptions of cultural hybridity, which bring together eastern and western art styles; but, more significantly, Rauch's paintings offer a contemporary re-evaluation of painting and figuration in terms of mixing elements from high art and popular culture, questions of the real and imaginary, intermediality, and post-modern irony.

6.3.ii *The post-1989 generation: Exploring new avenues for figuration*

Compared with Rauch's paintings, references to the artistic heritage of the *Leipziger Schule* and the former GDR as a cultural-historical framework are significantly reduced in the paintings of most of the younger artists of the "New Leipzig School". Whilst the works continue the older Leipzig painters' concern with technical and craft skills, these are put towards very different ends. The human figure holds a far less

prominent position, and also allusions to real existing social-political or historical conditions can only faintly be made out in the artists' highly imaginary and fictive compositions.

Perhaps closest to the work of Rauch, and its dense yet mystified references to the former GDR, are the paintings of Leipzig-born Tilo Baumgärtel. Together with Rauch, Baumgärtel is one of the "new Leipzig" artists whose work constitutes a distant continuation of the epic and surrealist strand of painting of the old *Leipziger Schule* (see, e.g., the painting of Arno Rink, Volker Stelzmann, Ulrich Hachulla, and Petra Flemming). Commenting on the narrative element in his painting, Baumgärtel emphasises its grounding in a filmic imagination. He describes his works as "scenic painting, which has in my imagination been preceded, or will be followed, by a quarter of an hour feature film. So I basically pull out one film still from a possible film sequence" (in Jocks 2005d: 197). In Baumgärtel's forest scenes from the years 2000-2004, this filmic imagination becomes visible in figures that are portrayed as approaching or leaving the depicted setting. In some paintings they have already left and their presence is only invoked in constructions such as footpaths, wooden cottages, electricity and telephone pylons, or distant views of industrial complexes.

Whilst the artist's forest settings, the uninhabited buildings that stand in them and other props recall the GDR, they are estranged and manipulated. In the painting "*Kühlwasser*" (*Cooling Water*, 70 x 100 cm, oil on paper, 2002) a woman carrying a briefcase is depicted walking past a forest lake at dawn. Behind her appears a derelict cottage or datcha, characteristic of East German out-of-town landscapes, and on the horizon there are three illuminated cooling towers of a nuclear power plant. Like Rauch in many of his works, Baumgärtel is here referring to the genre of paintings of industrial life of the official art of the GDR. In the late GDR of the 1970s, artists who were more outspoken began to depict the environmental damages caused by industrial pollution, rather than glorifying the GDR's economic apparatus. An example is Wolfgang Mattheuer's painting "*Freundlicher Besuch im Braunkohlerevier*" (*Friendly Visit to the Brown Coal Field*, 1974), which shows an earthy field raked by skid marks, stretching into the horizon. On the left of the horizon appears the excavation plant, which has a dark dust cloud hanging over it. On the right, the power station and briquetting plant are visible. The only sign of vegetation in the entire

scene is a bunch of dead tree-stumps and bushes in the foreground. Passing these is a group of workmen, in one direction, and an official delegation, in another. The latter are portrayed as a set of empty suits with masks instead of heads that have smiling faces painted on them. Positioned against the scarred and polluted landscape in the background Mattheuer's representation of the delegation constituted a daring commentary the bureaucratic machinery of the GDR and its blindness to worsening social and environmental conditions.

In Baumgärtel's painting *Kühlwasser* the acidic colour of the lake in the foreground and the dead, cut-off trees that frame it, evoke this critical artistic tradition of the GDR. Yet, in *Kühlwasser* the subject of industrial pollution appears to be lacking any ecological or political criticisms. The green-glowing colouring of the lake, as well as the industrial chimneys bathed in the mist of dawn, have something mesmerising and mystical about them. In an interview conducted with the artist, he explained that the motifs of the early forest paintings mostly stem from his childhood memories of living in an industrial region near Leipzig during the GDR:

“For a while my parents had a house in an area that was actually chemically polluted. There was a factory with a lake which we weren't allowed to go into [...] at the shores of the lake these strange colours were creeping up, they changed from violet to bright green, at the time I thought this was somehow beautiful [...] later, looking back, I found these non-places of the East very poetic... at that time this was all already deserted.”¹⁰²

Seen in light of this account, Baumgärtel's forest paintings can be considered an example of the new generation of memory debates that emerged in Germany in the 1990s, in which the critical confrontation of the past is replaced by highly personalised and emotionalised historical representations (see Chapter 3). The artist consciously breaks with the desire for accurate historical reconstruction and instead explores the past through free interpretation and association leading him towards his childhood memories and their fictional recreation. In the process of this self-conscious and often ironic play with notions of historical representation and authenticity Baumgärtel has developed a pictorial imagination that has strong resonances with that of the Surrealists. One of Baumgärtel's charcoal drawings (which make up a large part of his work from after 2004), “*Der Sammler*” (*The*

¹⁰² Interview conducted with Tilo Baumgärtel 15 November 2009, Leipzig.

Collector 2004), contains a direct reference to the Surrealist heritage by alluding to one of its father figures, Giorgio De Chirico. In the background of the drawing there appears a poster for an exhibition, depicting an abandoned piazza framed by arcades in the midday sun, a characteristic motif of De Chirico's metaphysical period. Earlier, in his paintings from 2000-2004, Baumgärtel turned De Chirico's desolate Italian city squares, into nightly forest settings. In *Kühlwasser* the play of light and shade, although softer than in De Chirico, still creates deep shadows that exude the sense of a haunted dream world. At the same time, the painting's cloudy fields of glowing colour, as in the luminous green of the lake, resemble the unreal and alien style of colouring of the Surrealist painter Yves Tanguy.¹⁰³

However, it is in his play with the intrusion of the unreal into the familiar and the placing of things in unusual and counterintuitive contexts that Baumgärtel stands closest to the Surrealists. In the painting "*Wald Kloster*" (*Forest Monastery*, 160 x 120 cm, oil on paper, 2003) such inversions of common sense perception are particularly evident. The painting is thematically and stylistically partitioned into two halves. The top half shows a complex of barracks that have a greater resemblance to a prison or work camp rather than a monastery, as the painting's title suggests. The unease this discrepancy between title and image instils is heightened by the sense of confinement and surveillance emanating from the barracks, which are illuminated by a low hanging moon that radiates the white light of a floodlight. Opposed to this sombre scene, which evokes the surveillance apparatus of the SED regime, the bottom half of the painting evokes notions of private life and leisure. Rendered in a cartoon style, it shows a log hut by a lake in which a speedboat is lying. Especially the log hut, or in East German vernacular *datcha*, symbolised the increasing withdrawal of people from public and political life into small-self contained private social circles in the late GDR.¹⁰⁴

Whilst the two parts of the painting repulse each other stylistically and thematically, they are held together by the speech balloons – filled with images not words – emerging from the window of the cottage and from one of the barracks. The balloon

¹⁰³ Other of Baumgärtel's paintings from the year 2002, including "*Hydroplan*", "*Wartezeit*", and "*Reifen*" contain similar cloudy fields of luminous colour.

¹⁰⁴ See Wolle (2012: 297).

emerging from the barrack contains an image of an electricity or perhaps telephone pylon (a motif more invocative of the language that usually fills a speech balloon) that is drawn in the same cartoon style as the lower half of the painting. Its cables continue through into the second balloon coming out of the cottage's window. Through the insertion of a frame within the frame, the balloons open an alternate pictorial space within the painting and another level of reality or imagination in addition to the two already charted out. The humorous association of these different levels of the real and imaginary through an element like a speech balloon (that has itself been estranged) is a strategy typical of much Surrealist art.

Far apart from Rauch and Baumgärtel's narrative and often symbolically overladen paintings stand the minimalist compositions of Tim Eitel. The filmic modes of representation that characterise the stage-like settings of Rauch and Baumgärtel are replaced by a certain flatness and coolness affinitive with the "*sachlich*" (objective) strand of the *Leipziger Schule* (see Chapter 5). Eitel's paintings are architectonic in the sense that they often depict architectural interiors, but also in the sense that their composition is highly geometrical; flat fields of harmonised colours appear to be arranged and staggered like building blocks. Set against these fields of colour are isolated figures of young people. At first the meticulous lighting of Eitel's paintings, the sharply outlined shadows, and their technically refined execution give the impression of photorealistic painting. Yet their milky coloration and the blurry effects of brushstrokes quickly dispel this impression.

A series of museum interiors, painted between 2000 and 2002, brings together Eitel's concerns with architecture, geometric abstraction, figurative realism, and the relationship between painting and photography.¹⁰⁵ The series, which shows individual figures in gallery spaces looking at pieces of art, immediately brings to mind Thomas Struth's *Museum Photographs* from 1989, which portray visitors in some of the world's most significant museums, the Academia in Florence, the Musée du Louvre in Paris, and the Art Institute of Chicago. The painting "*Struth*" (180 x 250 cm, oil on canvas, 2000) directly alludes to this art historical reference point. Yet, in contrast to Struth's photographs of visitors in Renaissance and nineteenth-century collections,

¹⁰⁵ This series of paintings was first shown at the gallery Eigen & Art, Berlin in 2002 and later at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin in 2003.

Eitel's museum interiors show modernist gallery spaces of steel and glass in which visitors look at twentieth-century modern and contemporary art. Although some of the paintings' titles are the names of modern art museums in Germany,¹⁰⁶ the gallery spaces they depict are mostly anonymous, representing an architectural type rather than a specific building.¹⁰⁷

Paintings like *Struth* clearly show that Eitel's interest is not in the representation of actual museum architectures, but in making architectural structures productive for his painterly experiments. In a 2005 interview, the artist described the museum interiors as an attempt to explore "the connection of a figurative tradition with conceptual approaches, [and] to clarify my position as a painter in relation to the museum system, as well as the investigation of the relationship between the beholder, image, and museum" (in Jocks 2005c: 222).¹⁰⁸ In *Struth* the architectural elements of the gallery – window frames, floors, walls, and ceilings – operate as a means to structure the pictorial space into a chain of multiply-interlocking picture frames. The relationship between beholder, image, and museum is explored through the repetitive positioning of a picture within a picture. At the centre of the painting is a paraphrasing of one of Struth's museum photographs that shows a visitor looking at a portrait. This photograph hangs in a gallery room framed by a window. A second visitor, standing in a room opposite, is looking at the Struth photograph, now through two window frames that separate him from it. Approaching is a third figure whose shadow appears in the window.

Yet, whilst serving to structure and partition the pictorial space, the architectural elements in *Struth* also take on an autonomous pictorial quality. Seen as pure painting, the grid shaped window frames, for example, echo the abstract geometric paintings depicted in many other works from Eitel's series of museum interiors. Such convergences between architectural elements and the modernist artwork depicted, is

¹⁰⁶ The Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt is alluded to in the titles "*Frankfurt*" (2002) and "*MMK*" (2001), and the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig in the title "*GfZK Schwarz*" (2001).

¹⁰⁷ Notably, Eitel's cool and anonymous museum interiors lack the sacred character of Struth's images, articulated explicitly in his later photographs of people in churches from the 1980s.

¹⁰⁸ This interview extract makes explicit the didactic element of many of Eitel's paintings. Titles such as "*Museumspädagogin*" (2002, *Museum Pedagogue*) "*Maik erklärt*" (2000, *Maik Explains*), and "*Diskurs*" (2000, *Discourse*) emphasise their concern with the process of learning how to look at modern art.

particularly evident in “*Blau und Gelb*” (*Blue and Yellow*, 150 x 200, 2002). In this painting a male figure, seen from behind, is standing in front of an enlarged Piet Mondrian imitation. In a tongue-in-cheek gesture, Eitel lets the black lines of the abstract geometric composition converge with the balustrade in the foreground. By working with a cliché Mondrian reproduction and joining the composition with an everyday functional object Eitel extinguishes its artistic aura, turning it into an image of mass culture.¹⁰⁹ *Blau und Gelb* can in this sense be read as a meditation on the relation between figuration and abstraction which cancels out the modernist opposition between abstraction as high art and figuration as popular art and kitsch.

The relation between figuration and abstraction is further explored in the painting “*Streifen*” (*Stripes*, 110 x 140 cm, 2002). Whilst the title, *Streifen*, resonates with one of the minimalist works depicted on the left, which could be by, for example, Agnes Martin, overall the painting appears to engage in a dialogue with the work of Gerhard Richter. The grey painted canvases on the left and right invoke Richter’s groups of grey paintings, which the artist made during the 1970s. Furthermore, the field of grey which represents the gallery floor, and in which the shadow of the female figure passing through appears, can be read as a reference to the mirrors used by Richter since the 1980s. For the exploration of the relation between figuration and abstraction, the work of Richter, who trained as a painter in the GDR before emigrating to West Germany in 1961, where he became intensely concerned with the possibilities and legitimacy of figurative painting after abstraction and minimalism, is an obvious reference point. It is also essential when considering Eitel’s engagement with the relationship between painting and photography, referred to above. Like the rest of the museum series, the realist painting style of *Streifen* is marked by a blur and lack of focus that is characteristic of Richter’s *Photo Paintings* from the 1960s and 1970s, in which the artist transcribed the photographic idiom into painting.

Eitel’s paintings open a broad spectrum of art historical references, ranging from the rational geometric pictorial language of Mondrian to Caspar David Friedrich’s “*Rückenfiguren*” (back figures), which are turned into young urbanites that contemplate modern art in sterile gallery spaces instead of romantic landscapes. A

¹⁰⁹ Also Pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Tom Wesselmann have previously incorporated Mondrian look-alikes in their paintings turning them into objects of mass culture.

similar, emotionally toned-down, contemporary version of nineteenth-century German Romanticism can be found in the landscape paintings of David Schnell. Schnell's works from 2002-2004 are mono-cultural agricultural fields and forested lands, which the artist has often explained as inspired by the Leipzig surroundings (see, e.g., Jocks 2005e). The pristine and spiritually charged views of northern European landscapes in nineteenth-century Romantic paintings, which look back towards a mythical golden age before the onslaught of secular materialism and modern industrialisation, here give way to representations of nature as fully absorbed by modern civilisation. The overly cultivated and regulated landscapes in paintings such as "*Kollision in der Baumschule*" (*Collision in the Nursery*, 190 x 110 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2003) project a natural world that has been fully economised and rid of any idiosyncrasies. The perfectly trimmed and aligned fir trees appear artificial, as if they have been assembled from pre-fabricated elements that assure a common standard and the maximum use of space. The trees are partitioned by a passageway that, although coloured an earthy brown, is a neat path of wooden planks rather than a dirt road. The painting *Auffahrt* (*Slip Road*, 150 x 230 cm, 2002) shows a similar scene of a field of fir trees divided by a passage way. However, in this painting the field is also crossed by an elevated section of road, presumably leading onto a motorway, from above. The artificiality that pervades the landscapes of both these paintings is heightened by the lighting, which conveys a formulaic and perfected notion of nature's beauty. The golden sunset in *Auffahrt* and the clear blue sky and radiant-to-pale red light that shines on the trees in *Kollision in der Baumschule*, are reminiscent of the images used in advertisements, postcards, and travel catalogues.

Consistent with the subject of his paintings of a fully rationalised natural world, Schnell's painterly approach is overtly technical. His landscapes are composed according to a strict one-point-perspective, which attains symbolic significance as a visual device that tightly regulates the landscapes represented by subordinating their appearance to the position of one predetermined vanishing point. By letting some of the preparatory grid-lines that structure the canvas shine through the paint, Schnell makes visible the painterly process of construction. Addressing the issue of intermediality in Schnell's work, some critics have suggested that the artificiality of the natural settings of his paintings invokes computer generated images of landscapes (see Schulz 2006 ; Pagel 2008). The uniformity of shapes and colours and repetition

as far as the eye can see recalls the enclosed landscapes of videogames or architectural programmes that are the product of a digital code. The strong spatial gravitation, and in some cases the suspension of gravity – as, for example, in *Kollision in der Baumschule*, where poles that take after the centrepieces of the fir trees are spinning in mid-air – enhance the impression that these are paintings of digital representations of landscapes, or perhaps a surrogate reality in the near future. Addressing the hyperreal aspect of his paintings, which are executed in the most traditional of artistic mediums and heavily reliant on technical skills, Schnell has confirmed that many of his motifs are futuristic fiction (in Jocks 2005e: 259).

Nevertheless, the shadow of history hangs over Schnell's futuristic visions. As already implied by the relationship with German Romanticism, Schnell's paintings contain a dense web of motifs that refer to German cultural tradition. Besides the theme of landscape it is especially the prominence of the forest and wooden structures in Schnell's paintings that evoke Germanic mythology and folklore. Viewed from this perspective, his group of paintings of the inside of empty wooden barns (begun in 2004 and on-going) hark back to the paintings of wooden architectural interiors by Anselm Kiefer.¹¹⁰ Although the heaviness of Kiefer's wooden beams and the sombre atmosphere of his paintings is rendered lighter in some of Schnell's works, such as "*Kiste*" (*Box*, 200 x 300 cm, oil on acrylic), a painting from 2006 that pre-empted the artists' later move towards more abstract compositions, those barns shown at night-time, as, for example, "*Hütte*" (*Hut*, 140 x 110 cm, oil on canvas, 2004) strongly reverberate with the ambiguous notions of Germanness found in Kiefer.

The interplay of futurity and history operative in Schnell's landscapes can also be identified in Martin Kobe's paintings of modernist architectural designs. Kobe's labyrinthine architectural structures invoke the utopian visions of another age. Although they are usually of a universal character, some of the motifs appear to refer to the particular modernist architectural heritage and specific buildings of the former GDR. For example, the red and bronze colouring of the structures in *Untitled* from 2004 (100 x 135 cm, acrylic on canvas) are reminiscent of the recently demolished

¹¹⁰ See Kiefer's series of *Parsifal* paintings and his paintings "*Deutschlands Geisteshelden*" (*Germany's Spiritual Heroes*) and "*Der Nibelungenleid*" (*The Sorrow of the Nibelungen*) all from 1973.

Palast der Republik in Berlin, which was the seat of the East German parliament. Yet, any attempt to try and reduce Kobe's paintings (which are all deliberately untitled) to their implicit references to real existing buildings, would mean distorting them. As much as the artist's compositions are representational they are also fantastic constructions that verge on the formally abstract. Explaining his ambivalent painterly position between representation and abstraction in an interview, Kobe echoes the binary rhetoric that structured much of the discourse on the "New Leipzig School" by describing himself as definitely *not* an abstract painter. However, his account also undoes the strict separation of the two modes of painting:

"Every detail [of my paintings] might have something abstract about it, but in the end I am everything but an abstract painter. Instead I approach reality through detours, so that the lines again attain meaning" (in Jocks 2005f: 234)

This quote indicates how Kobe explores abstract pictorial strategies from within a figurative-representational idiom. In *Untitled*, 2004, for example, the individual architectonic elements of the building seem to have been reshuffled: floors have turned into ceilings and vice versa, walls have been tilted and become floors, a staircase and corridors suddenly end at a wall. It is as if the picture of a modernist building has been cut up and the pieces re-assembled in a humorous collage that turns the rationalism and utopian aspirations of twentieth-century modern architecture into a nonsensical and dizzying assemblage of forms and shapes. In this gameplay concrete architectural forms easily pass over into pure painterly surfaces.

The passage of architectural form into pure painterly surface is perhaps more evident in the painting *Untitled* from 2003 (180 x 290 cm, acryl on canvas). This work is an example of Kobe's combination of abstract expressionist painting with a highly controlled technique of glazed surfaces that gives his paintings their crisp and luminous look. Read symbolically, the smudged paint that seems to grow out of the edges and angles of the idealised architectural design appears as patina. It introduces a sense of time and an air of decay into the painting, which is heightened by the abandonment of the scene. The futuristic architectural vision thus appears as a piece of history. Examined from an art historical perspective, the stark contrast between the two different styles of painting used in *Untitled*, 2003 can also be seen to raise the issue of intermediality and the status of painting in the age of new media. Notably,

Kobe's technique of glazed surfaces purges his paintings from any trace of painterly gesture or expression. It creates a perfectly smooth surface that seems to be illuminated from within, a visual effect that makes his paintings seem like computer and television screens. The fragments of expressionist painting that appear in many of his works consciously break this impression, thus creating a stark contrast between the painterly surface and the seemingly digital image.

Instead of the empty public buildings invoked by Kobe, Matthias Weischer's paintings from 2001-2004 show deserted and deranged domestic interiors that are cluttered with worn furniture, decorative design-objects, and defunct television sets. In interviews, Weischer who moved to Leipzig from North-Rhine Westphalia in 1994, has repeatedly suggested that the many abandoned flats he encountered in Leipzig in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall were a source of inspiration for his interiors (see, e.g., Jocks 2005g). But whilst traces of the former GDR can be identified in the paintings, their dense array of social-historical and art historical references also points far beyond the specific milieu of East Germany. In the painting "*Fernsehturm*" (*Television Tower*, 200 x 290 cm, oil on canvas, 2004) what first appears to be an abandoned and wrecked living room, on closer inspection reveals itself to be a collage-like arrangement of the history of postwar art and design. Displayed are items characteristic of the mass-produced interior design of the 1950s and 60s that made the dream of the bourgeois home affordable for the many. There is a shelving system at the back-wall, parts of which are covered in wood-grain effect adhesive paper, and the floor is covered in laminate. At the centre stands a tower built out of defunct early television sets – their screens removed, painted-over, or nailed-up. The postwar convergence of art and design is indicated in the Cézanne reproductions, hanging above the sofa and on the left, a turquoise plastic flamingo sculpture, and a psychedelic image, which has taken the place of the window view.

In terms of technique, composition, and theme *Fernsehturm* bears a striking resemblance to Richard Hamilton's Pop art collages of domestic interiors, such as his 1956 work *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* and the 1992 remake *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different?* Although Hamilton's 1956 work was a collage from magazine cut-outs, and his 1992 piece a computer generated image, the way the interiors are constructed is similar to

Weischer's technique. First the spatial structure of the room is constructed into which the objects are later positioned, a method that enhances the collage-like appearance of the works. Further, the layout of the room in *Fernsehturm*, its elements of furniture, and the fusion of high art and design are close to those of Hamilton's interiors. Especially the tower of dead television sets at the centre continues Hamilton's commentary on modern society's infatuation with information technology, overtly expressed in his 1992 image, where the television and computer screens have multiplied compared with the collage from 1956.

However, despite its effects of spatial depth and the arrangement of objects in a structure of grids and vanishing points, *Fernsehturm* has a distinctive flatness to it. When contemplated for a while, the surfaces of appliances, walls, windows, and shelves metamorphose into flat fields of paint. Also Weischer's painting over the television screens is an artistic gesture that reasserts the modernist notion of painting not as representation but as a medium with intrinsic value. Yet, intriguingly, through his particular paint handling, Weischer always maintains a sense of spatiality, even in the flattest areas of the canvas. He builds up layers of paint until they attain a thick and pastose quality and a sense of physicality (see Weischer in Ammann 2007: 91). The effect is that the flat fields of painting almost appear to be pieces of material that have been stuck onto the canvas. It is this effect which brings to mind the collages of Dada artists such as Kurt Schwitters when looking at *Fernsehturm*; a resonance that is further enhanced by the seemingly random assemblage of objects in the painting and its colour palette of browns and beiges.

From the "new Leipzig" artists discussed here Weischer is – with the exception of Rauch – probably the one most engaged in a dialogue with art history. His paintings show how the artist works through art history in order to address the artistic problems that occupy him. As Weischer put it: "I see art history through my own painting, I deliberately look for what I need, for what interests me" (in Ammann 2007: 93). Whilst close to a postmodern game of citation, this working through art history is also different from it, in the sense that it involves more of a process absorption and manipulation. This becomes evident, for example, in the painting "*Erfundener Mann*" (*Invented Man*, 200 x 160 cm, oil on canvas, 2003). Here Weischer returns to seventeenth-century Dutch painting and the emergence of the bourgeois domestic

interior as an artistic genre – including the attendant formations of distinctions between private and public, interior and exterior, individual and society – in order to explore the relevance and legitimacy of the genre in the context of contemporary art. Considering the specific arrangement and theme of *Erfundener Mann*, the painting can be read as a meditation on Jan Vermeer’s work *Young Woman Standing at Virginal* (ca. 1670-72) or *Young Woman Seated at Virginal* (ca. 1670-72) through the lens of twentieth-century modern art and bourgeois culture. Like Vermeer’s paintings, *Erfundener Mann* offers a narrow view of an interior space that extends backwards along diagonal lines. It draws on similar techniques of dividing the space into compartments through the use of decorative elements: skirting boards, window and picture frames, and, above all, Vermeer’s tiled floors reappear as square-patterned wallpaper. The virginal as symbol of a well-to-do middle-class household has been replaced by a television set standing on an imitation-wood chest. In *Erfundener Mann*, the intimacy of the private home, furnished with individual items of solid oak and tapestries, has given way to the anonymity of standardised industrial design and cool electric light. Home-pride has faded into a sense of dreariness. In the place of Vermeer’s upright young women in sumptuous dress there is a hunched figure cut from plywood. The figure is on the verge of disappearance, dissolving into abstract painterly gestures and shapes from its feet upwards. Pinned onto its body are a framed still life of flowers and a disk-shaped piece of psychedelic art.¹¹¹ The fact that out of all the elements in this painting it is the human figure which is dissolving into abstract painterly fields indicates once more the intense preoccupation of the “new Leipzig” artists with the contemporary status and relevance of a figurative-representational painterly idiom.

6.4 Positioning East German artistic traditions internationally

The representatives of the “New Leipzig School” were some of the few young artists working in post-1989 Germany, whose work projected the belief that the artistic heritage of the GDR had something to contribute to contemporary art practices and discourses. In particular it was the artists’ exhibition activity, which indicated their

¹¹¹ Harald Kunde (2005) has suggested, that the only elements in the painting which points towards liberation from the sombre and dreary atmosphere of the standardised interior, are the magic cube in the left and the psychedelic image, both of which recall the work of artists from the 1960s who sought an expansion of consciousness and sensual experiences.

ambition to position their work that was inspired by the heritage of the *Leipziger Schule* beyond Leipzig within the larger German and international art contexts. In the year 2000 five students from the Department of Painting/Graphics (Tilo Baumgärtel, Martin Kobe, Christoph Ruckhäberle, David Schnell, and Matthias Weischer) set up a producer gallery in Leipzig. Two years later they expanded their project to include five other artists (Peter Busch, Tom Fabritius, Oliver Kossak, Jörg Lotzek, Bea Meyer, and Julia Schmidt), some of whom worked in media other than painting. However, more significant was that the students moved the gallery from Leipzig to Berlin. The LIGA gallery was located on Torstrasse, at the edge of Berlin's contemporary art gallery district Mitte and from 2002 to 2004, the gallery showed the artists' works in solo and group exhibitions.¹¹²

As Christoph Tannert (2005) has noted, the artists' move to Berlin was driven by the pressure to market their art; LIGA was "a producer gallery, an instrument for autonomous self-promotion". By the early 2000s Berlin had again become Germany's contemporary art capital and was also developing into one of the fastest growing contemporary art markets internationally. A study of the Berlin contemporary art market from 2004 suggests that figurative painting in particular had become one of the bestsellers amongst local galleries (Siebenhaar and Forne, et al. 2004: 33). LIGA was no exception to this development. In 2003/2004 a considerable number of the works shown at the gallery, were bought by the American collector couple Don and Mera Rubell, who only one year later exhibited them in the United States under the titled *Life After Death: New Leipzig Paintings from the Rubell Family Collection* (see Chapter 4). Following this exhibition the large-scale international sale and debate about the paintings began, and the label "New Leipzig School" was coined.

From occupying a marginal position within the Leipzig Academy during the 1990s, the artists had moved towards being a focal point of attention in the international contemporary art market. Yet, whilst the sudden international significance of the "New Leipzig School" was in part driven by the economic re-evaluation painting had experienced alongside figurative art especially in the North American contemporary art market it was also related to an emerging interest in the possibilities of painting and

¹¹² See: <http://www.liga-galerie.de/> (accessed 10/03/2010).

figuration beyond the commercial sector (see Gerlach 2008: 17). By the early 2000s a wide range of museum exhibitions and art historical publications had begun to (re)investigate the role of figurative painting in modern twentieth-century and contemporary art. Thus, seen against this backdrop, it can be argued that in moving their producer gallery from Leipzig to the more international setting of Berlin, the young artists from LIGA projected not only an eagerness to market their art, but also seemed to show an awareness of the wider debate that was developing around figuration and painting and how their work spoke to this debate.

6.4.i *The return of the figure*

The return of figurative painting has been a cyclical phenomenon in twentieth-century art history. The latest return of the age-old medium was proclaimed just over a decade ago, in the early 2000s. Commenting on the situation Peter Hill (2005) observed how “[a]round the world [...] the pages of popular magazines, specialist journals and daily broadsheets are filling with ‘welcome back’ articles on painting’s timely return”. In the international art market much sought-after names who were associated with the back-to-painting-trend included artists who had been exhibiting since the 1990s (such as the Belgian painter Luc Tymans, the Dutch artist Marlene Dumas, Peter Doig, Dexter Dalwood, and Glenn Brown from the United Kingdom, and American artists Karen Kilimnik, Elisabeth Peyton, and John Currin) as well as figures who had only begun exhibiting internationally in the past decade. The latter included above all the “new painters” from Germany, who had attracted much attention since their appearance.

The international impact of the emerging generation of figurative painters from Germany was particularly visible in the development of Charles Saatchi’s collection during the early 2000s. Saatchi, who had previously been known for his patron role to the “Young British Artists”, shifted the emphasis of his collection to painting at the beginning of the new century. Between 2005 and 2007 the six-part exhibition *The Triumph of Painting* was shown at the Saatchi Gallery (Schwabsky 2005). Whilst the first part featured established figures from the 1980s and 90s (Martin Kippenberger, Jörg Immendorf, Herman Nitsch, Luc Tymans, Peter Doig, and Marlene Dumas), subsequent parts were dedicated to emerging artists, especially from Germany. Many

of the artists exhibited in the Saatchi gallery over the following years can also be found in Christoph Tannert's (2006) book *New German Painting - Remix*. They included the Dresden-trained Eberhard Havekost and Thomas Scheibitz; Jonas Burgert, who studied at the Universität der Künste in Berlin; Matthias Weischer, Tilo Baumgärtel, Christoph Ruckhäberle and Susanne Kühn from the Leipzig Department of Painting/Graphics; a cohort from the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg: Albert Ohlen, Daniel Richter, Jonathan Meese, Franz Ackermann, and Till Gerhard; from Düsseldorf Dirk Skreber, Lothar Hempel, and Stefan Kürten; and from Cologne Kai Althoff, Johannes Wohnseifer, and Christian Hellmich.

The explanations given in art journals, newspapers, and by contemporary art theorists about this most recent return of figurative painting in contemporary art, ranged from theories about an over-production of new media art that led to a renewed desire for more tangible and craft-based art forms, to arguments that suggested that the rise of photography in the 1990s, and its attentiveness to questions of composition, realism, and framing, had created a renewed receptiveness for painting. More economically inclined accounts tried to explain it in terms of generalizable and predictable art market cycles. Julian Stallabrass (2004) suggested that painting "undergoes a predictable revival with each boom, while less straightforwardly commercial practices – including performance and the various strands of post-conceptual art – step out into prominence with each bust" (107). Yet, although the latest return to figurative painting in international contemporary art did indeed coincide with the turn-of-the-century expansion of the contemporary art market, this does not explain the aesthetic specificity of the painting that became so popular – namely its figurative style. When positioned within the broader landscape of art historical discourses, it shows that the re-emergence of figurative painting coincided with a more fundamental art historical reassessment of the history of twentieth-century figurative art towards the end of the 1990s.

In a study of art critical and art historical discourses on American and British early twentieth-century figurative-realist painting, Janet Wolff (2003) has argued that the inferior status of this kind of work in modernist narratives was fundamentally revised as the twentieth century came to a close: "In the late 1990s and in the year 2000, art that had been marginalized or rendered invisible by museum practice and art-

historical discourse – notably realist and figurative art – was suddenly high profile” (Wolff 2003: 1). To underpin her argument she refers to a series of exhibitions at New York’s major art museums, the MoMA, the Whitney Museum, and the Guggenheim, which “all broke with the practice of favouring modernism in their accounts of the early twentieth century” (ibid.). Looking closely at museum exhibitions of figurative painting dating from the past ten to fifteen years, it can be seen that the art historical reassessment of figurative art from the early twentieth century which Wolff refers to, extended to a reassessment of postwar figurative painting, and also an interest in the status of figuration and the traditional medium painting in today’s art.

In Germany it was the year 2003 that marked the beginning of the exploration of these issues in major museum exhibitions. The exhibition which rang in the debate was *‘Dear Painter, paint me ...’ – Painting the Figure since late Picabia*, at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt from January to April (Gingeras 2002).¹¹³ It explored how artists since the postwar years have challenged narratives of an abstract and conceptual modernity that disqualified realistic modes of representation as politically and aesthetically reactionary. Contemporary artists such as Luc Tuymans, Elisabeth Peyton, John Currin, and also Neo Rauch, were shown alongside those who began their careers in the 1960s and 70s, including Sigmar Polke, Martin Kippenberger, and Alex Katz. Parallel to this exhibition the Frankfurter Kunstverein showed the aforementioned *“deutschmalerei-zweitausentunddrei”* (*german painting two thousand and three*), which featured those artists that were internationally been labelled “New German Painting”. From March to June the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg addressed the intermedial aspect of contemporary painting with *“Painting Pictures: Malerei und Medien im digitalen Zeitalter”* (*Painting and Media in the Digital Age*). Two years later, in 2005, the romantic aspects of contemporary painting were explored again at the Schirn Kunsthalle in *“Wunschwelten: Neue Romantik in der Kunst der Gegenwart”* (*Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*), a theme that was continued by *“Geschichtenerzähler”* (*Storytellers*) at the Hamburger Kunsthalle during the same year. Finally, another exhibition that requires mentioning is *“Zurück zur Figur: Malerei der Gegenwart”* (*Back to Figuration: Painting Now*) at

¹¹³ Prior to its staging at the Schirn, the exhibition was shown at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. After Frankfurt it travelled to the Kunsthalle Wien, Austria.

the Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung, Munich from 2006 (Lange 2006).¹¹⁴ Although this exhibition brought together different generations of artists who painted in a figurative style, it only showed works created after the year 2000. The artists exhibited included established figures such as Peter Doig, Marlene Dumas, Eric Fischl, and Lucien Freud, as well as a large group of emerging artists. Artists who had studied at the Department of Painting/Graphics at the Leipzig Academy featured prominently amongst the latter. Although the ten artists from Leipzig who were included in the exhibition were not presented as a coherent “school”, they stood out as a group of artists coming from the same art academy in the midst of a very broad range of disparate artists.

6.4.ii The art historical relevance of the “new Leipzig” figuration

In German exhibitions that thematized the (re)turn to figurative painting in international contemporary art the works of representatives of the “New Leipzig School” gained much visibility. Indeed the artists were often perceived as leading this recent artistic trend in Germany, as Jonathan Osmond commented in 2011: “amongst the plethora of artistic forms in a now pluralist united Germany, figurative realism is [231] one of the strongest. With surrealist, one might even say postmodernist, aspects, this has developed in western Germany as well, but currently to the fore is the so-called Neue Leipziger Schule” (Osmond 2011: 230-31). By the time Osmond was writing the “new Leipzig” painters’ continuation of the figurative-representational style of painting still taught at the Leipzig Academy after 1989, had attained an artistic relevance beyond local concerns to preserve the East German artistic heritage. Yet, what was it that made their paintings stand out amongst the wider turn towards figuration in Germany and also international art since the late 1990s?

Building on the analysis of the paintings of individual representatives of the “New Leipzig School” provided above, I argue here that the specific constellation of art historical and cultural factors at the post-*Wende* Leipzig Academy, led to the development of a number of distinctive artistic tendencies that made the Leipzig works particularly interesting. The former GDR provided the young artists with an

¹¹⁴ The exhibition travelled to Kunsthall Rotterdam, Netherlands, and KunstHaus Wien, Austria later in 2006 and 2007.

environment in which to explore the contemporary relevance and reception of figuration and painting in significantly new ways. Not only were they able to experiment with the post-socialist reception of the figurative styles of painting dating from the GDR, but by manoeuvring between local traditions and international art discourses and practices the artists managed to formulate new perspectives on contemporary issues such as intermediality, the mixing of genres, the passage between the real and imaginary, and cultural hybridity, as well as strategies of post-modern citation and irony.

During their time at the Department of Painting/Graphics, students who were later labelled “New Leipzig School” developed a firm commitment to the academic style of figurative painting that continued to be taught there. The staunchness with which they pursued this artistic path was in part a reaction against the criticisms they faced from within the Academy, by students and staff at the Departments of Photography and New Media who ridiculed the artists for their anachronistic ways (see Chapter 5). It was these accusations, which led the artists to formulate a highly distinctive artistic position that moved between anachronism and innovation. Faced with an environment in which other students were eagerly embracing the artistic possibilities of the new media and information technology, students at the Department of Painting/Graphics were pushed towards exploring the relationship of painting to photography, film, and computer generated imagery in their search for new directions into which to take the traditional figurative style of painting they were learning. Unique about their approach was that they engaged with intermedial artistic strategies and modes of representation not by moving outside of painting, but *through* painting. This is evident, for example, in the works of Martin Kobe and David Schnell from 2000-2004 in which the status of painting in the age of new media is addressed through a painting style that plays with and imitates the appearances and functioning of digital imagery; or also Tilo Baumgärtel and Tim Eitel’s works which explore how the representational modes of film and photography can be translated into painting. Further another significant way in which the artists’ staunch commitment to the older tradition of painting that had been preserved at their Department impacted on their artistic development, was that even when they began to soften the “hard” figurative style of their teachers, by venturing out into abstraction and popular art forms, such as

comic and collage, they always maintained a firm grounding in a classical academic painterly idiom.

For American critics and audiences it was above all how the “new Leipzig” artists used a figurative-representational painterly idiom to portray the post-1989 East German condition that made their paintings special. Exhibitions, catalogues, and reviews regularly described the artists’ enigmatic landscapes, interiors and architectural motives as portrayals of the “afterlife” of the GDR. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter with regard to the work of Neo Rauch, such a social-culturally determined reading overlooks how the artists’ engagement with the cultural memory of the GDR is not only notable for its *Ostalgie* but also for its artistic originality. When compared to the old *Leipziger Schule* and their *Problembilder* that addressed concrete social-political and historical subjects, the works of the “New Leipzig School” have often been described as postmodern “mood” paintings charged with social-historical references, but which dilute these in subjective, fictional, and imaginary perceptions. This description accurately reflects how cultural memories of the GDR appear in the artists’ paintings. Historical fact and fiction merge in mysterious landscapes and settings with highly ambiguous and fluid meanings. Examined in light of the literature on German Memory, the paintings can be identified as part of a new wave of post-1989 cultural productions that relate to the past through strategies of imaginative investment rather than recollection. The literature has often explained this reliance on imaginative strategies in terms of the producers’ historical and cultural distance to the events they represent. This may also apply in the case of the “new Leipzig” artists. With the exception of Neo Rauch, they did not actually experience the GDR; in fact, many of them grew up in former West Germany, and even those who grew up in the East, such as Tilo Baumgärtel and Martin Kobe, only have a child’s memories of the GDR. Approached as historical images or documents, as frequently in the American reception, the artists’ portrayals of the GDR past become politically and ethically problematic in how they aestheticise the everyday memories of a regime that has been classified as dictatorial and also in their failure to give any clear indication of the sufferings of its victims and the guilt of its perpetrators. However, if seen as artistic images that make no claims to historical representation or truths, the artists’ pictorial engagement with the cultural memory of the GDR becomes interesting and innovative in how they overlay and interlock

elements of the real and imaginary, including influences such as childhood memories and mythological and futuristic fantasies, to experiment with, and formulate new forms of surrealist painting.

Comparisons of the new with the old “Leipzig School” emphasise that, in their concern with the contemporary status of painting and figuration, the younger artists simultaneously answered to the artistic heritage of the GDR, as well as contemporary artistic developments beyond Leipzig. That is, in their search for new avenues for figurative painting the artists combined and compressed international artistic debates with culturally and geographically specific concerns. It was through this complex interweaving of artistic influences and orientations that new perceptions and forms of cultural hybridity surfaced in their works. The art critical debate, especially when it came to the work of Neo Rauch, often claimed that the specific cultural and historical circumstance in which the artists formulated their artistic position was reflected in how their paintings juxtaposed the eastern and western styles of the Cold War. However, as the above analysis of the artists’ paintings suggests, their compositions are visually and conceptually far more complex and subtle. Local and other artistic influences are absorbed, manipulated, and intertwined in a manner that makes their vulgar separation into “East” and “West” difficult and problematic. In some few instances, especially in the work of Rauch, where such juxtapositions prevail they are ironically played with in a game of exaggeration and postmodern citation. Positioned in the wider turn towards figuration and painting since the late 1990s, it seems reasonable to suggest that it was above all the complex and highly original hybrid aspect of the works, both in cultural and art historical and aesthetic terms, which made the “New Leipzig School” stand out nationally and internationally.

6.5 Conclusion

The efforts of young art students at the Leipzig Department of Painting/Graphics to explore new directions into which to take the tradition of figurative-representational painting preserved there after the collapse of the GDR, raises the question of the significance of this artistic gesture of continuity in the wider post-*Wende* German context. Was it politically and morally legitimate to continue and integrate the artistic

heritage of the GDR, a regime that has repeatedly been described as dictatorial, into the artistic culture of the unified Germany?

For many external observers the students' interest in the local East German traditions of painting, was problematic because it was, above all, aesthetically oriented and most students did not address the political history of the artistic traditions that they were dealing with. Commenting on the issues, a former Assistant on the art theory course of the Leipzig Academy interviewed for this thesis, claimed the artists cherished a conservative concept of art as autonomous from social and political questions:

“I get worried [...] if people believe that painting doesn't have anything to do with such discussions. If one says, it's just painting, it's not political. I am just a painter, I am innocent. That's the moment I consider dangerous. And I would say that, precisely for this reason, most of the painting coming out of Leipzig is conservative, because it imagines itself to be protected by some kind of artistic innocence.”

Other sources observed polemically that staff and students at the post-*Wende* Department of Painting/Graphics had turned the politicised artistic culture of the GDR into its exact opposite: “The old political, and also artistic-thematic censorship was replaced with the total rejection of the political and art discourses” (Janecke and Koch 2005).

However, the political significance of the artists' continuation of elements of the artistic heritage of the GDR cannot be reduced to a conscious political or moral confrontation of this heritage.¹¹⁵ The issue is far more complex. It involves contextual questions concerning the contemporary reception of art from the GDR and also the question of how the students at the Department of Painting/Graphics revised and adopted the artistic traditions they were building on. Examined in light of these issues the students' positive engagement with the local East German artistic traditions they encountered in Leipzig after the *Wende*, attains critical political significance as opposing the predominant negative reception of the artistic heritage of the GDR and

¹¹⁵ Chantal Mouffe (2001) has argued that no clear distinction can be made between “political art” and “non-political art”. The political lies for Mouffe not within the art itself, but in how artistic practices either participate in the reproduction of an existent hegemonic order (be it social, political, economic or artistic) or attempt to critique and subvert this order by making publicly visible what is excluded from it (Mouffe 2007: 5). Both kinds of art, the one that reproduces and the one that challenges the *status quo*, are in their specific relation to the *status quo* political.

its marginalisation from national art museums and discourses at the time. Countering the dominant post-*Wende* narrative of modern German art as running from the interwar avant-gardes, through the art of the old Federal Republic, and up to the present, the students did not approach art in the GDR as an isolated phenomenon that developed behind the Iron Curtain, and which reached its automatic end with the collapse of the East German regime, but as intimately related with western modern art and being of equal importance to contemporary artistic practices and debates. Rather than blindly restoring artistic concepts and practices dating from the GDR, they formulated an artistic position which distinguished itself through its search for ways in which to combine and compress the “eastern”, the “western” and the “contemporary”. Examined in light of Janet Wolff’s (2008) “principled aesthetics” (see Chapter 1), and its attentiveness to the question of how aesthetic values are negotiated in historically and socially specific communities, it can be argued that in a situation of value uncertainty, the students at the post-*Wende* Department of Painting/Graphics formulated an artistic position that was built on consensus. The political significance of the community of artistic values they formulated, seen from this perspective, lies in their creation of a symbolic space for aesthetic equivalence and artistic dialogue between East and West.

The next chapter again broadens the view from the “New Leipzig School” to the “New German Painting”. Further, whereas this chapter was largely concerned with the aesthetic and art historical aspects of the paintings examined, the following chapter turns to the cultural memories portrayed in them.

Chapter 7 The Ruins of Unification

The frequent art critical descriptions of the “new Leipzig” paintings as *Ostalgie* not only referred to the artists’ preservation of the artistic heritage of the GDR, but the term was used above all to describe what American critics called the paintings’ nostalgic “lifeworlds”, the objects, places, and people depicted in them. For many American commentators the paintings were filled with the ruins of the GDR, which were taken, on one hand, to reflect collective sentiments of longing for the old East Germany, but also, on the other, a sense of disillusionment with the failed project of socialist modernity. Whereas the German discourse on the Leipzig paintings usually abstained from such claims that the works’ sense of *Ostalgie* reflected the collective mood in post-socialist East Germany, domestic critics often shared readings of the paintings as thematising the history of socialist industrial modernity, its failure, and East Germany’s recent transition into a post-industrial age, following the events of 1989.

The aim of this chapter is to show that not only the art critical discourse on the “New Leipzig School”, but also the discourse on other of the “New German Painting”, framed the works’ nostalgic lifeworlds as looking back at post-World War II industrial modernity and its attendant social-political regimes in East as well as West Germany. The first part of the chapter shows how much of the new painting was unified by a ruin aesthetic that was inspired by the icons of the postwar modernist ideology of progress, as manifest in the areas of industry, architecture, and material culture, on either side of Europe. Whilst these ruin motifs were specific to the post-*Wende* moment, and strongly resonated with sentiments of *Ostalgie* and also *Westalgie*, it is argued that they were equally part of a broader contemporary fascination with industrial ruins. Scholars who have examined this “new cult of ruins” have usually interpreted it as harbouring a nostalgia for the utopian imagination that underpinned the postwar social-political project of mass industrial modernisation – the dream of material happiness for the masses.

Following on from this, the second part of the chapter examines the wider political implications of the artists’ nostalgic portrayal of a past age and its utopias of social

transformation. The focus here is on the German art critical discourse, in which the paintings' ruin aesthetic raised broader questions concerning the relationship between art and politics, and, more specifically, about optimism and pessimism regarding social change. The notion that the artists' nostalgic return to the ideals of another age indicated the resurgence of hope and attempts at recuperation was only hesitantly articulated in the German critical debate. Instead, perceptions of the paintings as signalling disillusionment with modernist notions of social progress dominated. It is shown how right-leaning critics celebrated the "New German Painting" for its alleged "post-utopian" outlook, which initiated an overdue return to the concept of art as beauty, and abandoned the critical ethos of the post-68 West German left, who still dominated much of the cultural discourse of the Unified Germany. In turn, left-leaning critics condemned the paintings' nostalgic-melancholic rendering of the architectural and cultural icons of modernist emancipatory aesthetic and political movements as robbing the latter of their critical potential, and as supportive of a conservative-restorative political ideology.

The final part of the chapter constitutes an intervention into the critical debate on the paintings' ruin motifs. Rather than operating with politically charged notions of these motifs as utopian or dystopian, the aim is to examine them as specific to the post-*Wende* moment, discerning the historical dynamics of continuity and discontinuity they impose across the historical divide of 1989, and between East and West Germany. Approached from this perspective, the paintings' nostalgic mode is seen not as a passive emotional response to historical discontinuities, but as an aesthetic device that actively fashions historical continuities and discontinuities. The concern is not to judge the artists' representations of recent German history on their "truthfulness", but instead to examine how these representations challenged dominant historical narratives of Germany's history of Unification. To return to a concept from Chapter 3, the concern is to judge the paintings in their performance as counter-memories. It is suggested that, collectively, the paintings positioned the GDR as well as the old Federal Republic in the pre-1989 past, thus invoking a common German-German history of post-1989 discontinuity that challenged dominant historical representations of the unified Germany as the uninterrupted continuation of the old Federal Republic.

7.1 Memories of industrial modernity either side of the Berlin Wall

One of the most common motifs of paintings that were promoted as “New German” in the international art market, are architectural ruins and scenes of derelict material cultures. Representations of urban wastelands, run-down buildings, cluttered interiors, and dis-functional and abandoned sites of industrial production appear across the paintings, either as background to other goings-on or as the central foreground theme. Art critics coded these ruin motifs as featuring the wreckage of an expired age: postwar industrial modernity. More specifically, the formal attributes of the derelict architectural structures and accumulations of objects of consumer culture portrayed in the paintings were often read as the cultural remains of Fordist modernity in East Germany, which had come to an abrupt halt with the events of 1989, as well as the remains of a worn-out model of industrial production, and its attendant regime of social-political organisation, in former West Germany.

It was the critical reception of the early paintings of Neo Rauch from the 1990s which showed views of a decaying industrial infrastructure of socialist modernity – power plants, dams, petrol stations, *Plattenbau* apartment blocks,¹¹⁶ and industrial and military buildings – that set the tone for the broader art critical debate on the ruin aesthetic of the new paintings. Characteristic of Rauch’s work from this period is the painting “*Landschaft mit Sendeturm*” (*Landscape with Receiver Tower*, 102 x 286 cm, oil on canvas, 1996). Echoing the wider critical reception of the artist’s early work, a catalogue essay for the exhibition “*Neo Rauch: Neue Rollen*” (*New Roles*) described this painting as showing a “post-industrial landscape” (Broecker 2006: 25). In another catalogue for the exhibition “*Randgebiet*” (*Border Territory*) from 2000, Harald Kunde (2000) suggested, more specifically, that paintings such as *Landschaft mit Sendeturm* showed “topographically recognisable landscapes” (35), which invoked the post-industrial setting of East Germany. The paintings reflected the conversion of a former landscape of heavy industry into an expansive, non-productive space in the years following 1989:

“[T]he sweeping expanse of the Leipzig lowlands — obstructed by chimney stacks, electricity pylons, intersected by pipelines and artificial basins, disfigured by industrial estates, motorway intersections, airports — rises into the picture. A remaining landscape testifying to the present, submersed in autumnal light,

¹¹⁶ Prefabricated apartment blocks.

leaden. The melancholy of abandoned production and manufacture – power plants, textile factories, open-cut mines resembling stage sets – all washed-out witnesses of an expired age” (Kunde 2000: 37).

However, whilst speaking to the post-*Wende* East German condition, Rauch’s early paintings were also part of a growing phenomenon in the 1990s; namely, the artistic representation and musealisation of the ruins of postwar industrial modernity.¹¹⁷

Over the past decade scholars from different areas of the humanities and social sciences have tried to make sense of this contemporary obsession with industrial ruins. They have examined its affinities with and differences from earlier classical images of ruins, and its relationship with a broader contemporary discourse about memory, trauma and war, as well as with contemporary trends in urban preservation. However, the question that stands at the centre of this literature is in what ways the contemporary fascination with industrial ruins signals a collective nostalgia for modernity, and what the political ramifications of such sentiments of nostalgia might be.

One thesis that has defined the debate is that the contemporary cult of industrial ruins is driven by a longing for the utopian imagination that underpinned the social-political project of mass industrial modernisation. As Andreas Huyssen (2006) suggests, it is an attraction that “hides a nostalgia for an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures”, futures that were promised to emerge from “a culture of industrial labour and its political organisation” (7, 8). Charity Scribner’s (2003) book *Requiem for Communism*, one of a number published in recent years on contemporary art that has turned to the cultural remains of state socialism and the western welfare states, argues along similar lines. Crucially, for Scribner, the art in question projects not only “the desire to recollect ways of living and working that were imagined to be possible under the rubric of the socialist alternative, but also to resuscitate the [10] principle of hope that inspired much of the last century’s social and cultural production” (9-10).

¹¹⁷ On the musealisation of industrial ruins, see Brandt (2010) and (2010a).

Contemporary art that has in some way or another inspected the exhaustion of the utopian potential of the project of industrial modernity has overwhelmingly been inspired by the industrial wreckage of state socialism. This artistic fixation on the former East Bloc is not surprising, given that it is here where Fordism, as an economic regime that once sustained the dream of socialist progress, died abruptly, giving way to a landscape in which a decaying heavy industry sits alongside dispersed pockets of a new post-industrial service and digital economy. By contrast, in the western world, the demise of Fordist modernity happened more gradually, sliding almost imperceptibly into post-Fordism. Further, the disintegration of the western welfare states was a process that developed in stages. Although the rhetoric of “crisis” has been applied to this process since the late 1980s (see Habermas 1989), it was rarely framed in the rhetoric of “collapse” that was so widely applied to the failure of state socialism after 1989.

Nevertheless, as Scribner (2003) has shown, artistic productions which referenced the demise of the western welfare states also increased as the death of socialism became more evident: “When state socialism entered its final agonies, many artists and writers were reminded of the wearing out of Western welfare states” (4). Abandoned factories in the shrinking cities of the industrial heartlands of North America (such as Detroit) and Western Europe (such as the cities of Germany’s Ruhr region or the mining towns of northern England) also increasingly became the subject of much artistic imagery.¹¹⁸ In painting, one may think of Ed Ruscha’s contribution to the American Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale of 2005, which was exhibited shortly afterwards at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York under the title *Course of Empire: Paintings by Ed Ruscha* (2005/2006). The title of the exhibition was derived from the nineteenth-century Anglo-American artist Thomas Cole’s five-part painting cycle, *The Course of Empire* (1833-1836), reproductions of which were presented next to Ruscha’s work. For the exhibition Ruscha’s *Blue Collar* paintings from 1992, which depict industrial buildings (bearing the signposts *Tech-Chem*, *Tires*, *Telephone*, *Tool & Die*, *Trade School*) against dark grey skies, were reassembled together with a new set of paintings, showing these same buildings as the artist imagined they would

¹¹⁸ Pioneers in the exploration of the artistic representation of abandoned factories in western Europe’s industrial heartlands, were the artist couple Bernd and Hilla Becher, who, in the late 1960s, began to systematically photograph and typify what they termed “technical sculptures”: water and winding towers, blast furnaces and grain elevators, and other monuments of industrial architecture.

look over a decade later. Whereas the works from 1992 are painted in black and white, the later set is in colour and the buildings are now abandoned, surrounded by barbed-wire fence, defaced by graffiti (today's universal sign of urban decay), and the earlier signposts have been replaced by signs in Asian lettering (see Vogel 2005). Julia Hell (2009: 84-85) has suggested that, whereas by themselves Ruscha's two sets of paintings "could be read as a commentary on the dialectics of transition, on the creative destruction inherent in a capitalism that rushes from innovation to innovation, destroying the old and obsolete", hung next to Cole's Romantic landscapes, which thematise the rise and fall of empires,¹¹⁹ they instead raise the spectre of imperial decline. Shown in the American context of the early twenty-first century, the exhibition's juxtaposition of Ruscha and Cole's paintings evoked not only the ruins of the World Trade centre, but also constituted "a haunting commentary on the waning of American Fordism, a mode of production and a way of life associated with the United States in one of its most prosperous periods." (Hell 2009: 84)

Whilst Ruscha's paintings are deeply rooted in the modern American urban-industrial landscape, Scriber is particularly interested in artistic works that reflect how the demise of industrial modernity has shaped the eastern and western world alike, together in a single frame (see Scribner 2003: 4). What is interesting about these works for her is that she sees them as thematising how the former East and West are united in their shared loss of industrial modernity as a collective utopia, as a power that will reshape the world. In her book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (2000), Susan Buck-Morss has examined this notion of a shared lost utopia in more detail. She proposes that the historical change rung in with 1989, was not primarily about "the replacement of 'really existing' (state) socialism by 'really existing' (capitalist) democracy but [about] how this fundamental shift in the historical map shattered an entire conception of the world, on both sides"

¹¹⁹ Each painting of Cole's five-part cycle shows the same river valley, which is, however, transformed from a savage and pastoral landscape (in the first and second paintings), into an urban civilisation at its peak, followed by a scene of violent destruction, and finally a landscape of ruins in which nature is again taking over the remains of human built structures. Although the city depicted in the third painting, *Consummation of Empire*, architecturally invokes ancient Rome, the paintings have been analysed as referring to Carthage. Cole's paintings were a response to two earlier works by the English painter William Turner *Dido Building Carthage* and *The Rise of the Carthaginian Empire* from 1815 (see Hell 2009: 85).

(x). Although the modernizing process took different social-political and economic forms in East and West, Buck-Morss argues, it was united by a faith in “the mass-democratic myth of industrial modernity” (ix). It is the shattering of this myth, which marks a shared passage into a “postmodern” sense of time, characterised by “the awareness that there *are* no stages of history in the developmental and optimistic sense that modernity’s dreamworlds once believed” (xii).

The following section of this chapter relates the claims of the literature discussed above to the “New German Painting” and its post-industrial ruin aesthetic. The painting’s ruin aesthetic is described in more detail by looking at individual artists and paintings and their reception. Further, and addressing Scriber and Buck-Morss’ point, it is examined how, between them, the works refer to both the eastern and western German cultural reference framework, providing artistic images of the decline of the socialist variant of industrial modernity as well as western counterpart. In this sense it is suggested that, collectively, the paintings’ ruin motifs resonate with notions of both *Ostalgie* and *Westalgie*.

7.1.i “New German Painting”: A shared post-industrial ruin aesthetic

As indicated above, it was the art critical reception of Rauch’s early paintings of the 1990s, which fundamentally shaped the broader debate on the ruin aesthetic of the “New German Painting”. Echoing Scribner’s (2003) suggestion, that contemporary art which addresses the exhaustion of the utopian imagination that was tied to the project of industrial modernity tends to be primarily focused on the wreckage of State Socialism, the critical debate on the new painting’s ruin aesthetic also centred on the “New Leipzig School”. For many commentators the ruinous lifeworlds portrayed in the Leipzig paintings seemed inspired by the built remains of the GDR, which the artists lived with in their day to day environment in post-*Wende* Leipzig.

In particular, American critics who were quick to read the nostalgic lifeworlds of the “New Leipzig School” as mirroring the East German post-socialist condition (see Chapter 4), suggested the artists’ paintings of derelict urban environments reflected the material remains of East Germany’s past of socialist modernity. Characteristically, the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Life After Death: New Leipzig Paintings*

from the *Rubell Family Collection* (Coetze and Heon 2005) described the paintings as portraying the afterlife of the GDR: “Traces of the GDR inhabit the grim interiors and muddled social modernist architecture in these paintings” (31). Thus the catalogue establishes Martin Kobe’s paintings of modernist architectural designs as transforming socialist ideals of progress into history: “Modernist concepts that were literally concretized as a gesture to a utopian communist ideal, here function simply as some dated futuristic science fiction B-grade film: an idea of the future based in the past” (30). In turn, David Schnell’s landscape paintings of abandoned barns, motorways, and public parks are read as conveying “the atmosphere of a ‘shrinking city’ or ghost town” (ibid.), a post-1989 urban category that has been widely applied to the economically depressed cities of former East Germany.

The sense of a post-industrial East Germany suffering from economic decline and social disintegration was also widely read into the paintings of deranged domestic interiors by Matthias Weischer. The catalogue for an exhibition of Weischer at the Kunstverein Schaffhausen and Kunsthalle Mannheim (Stegmann 2007), described paintings such as “*Efundener Mann*” (*Invented Man* 2004) and “*Fernsehturm*” (*TV Tower* 2004) as marking “escape” and “expulsion”. In this catalogue the critic Rudji Bergman claims, for example, that the inspiration for Weischer’s interiors stems from the decaying factories that were scattered across the post-*Wende* East German landscape, and the memories of visions of a better future inscribed in them:

“[Weischer] has transferred features such as bleached walls, shattered windowpanes, sluggish window drapes, and a sun-filled, unpeopled office, to his paintings from the reality of abandoned warehouses and ruined factories. Behind the bizarre appearance of fascinating aesthetics they can still be seen as the fortresses of economic disaster in a painfully real world, with all its unredeemed human dreams of freedom, prosperity, love, happiness, and employment.” (Bergmann 2005: 88).

In another essay from the same catalogue, for Markus Stegmann (2007), Weischer’s paintings of the mass-produced interior design of the postwar decades – “vulgar wallpaper patterns [...] the ubiquitous use of chipboard, the auspicious television of the early years [...] heavy wood-clad ceilings, and cloth lampshades” – awake these decades from their “enchanted sleep” (17). The notion of awakening from an enchanted sleep, here raised by Stegmann, resonates with Buck-Morss’ concept of

industrial modernity as a mass utopia that has passed. One of Weischer's paintings in particular, *Automat* from 2004 (280 x 360 cm, oil on canvas), can potentially be read as alluding to Buck Morss' argument about a shared loss of utopia in East and West. In the painting a gaming machine, which simultaneously evokes a cradle (birth) and a coffin (decay and death), stands at the centre of a modernist ruin that casts deep shadows under the influence of a spectral light shining in through the spaces where once there were windows and a roof. The top of the machine is adorned by a pink star resembling the Soviet Star, and on its side a circular target is painted in the colours of the US flag. The scene is predated by a sense of emptiness, silence and stillness and the viewer is left with the impression that time has come to a halt.

Tilo Baumgärtel is another Leipzig artist whose paintings have been read as *memento mori* that bear witness to the fading habitats of an expired age. The catalogue for an exhibition of Baumgärtel at the Kunsthalle Emden, described the artist's early paintings as inspired by Leipzig and its surroundings, where the artist lives today and where he also spent his childhood during the GDR:

“[I]n his early paintings overgrown allotment colonies, forgotten picnic areas, abandoned factories or deserted villages appear from out of the sprawling green like long lost temples somewhere in the tropical rainforest. [...] Landscapes filled with coarsely plastered dachas, camping sites or suburban settlements might recall Baumgärtel's native Saxony, but we should be aware that images from international travel brochures or the packages of Asia-Shop gimmicks influence his paintings just as much as the private memories of lake swimming in his youth or the great flood of summer 2002, which turned the banks of the Mulde rivers near Leipzig into a disaster zone” (Ohlsen 2006: 59).

Notably, this description matches the reading of Baumgärtel's painting “*Kühlwasser*” (*Cooling Water* 2002), provided in the previous chapter, where the painting was explained as a surrealist variation of the earlier official artistic depictions of industrial life in the GDR. Yet, by describing the ruinous buildings in Baumgärtel's paintings as “appearing from out of the sprawling green like long lost temples somewhere in the tropical rainforest”, this quote also positions them in a tradition of artistic representations of imperial decline and fall.

Although the ruins of the GDR portrayed in the painting of representatives of the “New Leipzig School” attracted the most art critical commentary, other paintings associated with the label “New German” were marked by a similar post-industrial ruin aesthetic. The works in question are by individual artists who studied at academies across western Germany. Although they did not constitute a particular group or school, their paintings are unified by representations of the architectural and cultural icons of western postwar industrial modernity. More specifically, they depict the material remains of the postwar West German society of affluence with its promise of a future all-inclusive welfare state, thus conjuring up a sense of *Westalgie*.

A Berlin-based critic interviewed for this thesis referred to the painting of the artist Christian Hellmich (who studied at the Folkwangschule, Essen and is today based in Cologne) to illustrate that modernist architectural motifs dating from the postwar period were common to many artists associated with the broader label “New German Painting”, not only the “New Leipzig School”. The critic described the architectural motifs of Hellmich’s paintings not as representations of actual existing buildings, but as “compilations of all sorts of photographic sources put together to make up a fantastic building”. Nevertheless, he suggests, the artist’s motifs include elements that refer to the West German Ruhr region, where the artist’s hometown, Essen, is located, and which was the postwar Federal Republic’s heartland of heavy industry (coal mining and steel production) and the motor of the economic miracle of the 1950s and 60s. Since the early 1970s, when the coal and steel of the Ruhr lost its competitive edge on the world market, the region has turned into a landscape scarred by industrial decline, pollution, and economic distress. According to the critic, Hellmich’s paintings capture this world:

“[These paintings] are all postwar. Ah, they are the downside of the *Wirtschaftswunder* [economic miracle], they are all anonymous 60s buildings, but they could be in Essen. Rubbish bins, this *Plattenbau*-look, its all Essen. They are all composed, but it is that sort of anonymous architecture of the 1960s that pervaded Germany in the wake of the rebuilding after the war.”

When turning to Hellmich’s paintings such as “*Schränke*” (*Shutter*, 200 x 220 cm, oil on canvas, 2005) and “*Eingang IV*” (*Entrance IV*, 280 x 400 cm, 2006) the above description of his work attains more flesh. Both paintings depict the kind of bare and minimalist modern urban environments characteristic of postwar West German cities.

Eingang IV shows the entrance to an underground station, or perhaps an underground passageway, and *Schränke* a garage-like building. Yet, this architecture, which once symbolised an economically thriving postwar West Germany, is turned into the ruins of a past age and social-economic system. Both paintings show abandoned settings that no longer seem to be in use. In *Eingang* the escalator appears to be standing still, and in *Schränke* the brown rolling shutter is closed and its colour fading.

In terms of their sense of abandonment and decay, and also their painting style – the muted fields of colour, their sense of flatness, the thick layering of paint, and the enclosed spaces that extend backwards – Hellmich’s two paintings recall the interiors of Matthias Weischer (see Chapter 5). Commenting on this resemblance with Weischer’s work, the critic cited earlier observed:

“[Hellmich] didn’t go to Leipzig he went to Essen art school. But when I interviewed him in his studio a few months ago, I said: ‘When I look at your work, I have to be honest Christian, there is a sort of Leipzig-quality about it’. And how ... and how he said, ‘Oh yeah, I was in David Schnell and Matthias Weischer’s studio in 2003 and I saw their work’, didn’t say anything more. And obviously it was like a revelation to him, he was very straightforward about it... and you know he is a Leipzig painter, that’s never studied in Leipzig”.

This interview extract is interesting not only because it reveals the stylistic closeness of Hellmich’s work to that of Weischer and other artists of the “New Leipzig School”, but, and in light of the critic’s earlier-quoted description of the Hellmich’s paintings as portraying the “downside of the *Wirtschaftswunder*”, it also suggests that thematically the artist found inspiration in the work of the Leipzig painters and their engagement with the ruins of the GDR. Hellmich has transposed the ruin aesthetic of the paintings of Weischer and Schnell, which he saw during his visit of their studio in 2003, onto the former West German urban context.

A West German, middle-class variant of the abandoned *Plattenbauten* featured in Matthias Weischer’s paintings can also be found in Stefan Kürten’s paintings of architectural motifs. Kürten studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and today lives in Düsseldorf and New York. Like Weischer’s interiors, his paintings have also repeatedly been framed as “motifs of modernist decay” (see Wullschläger 2011). Yet, in contrast to Weischer’s *Plattenbau*-motifs, which invoke the past promise of

socialist modernity, Kürten's paintings portray one of the principal architectural icons of West German affluent society, the suburban single-family house, in a state of decay. What seem to be "idyllic German suburbs" at first sight (Kröner 2011) have, on closer inspection, something mouldy and frosty clinging to them, which gives them the look of a fading dream. In the painting *Silence* (88 x 267 cm, oil on canvas, 2001), for example, the clinker front-façade of a pitched-roof house (a building style characteristic of the postwar West German suburbs of the 1950s and 60s) brown-yellow mould stains mark the canvas, suggesting its decomposition. In *Heartbeat* (190 x 270 cm, oil on canvas, 2004/2005) a modernist pavilion is overgrown with plants and weeds to the extent that inside and outside, nature and human-construction can no longer be clearly distinguished. In many places on the canvas the dense pattern of plants and weeds appears like black holes that are eating away at its material. In one of Kürten's later paintings, *Sitting in a Dream* from 2012 (150 x 120 cm, acrylic and ink on linen), which shows a similar modernist pavilion decorated with designer objects of the 1950s and 60s, the plants are still confined to their pots and beds. It is night and the light in the living room is burning; on the terrace table rests a tray with fruit. However, as the title suggests, the scene has something dream-like and surreal to it. It seems a memory of a past time with no worries and when things were still in order. Yet, forebodings of a less secure future are already in sight: the burgundy chair cushion carelessly lying across the floor of the terrace and the water-like appearance of this floor, which seems to be reflecting an illusion that might disappear at any moment.

Two other artists whose paintings can be described as portraying the ruins of Unification and who bear mentioning here are Jonas Burgert and Till Gerhard. Burgert trained at the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin and lives in Berlin. Having begun his career as an abstract painter in the mid-1990s, his later paintings, since around 2004, show neglected and abandoned studios which have been taken over by freely imagined mythological creatures. As in "*Fluchtversuch*" (*Attempt to Escape*, 280 x 340 cm, oil on canvas, 2006), the artist often includes his own figure in the composition (here "escaping" into the distance through the door-frame) invoking that the studios depicted are artist studios. This impression is further enhanced by the pots of paint that stand in the rooms portrayed and the blurs of pure colour that mark the canvases. In the case of *Fluchtversuch*, a pot of blue paint is standing in the door-

frame and a splash of pink colour covers the top part of the frame of a realist-style portrait. A catalogue essay for one of the artist's exhibitions at a commercial gallery in Hamburg in 2008, described the paintings as telling the history of the conversion of dis-functional industrial buildings in post-*Wende* Berlin into artists' studios, a history which Burgert, who has a studio in a former industrial building in Berlin Pankow, himself participated in. They show "places which could be studios like those you used to be able to find in shut-down factories and condemned houses in Berlin after the Wall came down" (Heinrich 2008, no pagination).

Finally, the ruins of Unification also appear prominently in the paintings of Till Gerhard, who studied at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Hamburg and is based in Hamburg. As with many of the other "new German" painters, the artist engages with the failed modernist utopias of East and West through real and fictive architectural motifs. The painting "*Vermeidung des Bösen*" (*Avoidance of Evil*, 230 x 300 cm, oil on canvas, 2005) shows "a world that has become destabilised" (Seyfarth 2005). A *Plattenbau* apartment block appears behind a pile of debris with an elderly woman rushing through the scene. Art critics have read the painting as a commentary on the collapse of the GDR and as confronting its viewer with the "heap of rubble left behind by a social system that has become obsolete" (ibid.). In turn, other Gerhard paintings, such as "*Das Wir Gefühl*" (*The We Feeling*, 200 x 180 cm, oil on canvas, 2004), look back on the utopian ideals of his parents' generation, the generation of '68, in West Germany. Referring to this and similar paintings of the artist, *Der Spiegel* has suggested Gerhard "transports his audience back to the late 1960s, to an age in which the world was neatly divided by an Iron Curtain. At least on one side of it, people mated, debated and demonstrated" (Knöfel 2005: 205). The idealist spirit of the 1960s and the period of the Cold War are already invoked in the titles of Gerhard's paintings; alongside *Das Wir Gefühl* there stand titles such as "*Saurer Regen – Kalter Frieden*" (*Acid Rain – Cold Peace*) and "*Wächter der Natur*" (*Guardians of Nature*). Yet it is also the painting's motifs and style which are underwritten by these themes. In *Das Wir Gefühl* a group of "Flower Children" is dancing in what would be an idyllic and untouched landscape, if there were not the satellites in the background, which some critics have read as a reference to the *Teufelsberg* in former West Berlin and the US listening station that was installed there in the 1950s. The contrast between this motif from the Cold War, on the one hand,

and the peace-seeking mentality of much of the 68-generation, on the other, is heightened by the luminous and thin colouring of the painting, which almost has the look of watercolours.

In light of the above discussion of the ruin motifs of some of the “New German Painting” and their art critical reception, it can be suggested that – granting a degree of variability – the paintings were marked by a shared ruin aesthetic. Thematically, this ruin aesthetic was focused on the architectural ruins and cultural residues of industrial modernity of the two postwar Germanys. Yet what were the wider political implications of the artists’ nostalgic portrayal of a past age and its utopias of social transformation? As Chapter 4 discussed, for many American commentators, the paintings projected a dystopian outlook, which they claimed was reflective of the collective sentiments in post-Unification Germany, especially in the eastern part. The assumption in much of the American discourse was that the nostalgic content of the painting embodied a nostalgic mood in real cultural life. To return to the art sociological debates examined in Chapter 1, it can be said that the painting was viewed as passively mediating collective social meanings and structures.

By contrast, the German debate largely abstained from such reflective theories in its discussion of the paintings’ nostalgic aspect. Instead the works tended to be judged on the basis of their reflexive engagement with society. Again as Chapter 4 showed, the verdict reached in such assessments was more often negative than positive. The artists’ social and historical realism was usually said to lack any critical social or political messages. Commentaries that were more specifically aimed at the painting’s ruin aesthetic and nostalgic representation of the social-political utopias of postwar industrial modernity, often suggested that the artists dwelled in a melancholic fixation on this past, rather than reinvigorating its social-critical impulse. For most German commentators the painting projected pessimism, not optimism, about future social-political change. The next part of this chapter examines how this interpretation of the painting in the German discourse often led to its association with the political right.

7.2 Between utopia & dystopia

In the introduction to the volume *Ruins of Modernity* (2010), Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle define the ruin as a site of intense semantic instability. The authors suggest that as a cultural trope the ruin “signals the impending breakdown of meaning and therefore fosters intensive compensatory discursive activity” (6). The domestic discourse on the “New German Painting” in a sense reflected this dictum. Commentaries on the paintings’ ruinous scenarios of postwar modernity, and the failed utopias they conjured up, varied between labelling the artists as disappointed utopians, post-utopians, and reactionary anti-modernists. The notion that the artists’ nostalgic return to the ideals of another age indicated the resurgence of hope and attempts at recuperation (an interpretation often articulated in the literature on contemporary art that represents the wreckage of state socialism and the western welfare states, see Scribner 2003) was only articulated hesitantly. Instead there was a strong tendency to read the artists’ paintings as indicating disappointment and the loss of utopian imagination.

Writing for the art magazine of *Deutsche Bank*, Oliver Koerner von Gustorf (2004) was one of the few critics to read a utopian imagination into the “New German Painting”. For Koerner von Gustorf the artists’ engagement with modernist discourse speaks “less of withdrawal than of hope”, in the sense that “a former vision of continuous progress appears as a recurrent dream in which something becomes rediscovered that was never really possessed in the first place”. An article published in the newspaper *Die Zeit* (Schüle 2005) is more hesitant in claiming a rediscovery of utopia in the artists’ paintings. Focusing on the nostalgic lifeworlds of the “New Leipzig School”, it identifies the paintings as showing “a time of helplessness, in which there are no more utopias, certainties and answers” (ibid.). Whilst the paintings’ protagonists are read as articulating a “quiet, tentative critique of the conditions”, it is suggested “[t]hey are too exhausted and disillusioned for the revolutionary outcry” (ibid.). What emerges from the *Zeit* review is the notion that in the Leipzig paintings, social critique and the desire for social change are weighed down by the forces of disappointment and disorientation.

The concept of the disappointed utopian suggested by *Die Zeit*, dominated much of the broader debate on the “New German Painting”. The artists’ nostalgic lifeworlds

were seen to lack the optimism necessary to draw up alternative visions of the future to replace those passed down from our predecessors that have proven inadequate as solutions to the problems of modernity. Instead, the paintings were often interpreted as veering towards a melancholic fixation on loss. Yet a closer look at the domestic debate shows that, while the artists were predominantly labelled disappointed utopians, not all commentators agreed that a social-political perspective was absent from their work. Right-leaning critics, who re-defined the artists' nostalgic outlook as post-utopian, aligned the works with a neo-conservative end-of-utopia discourse that began to establish itself in the German political and cultural fields in the early 1990s. In support of this discourse, the artists' paintings were cast as suggesting a critique of the left-liberal cultural establishment and its utopianism, which had dominated Germany since the late 1960s.

The literary author and former art critic of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Florian Illies, who founded his own art magazine *Monopol: Magazin für Kunst und Leben* in 2004, was one of the initiators of this neo-conservative appropriation of the "New German Painting". Illies became nationally and internationally known for his pop-literature novel *Generation Golf* (2000) – often described as the German equivalent to Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) – in which he narrates the upbringing and mentality of his generation, those born between 1965 and 1975 in the FRG. Characteristic of this generation are, for Illies, its childhood experiences of the West German affluent society of the 1970s and 80s and its embrace of material culture and brand identities. What differentiates this generation, according to Illies, from its parent generation – the '68ers – is above all its a-political attitude. However, rather than condemning the political disinterestedness of his contemporaries, Illies (even if ironically) celebrates this attitude. The "New German Painters" are for him part of the "generation Golf" and the first artists to express its mentality in visual art.

7.2.i Overcoming the idealism of '68

The public discourse of the years following Unification was characterised by "semantics of new beginnings, overdue endings, conclusions and re-evaluations" (Huber 2005: 84). In this rhetorical context the concept of generation was frequently

used to “mark a break in cultural continuity” (ibid.). Also, in one of the major review articles of the exhibition *deutschemalereizeitausendunddrei* published in *Der Spiegel*, Florian Illies celebrated the exhibition as presenting a new generation of artists – the “Generation ‘Golf’” (152) – who had initiated a historical “*Wendepunkt*” (turning point) in the German artistic field.

For Illies, the artists exhibited in *deutschemalereizeitausendunddrei* had made an overdue break from the strictures for artistic production of the postwar Federal Republic as defined by the liberal left: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Frankfurt School critical theory, abstraction, and minimalism. According to Illies the young artists ironically subverted these parameters for artistic production and thereby challenged the cultural-intellectual dominance of the older German liberal left. To illustrate his point, he referred to the painting *Bauhaus* (2003) by Yesim Akdeniz Graf:

“[I]n this painting a Soviet star moves above one of the white Dessau master houses [...] [it] calls for our attention with its shrill colours as if it wanted to deceitfully declare the Bauhaus – this for the 68ers central cornerstone of the future oriented Germany – as trash, and thereby take from the older generation with irony what this generation always believed to own: exclusive interpretative power” (Illies 2003: 153).

Although for Illies, the artists’ engagement with modernist discourse projects “*Wehmut* [nostalgia] for the achievements of modernity” (152), at the same time it signals that the artists have shed the utopian illusions of their parent generation, the ‘68ers. Corinne Wasmuht, for example, known for her quasi-abstract paintings, is said to approach the artistic idiom of abstraction analytically and art historically, as one possible style amongst many. Modernist idealist conceptions of abstraction as a path towards an emancipated future – “a possibility for escape, to fly from the present into the future” (152) – are absent from Wasmuht’s work.

Overall the paintings exhibited in *deutschemalereizweitausendunddrei* constitute, for Illies, a new and welcome anti-discursive artistic attitude: “The Kunstverein is showing paintings, only paintings [...] Even the catalogue abstains from the usual meaningful classifications” (150). The paintings’ arguably anti-discursive attitude was affinitive with the editorial profile of his Berlin-based art magazine *Monopol*. In an interview given at its launch, Illies described the magazine as concerned not with

“ideologies” but “quality” (in Poschardt and Sack 2004). In the same interview he praised painting coming out of post-*Wende* Germany for returning to a concept of art as beauty, long forbidden in the post-1945 Federal Republic: “Art is art, and not necessarily sociology or *Geschichtsaufarbeitung* [working through history]” (ibid.). By making “sensuality” its central concept *Monopol* takes the same approach: “Our age group again has a need for a sensual satisfaction of its aesthetic desires” (ibid.).

Illies’ framing of the new German painters as breaking with the social-political concerns of German postwar artists by returning to an a-political concept of art as beauty resonates strongly with the neoconservative end of utopia discourse that took hold of German political and cultural debates in the early 1990s when national unity put the longstanding conservative demand for a return to “normality” in postwar German political and cultural life back on the agenda. The “amorphously left and left-liberal consensus [that] had come to dominate intellectual life [in the Federal Republic] since the 1960s” (Huyssen 1991: 116) came under attack, including what conservative critics considered its “misguided, if not insidious, utopian disposition” (Huyssen 1995: 92). As Chapter 3 showed, this left-liberal disposition consisted of a post-national ideology and programme of constitutional patriotism, with an insistence on a collective identity that was anchored in a culture of collective guilt and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and a pacifist foreign politics of non-intervention. In the years after Unification neoconservative voices critiqued the liberal left for its “excessive political and cultural moralism” (Brockmann 1997: 19; see also Michel 1998: 246-47), which – so the argument went – had prevented Germans from developing a “normal” sense of national identity and Germany from again becoming a “normal nation”.

In the field of art and culture this neoconservative attack on the utopianism of the postwar liberal left was first played out in the “*Literaturstreit*” (“Literature Dispute”) of 1990 (for an overview, see Mayer-Iswandy 1996).¹²⁰ In a feuilleton debate a select

¹²⁰ Later similar neoconservative arguments for “normalisation” were raised in the debates over Germany’s participation in the Gulf War in 1991; the 1993 controversy over the publication of Botho Strauß’s essay “*Anschwellender Bockgesang*” in *Der Spiegel*; and the Walser-Bubis debate over Martin Walser’s speech at the reception of the 1997 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. For an overview of these controversies, see Brockmann (1997).

group of intellectuals¹²¹ called for a normalisation of the German aesthetic discourse by relieving art from the unwritten postwar obligation to a “*Gesinnungsästhetik*” (“aesthetics of conviction”), which had “overburdened and coarsened by moral and political engagement” (Brockmann 1997: 6) the literature of both the FRG and GDR. Authors from the postwar decades were accused of having been “far too immersed in non-literary themes, in the fight against restoration, fascism, clericalism, Stalinism, and so forth” (Greiner 1991: 210). What conservative critics demanded in the *Literaturstreit*, was a revision of Germany’s literary culture in light of national unification. Unification, so these critics argued, permitted a return to “normality” after the German “*Sonderweg*” (path of exception) since 1945, which had justified the prioritizing of moral and political issues over aesthetics in German art.

Examined against the background of these broader debates over continuity and discontinuity in German art following Unification, Illies’s review of *deutschemalerei-zweitausendunddrei*, shows signs of transferring the neoconservative calls for the normalisation of post-*Wende* German literature to include visual art. His propagation of the concept of art as beauty, and simultaneous rejection of art as a site for engaging with questions of “sociology or *Geschichtsaufarbeitung*”, echoed the earlier demands of neoconservative literary critics for a break with the postwar *Gesinnungsästhetik*.

Looking at the broader German debate on the new painting, it shows that the association of the art with the political right was not uncommon. As Christoph Tannert (2006) observes in the book *New German Painting – Remix*, the domestic debate was “shaped by the confrontation with ‘neo-conservatism’ – particularly to the effect that young painters were hardly trusted with being able to lay claim to the ‘critical function’ of their works” (11). Whereas right-leaning critics, such as Illies, celebrated the artists for their alleged post-critical attitude, left-leaning critics dismissed this attitude as amounting to a reactionary artistic position, especially, when it came to the artists’ engagement with modernist history and discourse. The next section of this chapter turns to this left-leaning critique.

¹²¹ The central figures in this debate were Frank Schirrmacher, co-editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the literary critic Ulrich Greiner, writing for *Die Zeit*, and Karlheinz Bohrer, editor of the political magazine *Merkur*.

7.2.ii Anti-modern reactionaries?

The journal *Texte zur Kunst* acted as the leading voice in negatively associating the “New German Painting” with the political right in the domestic discourse. It was in one of the journal’s more recent issues from 2010 (titled *Painting Is Not The Issue*), that the fiercest attack on the new painting was articulated as part of a broader critical assessment of the recent return of figurative painting in the international art market and exhibitions (see Chapter 6). An essay by the critic Niklas Maak (2010) included in the issue, introduced the new “figurative painting from Germany, preferably subsumed under the term ‘Leipzig School’” as “a top seller at art fairs and beloved by neoliberal politicians” (117). Continuing in the same pejorative tone, Maak describes the painting as an anti-modern, decorative kind of art, which returns to “pre-avant-garde criteria such as ‘brilliant craftsmanship’, atmosphere’, and ‘artistic signature’” (120), instead of engaging with modernist debates on painting as a medium. Further, the social-critical relevance of the painting’s nostalgic lifeworlds, as reflecting the contemporary social malaise, suggested by some commentators, is dismissed as an attempt to add “a tinge of glamorous self-doubt to the decorative effect” (120). Rather than seeing a critical consciousness in the artists’ nostalgic return to the icons of modernist movements in architecture and art, Maak claims the artists rob these icons of their emancipatory political and social foundations. Reinforcing the affinity of the “New German Painting” with the political right, he suggests “the people seen in these paintings, in their futuristic housing and trendy clothes, might be compared to the pop-coloured [...] information stands of neo-liberal politicians – socio-aesthetic vampires who suck the blood of an optimistic 1960s aesthetic, adopting the costume of modernity to fight the era’s political achievements” (120).

At various points Maak’s account of the “New German Painting” echoes one of the foremost critical attacks on the “Neo-Expressionist” German painters of the 1980s – Benjamin Buchloh’s essay “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression”, first published in the American art journal *October* in 1981. Whilst this parallelism can be related to affinities between the art of the two generations, it is also the result of *October* acting as a role model for the journal *Texte zur Kunst*, founded in 1990 (see Preuss 1997). Like *October*, *Texte zur Kunst* positions itself on the left of the political spectrum and both were conceived as platforms for conceptual and political art practices, which continued the heritage of the historical avant-garde. For the journal,

painting that had circulated under the label “New German Painting” in the international art market moved outside its confines.

In the early 2000s, *Texte zur Kunst* critiques of the “New German Painting” raised many of the same charges that pro-conceptualist *October* critics had levelled against German neo-expressionist painting in the early 1980s (see Chapter 4). In particular, reviews of the new painting reiterated the link *October* critics, such as Buchloh, had established between German “Neo-Expressionism” and conservative and reactionary political forces.¹²² Maak, in his 2010 review, also positioned the “New German Painting” in line with German “Neo-Expressionism” as an art that has abandoned social and political action and critique. Building on earlier arguments by Buchloh (1981), Maak suggests that one way in which the reactionary leanings of both generations of artists manifest themselves, was in the artists’ cultivation of images of the history of modernity as catastrophe. Maak cites the painting of Neo Rauch – which is described as projecting “horror fantasies or a wish to flee urban civilization to a dark pre-modern rural world” (Maak 2010: 120) – as exemplary of this tendency. His critique clearly builds on Buchloh’s (1981) earlier criticism of the neo-expressionist painters, as dwelling on a notion of modern history as catastrophe, as harbouring a “secret longing for destruction as solution” (67) to the contradictions of capitalist modernity. In Buchloh’s view, rather than questioning “the reasons for the failure of enlightenment, the end of modernism and the enforced silencing of its critical potential” the artists took them “as excuses for indulging in defeat” (66) producing highly aestheticized and mythologised images of terror and death. This approach, he claimed, not only undermined the development of “social consciousness” and “political awareness”, but more detrimentally, it fostered a “proto-Fascist” attitude (Buchloh 1981: 66).

Notably, Maak was not alone in identifying an apocalyptic slant in Rauch’s work as well as in others of the “New German Painting”. The concept of history as catastrophe

¹²² See also the *Texte zur Kunst* issue “*Neokonservatismus*” (*Neoconservatism*) from 2002, which included a round table discussion, during which the “New German Painting” was held up as exemplary of a proposed neoconservative turn in contemporary art (Ehlers et al. 2003). Pre-empting the condemnatory rhetoric of Maak’s article, this round table discussion singled out the painting of the Dresden-trained Eberhard Havekost as “an appropriation of Pop Art combined with a continuation of right traditions. A clichéd-understanding of looks, women and consumption. [...] this seems very crudely ‘neopopulist’, if you like also ‘necon’” (Fanizadeh in Krümmel and Lintzel, et al. 2003: 88).

pervaded many reviews and commentaries on Rauch.¹²³ One of the foremost proponents of this reading was the critic Rudji Bergmann. In his documentary film “*Neo Rauch: Ein deutscher Maler*” (*Neo Rauch: A German Painter*, 2007) Bergmann, for example, describes Rauch’s painting “*Die Lage*” (*State of Affairs*, 300 x 420, oil on canvas, 2006) as showing a wall that represents not the Berlin Wall, but a wall that protects the world from collapse after a “non-definable catastrophe”. Similarly, writing about the deranged and abandoned domestic interiors of Matthias Weischer’s paintings, Bergmann asks: “has a major catastrophe just occurred or did mere minor disturbances drive the absent inhabitants from their (residential) paradise?” (Bergmann 2007: 88). Another “New Leipzig School” painter whose work was regularly associated with a concept of history as catastrophe was Tilo Baumgärtel, for example, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* suggests the artist’s painting of rural suburbs marked by industrial ruin, show “a world [...] in which a (military? ecological?) catastrophe has happened” (Wendland 2003).

The artists of the “New Leipzig School” were not the only “new German” painters who were diagnosed with an apocalyptic and catastrophic imagination. Also many artists who studied at academies across former West Germany, and who were associated with the label “New German Painting”, were often said to display such an imagination. Above all it was Daniel Richter, who has often been portrayed as Rauch’s West German counterpart, whose painting was identified as portraying scenarios in which the structures of the modern world are collapsing. Richter trained at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg and is currently living in Hamburg and Berlin. His paintings from 2000 onwards, when the artist changed from an abstract to a figurative-representational style, show worlds in flames, filled with terror, violence, and destruction, “populated with shocked ghost-like figures, thronging mobs and aggressive animals” (Schatz 2008). Although much louder than Rauch’s seemingly mute and frozen paintings, Richter’s paintings share the latter’s apocalyptic outlook. *Die Zeit* described the artist’s street-scenes as “invok[ing] above all melancholia, inferno, depression” (Rauterberg 2007). Arguing along the same lines, an article in *Art in America* suggests the paintings show a world that is either

¹²³ Rauch’s painting has often been positioned within a longer trajectory of twentieth-century German art that centres on a concept of “history as catastrophe” (see Hell 2002). See Julia Hell (2004; 2008) for a critical account of this artistic tradition.

already “spoiled or on the brink of ruin” (Mueller 2008). The article refers to Richter’s “*Die Idealisten*” (*The Idealists*, 358 x 248,30 x 4,40 cm, 2008), which it describes as showing “three near-hysterical guys dressed in superhero unitards [who] furiously play air guitar in an urban plaza, while debris falls all around and a fiery explosion breaks out in a vacant structure behind them” (ibid.). Whilst this painting echoes Richter’s background in the Hamburg punk and anarchist scene during the 1980s and 1990s, other of his works invoke a concept of history as catastrophe in relation to German history. The painting “*Jawohl! und Gomorrah*” (*Yes, Sir! And Gomorrah*, 225 x 370 cm, oil on canvas, 2001), for example, shows a street scene in which a group of figures is escaping from a building. The painting’s title relates the scene to the destruction of the city of Hamburg during Operation Gomorrah in July 1943, which caused one of the largest firestorms raised by the Royal Air Force and US Army Air Force during World War II, leaving behind a scene of devastating destruction.¹²⁴ Crucially, the title places the painting in the context of a wave of German literature and films that emerged towards the end of the 1990s, and which verbalised and visualised the subject of German suffering during and after World War II, thus breaking with the taboo placed on the subject in West German public discourse since the 1960s (see Chapter 3). In his essay “*Luftkrieg und Literatur*” (*Air War and Literature*) from 1999 (reprinted in Sebald 2004), W.G. Sebald was one of the first to openly speak about and describe the burned and mutilated bodies that covered the streets of Hamburg in July 1943: “Horribly disfigured corpses lay everywhere. Bluish phosphorous flames still flickering around many of them; others had been roasted brown or purple and reduced to a third of their normal size” (Sebald 2004: 28). The skeletal figures in Richter’s painting share some of the characteristics described here; moving through ash-coloured buildings they seem to be fleshless in varying degrees, glowing and flickering like flames, in blue, purple, red, and orange, they are on the verge of decomposing.

Another of Richter’s paintings *Nerdon* (260 x 360 cm, oil on canvas, 2004) thematises Germany’s more recent history of the collapse of communism and the project of Reunification. The vandalised urban landscape is divided into two sides by a street leading towards the horizon. Partitioning walls have been moved to the side and in the

¹²⁴ The official numbers suggest that 42,600 civilians were killed, and 37,000 wounded during the air raid.

background a bridge seems to be connecting the two parts, yet it is inaccessible. On the right side, which appears to represent the East, a crushed red star is lying on the ground and a man has collapsed at its feet in exhaustion. Another man, who seems to be searching for food, is holding rats in his hands, and a white figure, seemingly a woman, is being raped by two men. On the left side, a white gorilla sitting in a wheelchair, who brings to mind West Germany's ex-chancellor Helmut Schmidt, is looking at the scene of devastation, wonderingly and helplessly. The painting portrays an ideological wasteland and a post-1989 Germany left with an overwhelming pile of historical wreckage.

The above discussion suggests that Maak's (2010) critique of the "New German Painting" as indulging in scenarios of disaster and destruction – a fascination previously identified by Buchloh (1981) in the "Neo-Expressionist" painting – has a certain relevance. Much of the "New German Painting" projects an inclination to slip into morbid fascinations and a concept of history as catastrophe. However, at the same time, Maak's critique bears an element of reductionism. As with some of the art critical commentaries on the new painting's visions of disaster and destruction cited above, Maak's review fails to engage with the painting's specific cultural references and memories in order to formulate a more historically and social-politically specific reading of its ruin motifs. This, in a sense a-historical, reading of the iconographic specificity of the "New German Painting" was counteracted above all by essays and reviews of the work of Rauch.

The latter body of art critical literature identified Rauch's catastrophic visions more concretely as a critique of the Enlightenment ideology of progress and its acting out in the dictatorial regimes of the twentieth century. In his essay in the exhibition catalogue *Randgebiet*, Harald Kunde (2000) suggests that Rauch's paintings of the failure of socialist modernity render this failure a universal cipher for the destructive and catastrophic effects of the modernist ideology of progress and its "engineers of humanity" – who "creat[e] entities which they can no longer control: homunculi of progress, protagonists of practice and action, well-meaning agents of collective failure" (36). Reviews that have read Rauch's nightmarish visions as allegories of Enlightenment reason having turned into technocracy and military destruction, often focus on the cardboard-like figures of his paintings, positing them as emblems of

planned action having transformed into meaninglessness and violence (see Wagner 2000: 17). Julia Hell (2002: 282) suggests that the tension between the purposeful gaze of the figures and their senseless actions constitutes an attempt by the artist to break down the scopic regime of industrial modernity: the totalizing gaze of the “maker and planner”. According to Hell, this scopic regime is, through complex and de-centralised perspective plays, also broken down on the level of the gaze of the paintings’ viewer. A painting such as “*Tankstelle*” (*Petrol Station*, 274 x 176 cm, oil on paper on canvas, 1995) takes this play with a de-centralised perspective to an extreme. The painting is divided into four (and a half) seemingly autonomous panels that are staggered on top of each other. Each panel shows a different view of what appears to be the same petrol station. Holger Broecker (2006: 24) has suggested that the painting confronts its viewer with the experience that the world can only be grasped in fragments and that our perception of it continuously shifts and changes.

Art criticism that has read a critique of the enlightenment ideology of progress into Rauch’s catastrophic ruin imagery is anchored in scholarship on modern imaginaries of ruins as the self-critical underside of modernity.¹²⁵ One of the contemporary proponents of this view, Huyssen (2006), suggests that “against the optimism of Enlightenment thought, the modern imaginary of ruins remains conscious of the dark side of modernity [...] It articulates the nightmare of the Enlightenment that all history might ultimately be overwhelmed by nature” (13). In her cultural history of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym (2001, 2010) has conceptualised this tradition of critical reflection on modernity, which incorporates nostalgia, not as anti-modern, but rather as “off-modern”. The prefix “off” indicates not an end to utopian thought, but rather a shift in the temporal structure of the utopian imagination. It involves a revisiting of the “unfinished critical project of modernity, based on an alternative understanding of temporality, not as a teleology of progress or transcendence but as a superimposition and coexistence of heterogenous times” (Boym 2001: 30). The off-modern perspective is, for Boym, part of what she terms “reflective” nostalgia (as opposed to “restorative” nostalgia), which thrives in *algia* (longing) as opposed to *nostos* (homecoming). The visual ciphers of reflective nostalgia are, according to Boym,

¹²⁵ For an overview of this scholarship, which includes the writings of Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, amongst others, see Hell and Schönle (2010: 7) and Hell (2004).

“patina, ruins, cracks, imperfections” (45), which convey the contradictions of modernity between innovation and progress on one side and ruination on the other.

The final part of this chapter examines the temporal structure of the ruin motifs of the new German paintings. The aim is to convey the layers of time and history that are put into play in the paintings’ nostalgic lifeworlds. More specifically the focus is on the historical continuities and discontinuities established in the paintings with regard to the specific post-1989 German context. Crucially, the concern here is not to judge the images of German history evoked in the paintings on their “truthfulness”, but rather on how they challenged dominant historical narratives. In other words, the paintings are judged on their performance as “counter-memories” (see Chapter 3).

The political labelling of the art will be abstained from in the final part of this chapter. As the above overview of the critical discourse on the paintings’ representations of the ruins of industrial modernity and its underlying ideology of social progress suggested, it remains open to debate whether the paintings express disappointment with this ideology, its critique, idealisation, or reanimation. Political readings of the latter kind vary as they must ultimately depend on which painting is being looked at, as well as on the specific social-historical context in which the viewing takes place.

7.3 A common German-German history of post-1989 discontinuity

The proliferation of *Ostalgie* and other forms of nostalgia in Germany after the historical transition of 1989/90 asserts the common view of nostalgia as affinitive with historical periods of discontinuity in individual and collective life (Davis 1979: 49). In his sociology of nostalgia, Fred Davis (1979) argued that the social value of nostalgia lies in its capacity to create continuity in collective identity, and to evoke idealised visions of a stable past, to better endure an unstable present and uncertain future. In contrast to Davis’s definition of nostalgia as a response to historical rupture and a defence mechanism against the threat of identity discontinuity, Stuart Tannock (2006) conceptualised nostalgia as a “periodizing emotion”, which actively fashions historical discontinuity: “[D]iscontinuity, far from being simply experienced by the nostalgic subject, and far from being simply the engendering condition of nostalgia, is also and always at the same time a discontinuity posited by the nostalgic subject”

(Tannock 2006: 456). For Tannock, nostalgia positions a cut between the past and present. A critical analysis of nostalgia should ask “how these discontinuities are interpreted, [...] how they are given meaning in the structure of nostalgic rhetoric” (Tannock 2006: 459). In other words, it should ask what is placed in the past and what is brought into the present and with what effect in specific instances of nostalgia.

The remaining sections of this chapter turn to examining the ruin aesthetic of the “New German Painting” in terms of a concept of nostalgia as imposing patterns of historical continuity and discontinuity. Following the historical rupture of 1989/90, the dynamics of historical continuity and discontinuity were complicated by their occurrence in both East and West Germany; as well as by the delayed recognition that the events of 1989 had not only caused the end of the GDR, but had also greatly altered the social-political fabric of the Federal Republic (see Chapter 3). It is suggested that positioned against the specific post-1989 German historical background, one of the most relevant aspects of the new paintings’ ruin motifs was how artists used a very similar kind of ruin aesthetic to reflect the demise of industrial modernity – and its attendant social-political visions of material equality and social welfare – in the former GDR as well as the old Federal Republic.

Thus, in a sense, the shared ruin aesthetic of the paintings resonates with the kind of artistic work Charity Scriber (2003) praised for portraying the collapse of socialism and the western welfare states “in a single space of industrial obsolescence that welds together aspects of Eastern and Western European culture” (4). However, in the case of the “New German Painting”, rather than simply welding together aspects of eastern and western European culture, the paintings’ shared ruin aesthetic approximated the divided history of postwar East and West Germany. It not only pointed towards similarities in the eastern and western variants of industrial modernity – including the dream of social progress – but also suggested a common history of post-1989 discontinuity between the GDR and pre-Unification FRG in their transformation into the united Germany. Examined as a group, the paintings position both the GDR and the old, Bonn Republic in the pre-1989 past. This dual historicisation challenged dominant narratives of post-Unification Germany as the continuation of the old Federal Republic through portraying post-*Wende* Germany as having to deal with the ruins of the GDR as well as the old western Republic.

7.3.i *The East-West axis of “New German Painting”*

As with much other post-1989 German nostalgic cultural production, the historical and cultural terrain yield visible in the “New German Painting” unfolded along what Julia Hell and Johannes von Moltke (2005) have called “the axis of East and West, divided versus unified Germany” (Hell and Moltke 2005: 87). Whilst much German art and culture (in both East and West) before 1989 was focused on a vertical past-present axis which reflected contemporary Germany in light of the trauma of Nazism and the Holocaust (see Huyssen 2010: 217), art and culture from the post-*Wende* decade that addressed issues of German identity tended to focus on East-West relations before and after Unification.

To gain a better understanding of how East-West relations were portrayed in the “New German Painting” it is helpful to compare the works with some of the painting from the postwar decades that addressed the subject of national division. Once more a comparison with the painting of the “Neo-Expressionist” artists is illuminating here. The neo-expressionists generally looked at East-West relations through the prism of national division and Cold War antagonisms and the most common architectural cipher used in the paintings is the Berlin Wall. It features perhaps most prominently in Jörg Immendorff’s “*Café Deutschland*” series (1977-83). In *Café Deutschland I* (1977/78) the artist himself appears behind a fragment of the Berlin Wall, trying to stretch his hand through it. Behind the artist the then Chancellor of the FRG, Helmut Schmidt, and the Head of State of the GDR, Erich Honecker, are shown sitting at a table, each painting their own German flag. East-West divisions are also thematised in A. R. Penck’s painting “*Der Übergang*” (*The Passage*, 1963), created two years after the building of the Berlin Wall. The painting shows a stick figure balancing on a tightrope, making its way across an abyss of flames that divides two landmasses. It can be read as a metaphor for Penck’s later emigration to West Germany, in 1980. As Karen Lang (2009) observes, the painting “invokes the separation of the nation into

two, distinct territories, and its mood evokes a sense of alienation” (85).¹²⁶ Although the Berlin Wall does not appear in the painting, it is alluded to in the abyss.¹²⁷

As suggested in this chapter, the predominant architectural cipher for East-West relations in the “New German Painting” was no longer the Berlin Wall, but the ruins of postwar modernist architecture and material culture which, in the “New German Painting”, referred back to both the former GDR, as well as the old Federal Republic. East and West Germany, before and after Reunification, were not portrayed as two separate and divided territories, as in the “Neo-Expressionist” paintings, but were merged into a single object of contemplation. This becomes particularly evident in, for example, the paintings of Christian Hellmich which transposed the ruin aesthetic formulated by the artists of the “New Leipzig School” with regard to the former GDR onto the former West German context. It was thus through the figure of the architectural ruin and the lens of nostalgia – both of which have the capacity to overlay and collapse historical temporalities (Merewether 1997, Boym 2001: xiii-xiv) – that the divided past and unified present, East and West, were brought into close proximity. It can be suggested that, in contrast to the “Neo-Expressionist” paintings created during the time of national division, the “New German Painting” corresponded with a new stage in the remapping of the country after Reunification (see Hell and Molte 2005: 87).

In his analysis of the social value of postwar industrial ruins in the UK, Tim Edensor (2005) emphasises the hybrid and transgressive capacities of ruins. For Edensor, ruins are cultural forces that blur temporal boundaries through their physical over-layering of different histories, as well as spatial boundaries between functional and non-functional spaces. Pointing to the creative and innovative capacity of ruins, Edensor proposes a critical re-reading of ruins as “sites in which the becomings of new forms, orderings, and aesthetics can emerge” (15). To Edensor’s theory of ruins as blurring

¹²⁶ Andreas Huyssen (2010) has argued that in a majority of “Neo-Expressionist” painting, the Berlin Wall appears not so much as a cipher for East-West division, but rather as “a symbol of universal alienation in the tradition of urban expressionism” (216).

¹²⁷ Penck’s negative portrayal of the Berlin Wall in *Der Übergang* (1961) stands in sharp contrast to its overwhelmingly positive representation in other East German visual art from the 1960s, where it is shown as protecting the socialist collective against the evils of capitalism (see Eisman 2010). Instead Penck’s work is much closer to later paintings of artists from West Germany, where the Wall appears as a symbol of alienation or a dictatorship that needed to wall-in its own people. At the same time it pre-empted the regime-critical artistic work that increased in the late GDR of the 1980s.

temporal and spatial boundaries, it can be added that ruins potentially also blur cultural boundaries. The case of the “New German Painting” and its ruin aesthetic, which was used equally to frame both the demise of the GDR, and that of the old Federal Republic, is a good illustration of this. As the next section shows, in the critical discourse on the new paintings, it was above all the ruins of the GDR portrayed in the works of the “New Leipzig School”, which were claimed as icons of a shared German-German history of industrial decline and of the loss of modernist visions of industrial modernisation as a path towards social progress and material equality.

7.3.ii East German ruins as icon of a shared lost past

In art critical commentaries on the “New Leipzig School”, the artists’ paintings were often discussed as iconic representations of the post-1989 German condition in former East as well as West Germany. This was especially the case with the work of Neo Rauch. Speaking of Rauch’s early paintings of the ruins of eastern German Fordism, a German critic suggests that “[t]hroughout the nineties Rauch’s paintings are populated by the stage-designs and actors of the *Gedächtnisreservoir* [memory reservoir] of the industrial societies – and what’s interesting about this – *both* sides of the iron curtain” (Heiser 2007: 124). In the above cited article from *Die Zeit* (Schüle 2005) on the “New Leipzig School” the artists’ representations of the ruins of the GDR are discussed not only as resonating with sentiments of *Ostalgie*, but also *Westalgie* for the affluent society of the old Bonn Republic. To make this point, the article refers to the fact that many of the “New Leipzig School” artists were originally from West Germany:

“The young painters reached adolescence during the time of the *Wohlstandsidylle* [idyll of affluence] of the eighties and fifteen years later they experienced the collapse of the ideal world. Characteristic of this helpless generation is a longing for security, for romantic ideals, at the zenith of individualisation they long for social ties and *communion*, for communication and *Gemeinschaft* [community]” (Schüle 2005).

The art critical discourse on the “New German Painting” was not alone in elevating artistic representation of the ruins of the GDR, to iconic representations of a bygone past in both Germanys. The academic discourse on post-1989 German nostalgia has

also repeatedly proposed such theories. Discussing the success of *Ostalgie* popular culture with western German audiences, Elaine Kelly and Amy Wlodarski (2011) suggest these products struck a chord with sentiments of longing for the pre-1989 past that was also prevalent in the West: “As unemployment rose and Germans became increasingly disillusioned with the policies of the Federal Republic, east Germany emerged as an icon of a lost past, a focus for a nostalgia shared not just by citizens of the former state but also by their western counterparts” (Kelly and Wlodarski 2011: 4).

The look eastwards amongst West Germans to give expression to their own sentiments of nostalgia for the pre-1989 Federal Republic past can be explained as a case of sideways nostalgia. As Svetlana Boym (2001) writes, “[s]ometimes nostalgia is not directed towards the past [...] but rather sideways” (xiv). Through participating in sentiments of collective longing for the GDR, western Germans indirectly remembered its counterpart, the old Federal Republic. This sideways nostalgia undermined the rhetoric of continuity between the old Bonn and the new Berlin Republic that structured the public and political discourse of the Post-Unification Federal Republic. Westerners’ participation in *Ostalgie* signalled that they were beginning to recognise that Unification did not only coincide with the end of the GDR, but that “the old FRG had also disappeared and that their previously comfortable existence was threatened not just by massive transfer payments but by new political responsibilities” (Jarausch 1997: 9). As the political journal *Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte* observed, the financial costs of Unification and global economic pressures increasingly posed a strain on the West German welfare state: “The last and most difficult farewell which is being demanded from the Germans since the historical turn of 1989/90, is that from the postwar-welfare state, which gave the traumatised nation an ‘*ersatz*’ identity and - considering the social dislocations which it was confronted with - almost magical social stability” (Fuhr 2005: 25).

Paul Cooke (2005), in his book on representations of the GDR in post-*Wende* Germany, also underscores the inclusive dimension of *Ostalgie*. Cooke explains “the notion of ‘east Germanness’” that was attached to *Ostalgie* products and practices, transcended “regional disparities” in a way that “the east, and particularly the set of values with which east Germanness is often imbued, ultimately provid[ed] a

discursive space for people in *both* the east and west to explore their relationship to the unified state” (Cooke 2005: 9). The set of eastern German values Cooke refers to have been summarised as those of social equality, social solidarity and a strong welfare state (see Grix 2002: 11). In one of the few analyses of the relationship between *Ostalgie* and *Westalgie* to the present day, Roger F. Cook (2005) elaborates the argument that western identifications with eastern German nostalgia happened via a shared longing for a lost pre-1989 sense of social stability and community.¹²⁸ Taking a sociological perspective, he argues that *Ostalgie* projected “a form of social interaction that may stir nostalgic impulses among West Germans as well” (43). *Ostalgie* was a cultural practice, which articulated an imagined community that brought back to life the memory of solidarity in the small, self-contained social circles located between the private and public sphere, which were characteristic of the GDR “*Nischengesellschaft*” (“niche society”). To make his point, Cook refers to the film *Good Bye Lenin!* (often cited as typical of *Ostalgie* popular culture) and its portrayal of social life in the GDR as defined by *Gemeinschaft*, “an idyllic life together with friends and family within the oppressive, but also in many ways protective confines of the socialist state” (48). Intriguingly Cook argues that, despite the two Germanys’ efforts during the Cold War to separate themselves politically and culturally, both the sense of “an alternative community that existed silently in the shadows” (48) and the aspirations to social security and equality of GDR socialism, resonated with the social horizon of the old Federal Republic. He refers to the postwar western German “dream of an eternal welfare state” and “of an all-inclusive society of abundance” (46); as well as to the society of “small self-contained circles” (49) that the Federal Republic became as part of its post-national ideology. Given these affinitive social structures of the two postwar Germanys, eastern longings for the social horizon of the GDR of social solidarity, stability and security, resonated with and were able to accommodate western longings for the old Federal Republic.

Building on the preceding analysis, it can be suggested, that the nostalgic lifeworlds portrayed in the “New Leipzig School” painting similarly conjured up memories of forms of social and political organisation that were intimately intertwined with the project of postwar mass industrialisation in East and West. This thesis is reaffirmed

¹²⁸ For a definition of *Westalgie* as longing for “a simpler, more secure past”, see also Fuchs and James-Chakraborty, et al. (2011: 8).

when considering that other of the new German paintings, which referred to a more western German cultural reference framework were marked by a very similar post-industrial ruin aesthetic. As suggested above, this shared ruin aesthetic projected an image of post-*Wende* Germany as a nation that had to deal not only with the ruins of the GDR, but also of the old Federal Republic. However, at the same time, it potentially also reminded of the promises of future security, stability and solidarity to be achieved through industrial modernisation, which each of the postwar Germanys had given its citizens. Whether the paintings express disillusionment with this memory, its critique, idealisation, or reanimation remains open to debate and depends on the specific painting being examined. Whilst Rauch's paintings, for example, have been widely read as a critique of modernist notions of social progress, other of the new German paintings, such as Till Gerhard's *Das Wir Gefühl* (2004), project an intense longing for a time that still held the promise of a different future.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined the ruin motifs seen in individual examples of the “new German” paintings as an artistic commentary on the end of the postwar social-political project of industrial modernity, on both sides of the Berlin Wall. It was suggested that the paintings were unified by a shared ruin aesthetic which approximated the histories of the two postwar Germanys. Whilst Chapter 4 showed how the American art critical discourse was largely content with reading the paintings' ruin motifs as projecting dystopian sentiments that straightforwardly reflected the mood in post-1989 Germany, this chapter examined how, in the German discourse, critics were more concerned with coding the artists' imaginary scenes of dereliction and destruction politically, with the result that the paintings were often associated with the political right. The final part of the chapter moved away from this political framing of the works and instead concentrated on unpacking their temporal structure. The argument was made that the images of German history invoked in the paintings challenged dominant linear historical narratives of post-Unification Germany as the continuation of the old Federal Republic. Instead, through their shared ruin aesthetic, the paintings positioned both the GDR and the old Federal Republic in the pre-1989 past, thereby implying that the new Germany had to deal not only with the ruins of the GDR but also of the old FRG.

Notably, this chapter drew on the concept of “lifeworlds” used in the American discourse on the paintings. Chapter 4 suggested that American use of the concept reflected the debate’s social-anthropological bent: that is, the tendency of American critics to read the nostalgic content of the paintings as embodiments of a nostalgic mood in post-1989 Germany’s real cultural life. In operating with the very same concept here, in order to speak of the places, people, and objects depicted in the paintings, the aim was not to buy into the American interpretation of the works as mirroring underlying collective sentiments. Rather the aim was to emphasise the works’ social communicative value, also implicated in the concept of lifeworlds. To return to Ron Eyerman’s (2006: 20) concept of art as a space of collective meaning production discussed in Chapter 1, the intention was to understand how the paintings put the artistic imagination to work to reflexively engage with recent German social-political history and to create an experimental space in which collective meanings could be forged. Thus, whilst the nostalgic lifeworlds depicted in the painting may indeed resonate with discernible collective sentiments of nostalgia in post-1989 Germany, it is more important to understand how they refracted such sentiments and with what critical effect.

Conclusion

This thesis provided an analysis of the phenomenon “New German Painting” from an interdisciplinary perspective that combined approaches from the sociology of art with approaches from art history. The question that arises with such an interdisciplinary perspective is whether it should continue to adhere to the principle of value neutrality widely accepted in the sociology of art; or whether the positive engagement with art’s aesthetic specificity inevitably involves a critical judgement of it. Whereas the final part of Chapter 1 discussed this question in the context of recent theoretical and methodological innovations in the sociology of art, this concluding chapter returns to it in view of the preceding analysis of the “New German Painting”. Did the thesis formulate a critical judgement of the new painting; and if so, from what position – that of the sociologist of art, art historian, or impassioned observer – and according to what criteria – aesthetic, social, political, or historical? A discussion of these questions will help bring into focus the thesis’ contributions to recent methodological debates in the sociology of art, as well as its substantive contributions to the study of modern German art after 1989.

The aim of the thesis, as stated in the Introduction, was to examine the aesthetic specificity of the “New German Painting” and its art critical reception in light of Germany’s recent history of Unification, as well as the art’s export to the international art market. In other words, the intention was to understand the genesis, emergence, and development of the new painting in relation to broader social-political developments in post-Unification Germany and international art market dynamics. The dates that roughly framed the analysis were the transition year of 1989/90 at one end, and the first decade of the new century at the other. These dates correspond with the emergence of the “New German Painting” in the post-*Wende* German artistic field of the early 1990s, and its introduction to the international, and above all American, contemporary art market approximately ten years later.

The art that stood at the centre of the analysis was the painting of representatives of the “New Leipzig School”. Whilst the Leipzig work attracted the most art critical attention from amongst the new painting both nationally and internationally, it also

demonstrated most evidently how the aesthetic specificity of the “New German Painting” and its critical reception were intimately intertwined with the history of German Reunification. To return to a theme from the Introduction, the Leipzig work brought the “German” in the “New German Painting” most sharply into focus.

One of the central objectives of the thesis was to examine how the question of the “German” in German art continued to shape artistic practices and discourses after the national reunification of 1990; a period that is still largely a blind spot in scholarship on modern German art. Critical re-writings of twentieth-century German art history as a “continuity of disjunctures” (Grasskamp 1991) advanced in recent years to challenge homogenous concepts of modern German art as unified by an underlying expressionist continuity, tend to stop at the year 1990. The intention of the thesis was to extend this reassessment to art dating from the period after Unification. It argued that controversies about the “German” in German art were not resolved by political unification, or the increasingly international orientation of contemporary artists. The phenomenon “New German Painting” demonstrated that “Germanness” was still an issue in contemporary art. The painting of the “New Leipzig School” proved to illustrate the continuity in debates most visibly, whilst also emphasising the new conditions under which the debates took place.

Crucially, the question of the “German” in the “New German Painting” was raised not simply as one of form and style. The post-1989 social and political conditions under which artists and critics renegotiated notions of German particularism involved broader issues of German collective memory and identity after Reunification. It was in order to capture the interrelationship between the aesthetic specificity of the “New German Painting” and these broader issues that the thesis adopted an analytical framework which combined art historical with sociological approaches. Further, the choice to focus the analysis on the nostalgic aspect of the new painting, including its critical reception, was taken on the grounds of the proposition that it was this aspect of the art which revealed the underlying interactions between the painting’s aesthetic content and the social-political context of post-Unification Germany in its full complexity, and without reducing one to the other.

Chapter 3, which examined a cross-disciplinary body of literature on nostalgia in post-*Wende* Germany, provided a theoretical basis for the investigation of the nostalgic aspect of the “New German Painting” in relation to the specific post-Unification German context in the empirical parts of the thesis. Theories from the fields of German History and Memory Studies concerning a shift in German memory culture from the postwar paradigm of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* to a post-Unification culture of “memory contests” (Fuchs and Cosgrove 2006), were returned to in Chapter 4. It was argued that the disregard of many German critics for the painting’s memory function was premised on their judgement of it against the critical and psychoanalytic criteria of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, rather than recognising and exploring the resonance of the painting with a new German memory discourse, which involved the pluralisation of German pasts, the rise in personal and fictional accounts, and a changing relation between guilt and victimhood.

Other concepts and theories explored in Chapter 3 that were brought to bear on the analysis of the “New German Painting” in subsequent chapters, included a “functionalist” perspective on nostalgia (Atia and Davies 2010), which examines nostalgia as a situated cultural practice and which is concerned with its social and political uses, purposes, and circumstances. An example of this perspective, which the empirical parts of the thesis relied on, was the theorisation of post-*Wende* nostalgia as a form of counter-memory that challenges official histories of East and West Germany, with an eye to establishing individual and collective subject positions in an ill-defined and contested post-Unification German present.

In the context of early debates on the principle of value neutrality in the sociology of art – discussed in Chapter 1 – Janet Wolff ([1983] 1993) suggested that the challenge for the sociologist of art lay not in holding up false pretences of abstention from judgement, but rather in providing a coherent discussion of the “aesthetic categories and judgments which locate and inform the researcher’s project” (107). As this quotation suggests, for Wolff, the sociology of art cannot proceed without the aesthetic categories of art critical and art historical discourses. In support of this argument Elisabeth Bird (1979) illustrated how already the process of choosing and delimiting the object of study requires from the sociologist of art to rely on aesthetic and art historical criteria. Further, Bird emphasised that these criteria are inherently

built on certain aesthetic value judgements. Responding to this dilemma, Wolff ([1983] 1993) demanded that sociologists of art critically reflect on their reliance on aesthetic categories and judgements, and address how the latter relate to the specific criteria of judgement they themselves bring to the analysis of artistic work as sociologists.

Although the preceding empirical chapters of the thesis were written with the aim of stating clearly what aesthetic and art historical, as well as sociological and cultural-historical concepts and theories informed the analysis, the following paragraphs summarise how each chapter combined a formal-aesthetic and art historical approach to the art with a social-historical and sociological perspective. Further, it is discussed how the categories of assessment which underpinned the thesis' analysis of the "New German Painting", partly overlapped with those of the art critical discourse. This overlap was inevitable given the central concern of the thesis to review the social-historical concepts critics used to frame the works and also the artistic values they bestowed on them. Yet, in examining these concepts and values the thesis was careful throughout to maintain a reflexive critical distance on the specific ways in which they had been used, and with what art historical, as well as social and political implications.

Similar to the critical discourse on the "New German Painting", the thesis focused on the painting's nostalgic aspect. Chapter 4 explored how the American and German discourses split along what Paul Grainge (2002) described as concepts of nostalgia as "mood" and "mode"; that is, as a sentiment of loss and longing and a consumable style. Positive American commentaries promoted the Leipzig painting as an art that reflected collective sentiments of longing for a lost past in post-*Wende* Germany, especially the former East. However, although the US debate addressed the underlying interactions between the painting's aesthetic specificity and the social-political context of post-Unification Germany, which the thesis aimed to explore, it tended to oversimplify them. The reading of the nostalgic content of the painting as mirroring a nostalgic mood in real cultural life denied the art any critical-reflexive capacities, and also ignored the multiple mediations that stand between artistic work and the social-historical context in which it is produced; including specific histories of

artistic production, perception, and representational economies, as well as the marketisation of artistic work.

The German discourse was, as Chapter 4 continued to show, more sensitive to these processes of mediation. Sceptical of the financial and popular success of the painting in the United States, German critics explained the overtly German iconography of much of the work and its nostalgic outlook as catering to established American perceptions of German art as charged with national history. More specifically, the painting of the “New Leipzig School” and other artists who referenced the GDR’s dictatorial and Stasi history, were said to tap into American fascination with German fascism. At the same time, the latter kind of works, were accused of exoticising East German history and of feeding a growing post-socialist nostalgia industry. Although German observers positioned the painting’s nostalgic aspect in relation to longstanding debates on the relationship between artistic representations of German history and German collective memory after 1945, they dismissed the painting as obstructing, rather than furthering, a critical culture of German collective memory after 1989.

Proceeding from the distinction established in Chapter 4 between readings of the nostalgic aspect of the new painting as “mood” and “mode”, the thesis argued that neither of these approaches could, in itself, capture the complexity of the relationship between the art and the post-1989 German social-political context. The nostalgic aspect of the work can neither be conflated with real existing feelings of loss and longing, nor can it be reduced to a commercial culture of historical amnesia. Instead elements of both these factors, as well as others, underpin the nostalgic aspect of the work. The aim of Chapters 5 to 7 was to bring the ambivalent position of the painting’s nostalgic aspect, between mood and mode, and other factors that played into it, but which had remained unidentified in the art critical discourse, into focus.

Notably, like the American discourse on the “New German Painting” Chapters 5 to 7 looked at the nostalgic aspect of the painting in the specific post-*Wende* German context, rather than deepening the analysis of its international marketization, which was the focus of much of the domestic, German debate. Pursuing an analysis of the international export of the art would have led to a more general and theoretical

discussion of the financial and global expansion of the international art market, relations between aesthetic and economic value, and possibly postmodern theories of nostalgia as a consumable style. In other words, it would have meant digressing from the core concern of the thesis: to examine how issues of German cultural memory and identity after 1989 played out in the “New German Painting”.

Chapters 5 and 6 analysed what the stylistic nostalgia of the artists of the “New Leipzig School”; that is, the artists’ continuation of the traditional figurative mode of painting developed at the Leipzig Academy during the GDR. The chapters explored how this artistic position, which was premised on the preservation of elements of the artistic heritage of the GDR, intersected with various social-cultural and art historical processes: collective identity construction in East Germany during the post-*Wende* years, the controversies of the *Bilderstreit* over what role the artistic heritage of the GDR was to play in the cultural memory and artistic identity of the unified Germany, and also the re-evaluation of painting and figuration in international contemporary artistic debates.

Thus, the criteria employed for discussing and assessing the aesthetic specificity of the painting of the “New Leipzig School” were sociological as well as art historical ones. To discern the intersecting processes that came together in the artistic position of the Leipzig artists, the thesis in particular drew on contributions to the sociology of art which have theorised artists’ individual and collective aesthetic choices (including their institutional and discursive positioning) as projecting not only certain artistic values, but also as constituting investments into imagined social cultural identities and communities (see Born 1993, Wolff 2008).

Chapter 5 examined how the decision of the East German faculty at the post-*Wende* Department of Painting/Graphics of the Leipzig Academy to preserve the syllabus of traditional figurative painting, was premised not just on aesthetic preferences but also involved protests against a perceived West German cultural domination and colonisation since Unification. In a post-1989 context in which the larger artistic heritage of the GDR had been devalued, the East German faculty at the Department withdrew into a defensive and anti-western position. As the chapter argued, this position resonated strongly with definitions of *Ostalgie* by political sociologists as a

defiant cultural identity that reacted against the asymmetrical power-relations between East and West in the unification process. However, this position of defiance tended towards the self-idealisation of the marginal and different and the denigration and demonization of what was perceived as the dominant and mainstream. The cultural identity and community it projected was an exclusive and closed one which spurned debate and dialogue with discourses that diverged from its own values. The adaptation of such a defiant position of eastern German artistic distinctiveness by faculty at the Department of Painting/Graphics, did not effect the desired equalisation of eastern and western German artistic traditions, but rather reproduced the marginalisation of the former.

Chapter 6 turned to examine how the preservation of elements of the artistic heritage of the GDR manifested itself in the artistic practices of students at the Department of Painting/Graphics. It argued that in contrast to their teachers, who tried to protect the local East German artistic traditions from foreign influence, students at the Department collectively formulated an artistic position which negotiated between the devalued local East German artistic traditions and their experiences of art discourses and practices beyond Leipzig. Art historically the artists' position was interesting because they approached contemporary international debates on the status of painting and figuration from a culturally highly distinctive perspective, which provided them with new insights on issues such as intermediality, cultural hybridity, and strategies of post-modern citation and irony. Examined from a more social-political perspective, or what Janet Wolff (2008) has called a "principled aesthetics", their works become relevant because of the space of symbolic equivalence and dialogue they created between the East German artistic traditions and western modern and contemporary art.

Chapter 7 again broadened the view from the "New Leipzig School" to the larger body of the new paintings. Further, it engaged more closely with perceptions of what American critics often called the paintings' nostalgic "lifeworlds", and the idea that these lifeworlds in some way reflected the post-1989 German collective consciousness, or "mood". The focus of the chapter was on the paintings' ruin motifs and their evocation of postwar industrial modernity and its underlying ideology of social progress. Many American, and also German, critics viewed these ruin motifs as

projecting disillusionment with the social-political project of modernity. For American critics, this attitude reflected the collective mood in post-1989 Germany, especially in the former East. By contrast German critics, who largely abstained from such reflective social theories of art, judged the motifs on the basis of their engagement with modernist social-political discourses. They coded them politically, with the result that the works and artists frequently came to be associated with a neo-conservative end-of-utopia discourse that had emerged in the German cultural and political fields in the early 1990s.

The aim of the chapter was to mediate between these two approaches. Whilst it took from the American discourse the idea that the paintings contained social-communicative value and potentially conveyed something about contemporary German society, it took from the German discourse the notion that the works projected a reflexive engagement with modernist social-political discourses. The paintings' nostalgic lifeworlds were examined against a concept of art as a space of collective meaning production in which the artistic imagination is put to work to creatively and critically engage with the surrounding world (see Eyerman 2006). That is, the ruin motifs were looked at as historical images that manipulated and played with dominant historical narratives of Germany's recent history of division and unification. In particular they were read as images that challenged official narratives of post-Unification Germany as the inevitable continuation of the old Federal Republic.

It is difficult to draw overall conclusions on the substantive issues and themes that were explored in the thesis. In a sense, the very project of re-writing modern German art history as a "continuity of disjunctures" defies an approach that produces a coherent and linear narrative which has a clearly discernible argument underlying and driving it. Instead, what the thesis offered was an exploration of wide-ranging issues and themes that were raised by the phenomenon "New German Painting". These themes and issues spanned patterns of continuity and rupture in German art history between post-1945 and post-1989; German-American artistic relations; East-West relations in German art since Unification; and post-Unification debates on German collective memory and identity. The hope is that the thesis succeeded in marking out

these thematic areas and their problems in sufficiently sharp contours and in a way that has signalled possible directions for future research.

An example of possible future research is a more detailed comparison of the “New German Painting” with the figurative painting of the postwar decades either side of the Berlin Wall: the painting of the West German “Neo-Expressionists” and of the *Leipziger Schule* in the East. Such a comparative-historical study would not only reveal aesthetic and thematic affinities of the post-*Wende* painting with this earlier art, but, by showing how influences from both movements can be discerned in the post-*Wende* painting, shared concerns of West and East German figurative painting of the 1970s and 80s would also be brought into focus. Further, it would allow the comparison of German figurative painting from the second half of the twentieth century in three distinct social-political contexts: the postwar Federal Republic, the GDR, and the reunified Germany. An interdisciplinary approach that moves between art history, sociology, and social-political history – as advanced in this thesis – would be particularly suited to bring out the intricate connections between these artistic styles and social-political contexts.

Methodological conclusions can perhaps be drawn more easily from the thesis. Albeit formulated in response to the specific nature of the artistic phenomenon “New German Painting”, the thesis’ combination of sociological with art historical approaches speaks to recent innovations in the sociology of art. Beyond this, the hope is that it also latently resonates with the writings of early twentieth-century art historians, such as Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, as well as sociologists and critical social theorists, such as Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno. The writings of these thinkers demonstrate that cross-disciplinary movements between social and aesthetic theory have a much longer history (see Tanner 2003; Schwartz 2005). The task for contemporary scholars is to revive these movements without being intimidated by disciplinary boundaries that, viewed in the context of the wider history of knowledge, have only been constructed relatively recently.

I want to end this thesis by returning to my personal motives for choosing to study the phenomenon “New German Painting”, which I briefly explained in the Introduction. The reader may have noticed a certain element of nostalgia in this account. I returned

to my childhood memories of the old Federal Republic and my first experiences of East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall to explain how I arrived at wanting to study and write about Germany's post-Unification cultural history. In a sense the project of examining this subject in my PhD was an attempt to critically reflect on the idealised and distorted memories I had of the Germany in which I grew up. The aim of this thesis has been to do the same for the art that was internationally summarised under the label "New German Painting" and its critical reception. Both the art and its reception evoked notions of nostalgia that were in one way or another tied to Germany's recent history of division and reunification. However, the relationship between the aesthetic specificity of the art and the post-Unification German social-political context has, until now, hardly been historically and critically examined. The intention of this thesis has been to take a first step in investigating these issues, as well as to show how they continue and diverge from prior patterns of underlying connections between aesthetics, society, and politics in modern German art.

Appendix I: List of Artists Examined

Artist	Date/Place of Birth Lives & works in	Artistic Training	Gallery Germany	Gallery USA
Tilo Baumgärtel	1972, Leipzig, East Germany Lives & works in Leipzig	1991 - 98 <i>Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst</i> (HGBK), Leipzig, Class of Prof. Arno Rink 1998 – 2000 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig, Masters Class of Prof. Arno Rink	1998 – Galerie Kleindienst, Leipzig http://www.galeriekleindienst.de/index.html 2005 – Christian Ehrentraut, Berlin http://www.christianehrentraut.com/ 2002 - 2004 LIGA, Berlin http://www.liga-galerie.de/	
Norbert Bisky	1970, Leipzig, East Germany Lives & works in Berlin	1994 -99 HdK, Berlin, Class of Prof. Georg Baselitz 1994-1995 <i>Salzburg Summer Academy</i> , Austria, with Jim Dine 1999 HdK, Berlin, Masters Class of Prof. Georg Baselitz	2001 - 2006 Galerie Michael Schultz, Berlin http://www.galerie-schultz.de/ 2007 – Galerie Crone, Berlin http://www.cronegalerie.de/	2004 - Leo Koenig Inc., New York http://www.leokoenig.com/

Jonas Burgert	1969, Berlin, West Germany Lives & works in Berlin	1991 -96 HdK, Berlin 1997 HdK, Berlin, Masters Class of Prof. Dieter Hacker	2006 – Produzentengalerie, Hamburg http://www.produzentengalerie.com/ 2008 – 2009 Arndt & Partner, Berlin (now Arndt Berlin) http://www.arndtberlin.com/website/	2009 - Haunch of Venison, London/Berlin/ New York/Zurich http://www.haunchofvenison.com/en/index.php#page=London
Tim Eitel	1971, Leonberg, West Germany Lives & works in Berlin	1994-96 Fine Arts at <i>Burg Giebichenstein, Hochschule für Kunst und Design</i> , Halle 1997 - 2001 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig 2001 - 2003 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig, Masters Class of Prof. Arno Rink	2003 - Galerie Eigen + Art, Leipzig/Berlin http://cgi.eigen-art.com/user-cgi-bin/index.php?article_id=1 2002 - 2004 LIGA, Berlin http://www.liga-galerie.de/	2006 - Pace Wildenstein, New York http://thepacegallery.com/
Till Gerhard	Hamburg, West Germany Lives & works in Hamburg	1992-93 <i>Muthesius Hochschule für Kunst und Gestaltung</i> , Kiel 1993-98 <i>Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften</i> , Hamburg, Department of Gestaltung, Class of Prof. Dieter Glasmacher	2006 – 2007 Galerie Michael Jansen, Berlin http://www.galeriemichaeljansen.de/ 2001 - 2003 Feinkunst Krüger, Hamburg http://www.feinkunst-krueger.de/	2004 - Stellan Holm Gallery, New York http://www.stellanholm.com/

Eberhart Havekost	1967, Dresden, Germany Lives & works in Berlin	1991-96 Diplom at <i>Hochschule für Buchkunst</i> (HfBK), Dresden 1997 <i>HfBK</i> , Dresden, Masters Class of Prof. Ralf Kerbach	1997 - Galerie Gebr. Lehmann, Dresden/Berlin http://www.galerie-gebr-lehmann.de/ 2001 – 2003 Galerie Johnen + Schöttle, Cologne http://www.johnen-schoettle.de/	2005 - Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles http://www.robertsantilton.com/ 2000 - Anton Kern Gallery, New York http://www.antonkerngallery.com/
	1977, Düsseldorf, West Germany Lives & works in Cologne	1998-2004 Communication Design, emphasis on free diagramming/ painting at <i>Folkwangschule</i> , Essen	2009 - Tanja Pol Galerie, Munich http://www.tanjapol.com/ 2005 Galerie Schwind, Leipzig/Frankfurt a.M. http://www.galerie-schwind.de/home.0.html 2003 – 2005 Galerie Frank Schlag & Cie., Essen http://www.german-modern-art.com/index.html	2006 – Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/
	1970, Hamburg, West Germany Lives & works in Hamburg	1993 – 98 <i>Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften</i> , Hamburg, Department of Gestaltung 2000 – 05 Fine Arts, <i>Hochschule für Bildende Künste</i> (HfBK), Hamburg, Class of Prof. Werner Büttner/ Prof. Olav Christopher Jenssen, and guest Profs. Daniel Richter, Tal R, and Peter Doig	2005 – 2007 Arndt & Partner, Berlin (now Arndt Berlin) http://www.arndtberlin.com/website/ 2000 - 2003 Feinkunst Krüger, Hamburg http://www.feinkunst-krueger.de/	2007 – 2009 Sandroni Rey, Los Angeles http://www.sandronirey.com/ (Gallery closed in 2009)

Martin Kobe	1973, Dresden, East Germany Lives & works in Leipzig	1995 - 2000 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig, Class of Prof. Arno Rink 2000 - 03 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig, Masters Class of Prof. Arno Rink	2002 – 2002 (?) Galerie Dogenhausen, Leipzig http://www.dogenhaus.de/ 2005 – Christian Ehrentrau, Berlin http://www.christianehrentraut.com/	
Stefan Kürten	1963 Lives & works in Düsseldorf/ New York	1983-89 <i>Kunstakademie Düsseldorf</i> , Class of Michael Buthe 1989-90 Art Institute of Chicago	2004 – Galerie Ute Parduhn, Düsseldorf http://www.galerie-parduhn.de/ausstellungen.php 2002 - Galerie Michael Cosar, Düsseldorf http://www.cosarhmt.com/	2004 – Hosfelt Gallery, New York/ San Francisco http://www.hosfeltgallery.com/ 2002 - Alexander & Bonin, New York http://www.alexanderandbonin.com/
Neo Rauch	1960, Leipzig, East Germany Lives & works in Leipzig	1981 - 86 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig, Class of Prof. Arno Rink 1986 – 1990 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig, Masters Class of Prof. Arno Rink 1993 – 98 Assistant to Prof. Arno Rink, <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig 2005 – 2009 Prof. for Painting/Graphic, <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig	1993 - Galerie Eigen + Art, Leipzig/Berlin http://www.eigen-art.com/	2000 – David Zwirner, New York http://www.davidzwirner.com/

Daniel Richter	1962, Eutin, West Germany Lives & works in Berlin/ Hamburg	1992-96 <i>HfBK</i> , Hamburg, Class of Prof. Werner Büttner	1995 – Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin http://www.cfa-berlin.de/ 1999 Galerie Johnen & Schöttle, Cologne http://www.johnen-schoettle.de/ 1996 Galerie Jürgen Becker, Hamburg http://www.galeriebecker.de/	2008 – Regen Projects, Los Angeles http://www.regenprojects.com/ 2004 – David Zwirner, New York http://www.davidzwirner.com/ 2001 Patrick Painter Inc., Los Angeles, USA http://www.patrickpainter.com/
Christoph Ruckhäberle	1972, Pfaffenhofen, West Germany Lives & works in Leipzig	1991 - 93 Character Animation at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, USA 1995 - 2000 Painting at <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig 2000 - 02 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig, Masters Class of Prof. Arno Rink	2001 - Galerie Kleindienst, Leipzig http://www.galeriekleindienst.de/index.html 2005 – Christian Ehrentrau, Berlin http://www.christianehrentraut.com/ 2002 - 2004 LIGA, Berlin http://www.liga-galerie.de/	2004- 2006 Zach Feuer Gallery, New York http://zachfeuer.com/
David Schnell	1971, Bergisch Gladach, West Germany Lives & works in Leipzig	1995 - 2000 Painting at <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig 2000 - 02 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig, Masters Class of Prof. Arno Rink	2005 - Galerie Eigen + Art, Leipzig/Berlin http://cgi.eigen-art.com/user-cgi-bin/index.php?article_id=1 2002 - 2004 LIGA, Berlin http://www.liga-galerie.de/	

Corinne Wasmuht	1964, Dortmund, West Germany	1983-92 <i>Kunstakademie Düsseldorf</i> , Class of Prof. Alfonso Hüppi	2007 – Galerie Giti Nourbaksch, Berlin http://www.nourbaksch.de/	2006 – Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York http://www.petzel.com/
	Lives & works in Berlin	2006 – Prof. at Karlsruhe Art Academy	2000 - Meyer Riegger Galerie, Karlsruhe http://www.meyer-riegger.de/ 1994 – 1997 Galerie Johnen + Schöttle, Cologne http://www.johnen-schoettle.de/	
Matthias Weischer	1973, Elte, West Germany	1995 - 2000 Painting at <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig	2005 - Galerie Eigen + Art, Leipzig/Berlin http://cgi.eigen-art.com/user-cgi-bin/index.php?article_id=1	
	Lives & works in Leipzig	2000 - 02 <i>HGBK</i> , Leipzig, Masters Class of Prof. Sighard Gille	2002 - 2004 LIGA, Berlin http://www.liga-galerie.de/	

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