NEW OBJECTIVITY: MODERN GERMAN ART

IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

1919–1933

Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann

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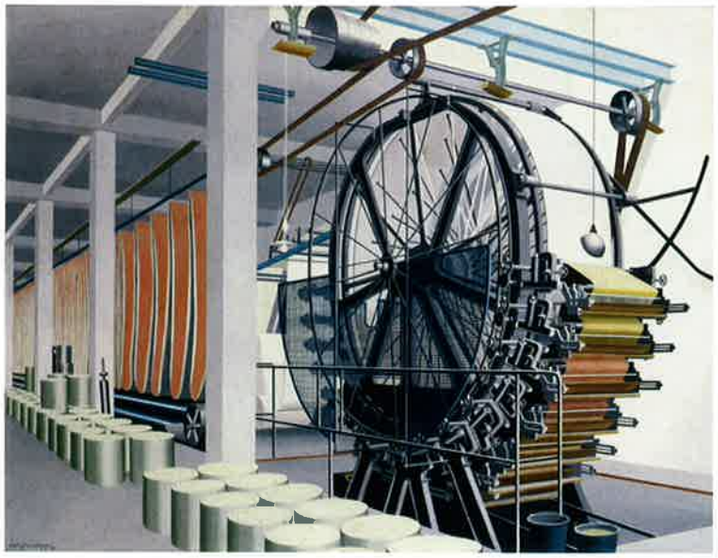

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BACK COVER Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Steam Engine Camshaft*, 1927, Galerie Berinson, Berlin

ABOVE Carl Grossberg, *The Paper Machine*, 1934

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CIRKUS BUSCH
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Sabine Eckmann

A LACK OF EMPATHY
ON THE REALISMS OF NEW OBJECTIVITY

Whether left-leaning, conservative, or politically neutral, seemingly divergent artists such as Otto Dix, Carl Grossberg, George Grosz, Lotte Jacobi, Alexander Kanoldt, Carl Mense, August Sander, and Georg Schrimpf all chose—following the advent of avant-garde abstraction and fragmentation—a realistic artistic approach to mediate the social, cultural, and political conditions of Weimar Germany. Germany's first and short-lived democracy was characterized by rapid transformations, beginning with the highly volatile aftermath of World War I and culminating in the inflation of 1923. It was followed by the so-called Golden Twenties, the period of political stabilization and relative prosperity between 1924 and 1929. The subsequent short but decisive period leading up to Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 was marked by economic depression, rapidly rising unemployment, ideological disputes, and political extremes.[1] Executed roughly between the end of World War I and Hitler's rise to power, artworks based on reproductive processes of likeness had a strong presence in the German art world during the so-called stabilization period of the mid-1920s.

One of the most compelling characterizations of the heterogeneous artistic output classified as New Objectivity foregrounds it as a phenomenon of crisis—one that responded to revolution and restoration, violence and materialism, technology and irrationalism, *völkisch* culture and cosmopolitan civilization—caught in a diverse spectrum of political and intellectual positions reaching from a divided left to the far right.[2] Variously labeled as New Naturalism (Paul Westheim, 1922), New Objectivity (Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, 1923), Post-Expressionism (Franz Roh, 1925), Magic Realism (Roh, 1925), and New Classicism (Hartlaub, 1922), some of these artworks probe figuration as a means to illuminate and sometimes criticize social and political injustices, or to articulate estrangement from the present and, by inversion, express a longing for the past. Many artworks noticeably dwell on the artificial and at times visually seductive qualities of inanimate objects, including new technologies and commodities, which increasingly dominated the daily life of Weimar Germany and its growing consumerism. On a perceptual level these realist artworks, engaged in a precise form of mimetic representation, challenge stylistic commonalities: some are cold, sober, anti-emotional, and allegedly objective; some appear timeless (though sometimes in unexpected ways) and are often labeled Classicist; finally, some are very literal and graphic in their depiction of violence, abnormalities, sexuality, and social inequalities and are frequently categorized as Verist. Yet in one way or another, they all make visible an alienated relation to the real, sometimes in the form of a dangerous and unpredictable outside world, one that is either devoid of humans or populated with ugly bodies and hyperbolic faces that appear as if filtered through a ghostly and uncanny present.

The makers of these artworks didn't subscribe to a homogeneous vision of realism or other unified incarnations of mimeticism. On the contrary, these artworks are characterized by a variety of representational modes that are figurative as opposed to abstract. Moreover, they are all devoid of expressionistic subjectivity that revealed the self as fragmented and heteronomous. Instead these artists employ different formal approaches—a tectonic visual language; exaggerated shapes as typical for caricatures; a focus on surface appearance as well as "thingness," along with overtly sharp, often-microscopic simulations; and a preference for local colors to create images of frozen spaces, artificial things, and detached people—all of which represent a disenchanted experiential world.[3] What these New Objectivity artworks share is a singular commitment to visibility, which paradoxically often complicates their perception and their meaning, caught as they were in a culture of visual display. The aestheticization of the visible, the artistic organization of aspects of experiential reality, is difficult

RUDOLF SCHLICHTER, *Margot*, 1924

if not impossible to translate into words. In considering the incommensurable, the utterly unexplainable, in relation to New Objectivity, Karl Hofer wrote in 1922 that the genuinely humane, as he described it, is often hidden, if not absent.[4]

This essay focuses on these various and new articulations of realism in New Objectivity, exploring how artworks and contemporary discourses engaged with figuration as a means to create and reflect upon an artistic language that would make visible a complicated and contradictory social and cultural context, one that was penetrated by instability, doubt in human values, and a lack of utopian aspirations. How are these aesthetic forms of mimeticism reflexive and in this sense realist in relation to the interwar conditions of modernity?

ALBERT BIERSTADT, *Olevano*, 1856–57
Oil on paper mounted on canvas; 19 ¾ × 27 ⅛ in. (50.2 × 68.9 cm)
Saint Louis Art Museum, Eliza McMillan Trust, 150:1953

NEW OBJECTIVITY AND REALISM

In 1922 Paul Westheim, the editor of the art journal *Das Kunstblatt*, conducted a survey of artists, writers, museum directors, and other art historians and intellectuals as to whether the new figurative art could be seen as a new naturalism.[5] Although the published survey includes more than thirty international respondents who often drafted lengthy answers, it did not amount to a concise portrait of what this new naturalism might entail, nor did it clarify the varying opinions of what naturalism consisted of in the first place or what it might mean in the aftermath of abstraction, Cubism, and Constructivism. Surprisingly, the politics of art and the political legacy of the nineteenth-century movements of literary Naturalism and pictorial Realism were hardly mentioned. One exception was George Grosz, whose contribution considered the significance of the political journalist as compared to the insignificance of the realist painter.[6] Critic, art historian, and leftist activist Adolf Behne also took a political stance by asserting that the focus on figuration in the art of New Objectivity would be market driven.[7] He argued that there existed a "desire [for] a materialistic, naturalistic, and representational art" that would resemble the commodification of contemporary culture.[8]

A variety of opinions, nonpolitical in nature, debated the properties of pictorial naturalism, and its contradictory stance in relation to art's intrinsic properties, since art, penetrated by the spirit (or subjectivity) of its creator, would necessarily be different from life and its exact replication. Moreover, another topic emerged: the significance of the object *per se*[9] independent from human subjectivity, a phenomenon that contemporary critic Wilhelm Michel in 1925 described as the discovery of the thing after the crisis of the I.[10] Marxist critic Béla Balázs saw this slightly differently: criticizing both economic rationalization and advanced technologies, he remarked in 1927 that "it may be a cruel historical fact that large-scale capitalistic rationalization of the social system has turned most humans into machine animals who, having become things themselves, are now capable of perceiving only things and no longer react with human reflection or human emotion to the things of reality."[11] According to Balász, then, New Objectivity was not so much about a newly found compassion for the thing itself, but—more importantly—about man behaving like a thing. Emphasizing the lack of empathy in such New Objectivity artworks, Balász highlighted antihuman qualities as symptomatic for this form of realism, which embraced objects rather than humans, suggesting a reification of social relations as elaborated upon in Georg Lukács's influential *History and*

Class Consciousness (1923). One concrete example that underscores Balász's argument is Georg Scholz's *Cacti and Semaphore* (p. 257), in which cacti and lightbulbs—the former an in-vogue commodity of the 1920s, the latter a marker of modernization—are joined to create a unified image that reveals a rationally ordered, object-like nature beyond the frame of the window. Paintings such as Rudolf Schlichter's *Margot* (p. 26) also buttress this judgment of Balász in that Margot, despite her plastic presence, is impenetrable as a human being, a characterization that also evokes Bertolt Brecht's impassionate characters.

Gustav Hartlaub's opinion of New Objectivity, unlike Balász's, is grounded in a liberal discourse and highlights spiritual intentions as well as socio-critical ambitions—in short, humanistic values. Hartlaub, the curator of the 1925 exhibition *Neue Sachlichkeit*, explained in the 1922 survey:

> I can distinguish a *right* and a *left* wing here. The former, conservative to the point of classicism in its emphasis on timeless values, seeks now, after the experience of so much extremity and chaos, to sanctify everything sound and healthy, the bodily-sculptural reality that is faithfully drawn from nature, while perhaps enhancing the earthier and more ample dimension here.... The left wing, on the other hand, stridently contemporary, evincing far less faith in art, spawned rather by the very denial of art, seeks with primitivist exactitude and obsessive self-exposure to unveil the reality of chaos as the true countenance of our time.[12]

This interpretation of New Objectivity was not only programmatic at the time but remains relevant to the common perception of New Objectivity even today. Hartlaub stressed homogeneous and at times classicizing depictions of people, land- and cityscapes, and objects, all of which would have left behind modernist fragmentation and visually erased experiences of violence and disaster—consequences of World War I in particular, but also of industrial modernization in general. These timeless images would closely reflect nature and disclose a longing for unifying, spiritual, archetypal motifs and compositions.

GEORGE GROSZ, *Gray Day*, 1921
Oil on canvas; 45 ¼ × 31 ½ in. (115 × 80 cm)
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie

Alexander Kanoldt's *Olevano II*, for example—painted in 1925 at the height of the stabilization period that witnessed increased rationalization of industrial production—depicts a small Italian village that radiates calmness, albeit it in a way that combines artifice with verisimilitude. In contrast to Albert Bierstadt's 1857 atmospheric depiction of the same motif, which followed the conventions of nineteenth-century landscape painting that associated elements of genre painting with detailed observations of sites untouched by modernization, Kanoldt employed several perspectival views that complicate seeing based on the experiential perspective. Additionally he eliminated distinctions in scale in order to distance the viewer from any intimate or imaginary relation to the depicted subject. Abstracting Bierstadt's picturesque rendering, he presents a tectonically structured landscape that lacks historical specificities as well as human presence, focusing instead on simplifications and geometricizing principles. Kanoldt underscores the "thing character" (*Dingcharakter*) of nature as an inanimate object rather than representing its organic and pre-industrialized quality, as Hartlaub claimed. Although he categorized Kanoldt as a Classicist, the painting itself (of which a similar version, now lost, was part of the 1925 exhibition) apparently problematizes the curator's observation about the idealizing, timeless, and transcendental characteristics inherent in such artworks. Curatorial vision and the artwork's actual properties are, in this case, at odds.

Further, Hartlaub described an anti-art impulse and Verist ambition that was driven by the quest to expose the truth about the socially and politically tumultuous and demoralizing conditions of the present through self-degradation. Though artists such as Kanoldt and Grosz have frequently and consistently been assigned to these two different camps within New Objectivity, they nevertheless display some commonalities where artistic methods are concerned. Grosz's *Gray Day* (1921) painted during the early politically and economically unstable phase of the Weimar Republic, also demonstrates attention to abstraction and geometrical simplification as opposed to naturalistic details. However, Grosz's leftist political commitment

resulted in a biting political critique. *Gray Day* is set in a bleak urban environment featuring a black marketer, a war veteran, a factory worker, and (prominently positioned in the foreground) a municipal welfare officer for disabled veterans, who is distinguished by ridiculous qualities: his egg-shaped head, his crossed eyes, his typically bourgeois mustache.[13] Yet what all four of the figures share is a lack of individual features, transforming them into generalized types. As in other allegories, the imperial colors (black, white, and red) in the ribbon on the officer's lapel and the shape of his mustache that recalls Kaiser Wilhelm II disclose the welfare officer as one of the reactionary nationalists that Grosz sought to attack with this satirical painting. However the overemphasized, exaggerated characteristics that lack naturalistic detail and individual features are also suggestive of a post-human condition in which man and the built environment lose their physical corporeality, and in their role as disembodied marionettes—objects of sorts—explicitly reveal a society in which vice dominates over human values.

Grosz's politically committed art distinguishes him unmistakably from Kanoldt, who despite similar formal methods chose to render an artificial version of an ideal landscape, one that raises questions about its specific meaning and more generally the significance of nature within the cultural discourse of the time. For example, reflecting on the possibility of a new naturalism within the visual arts, critic Wilhelm Hausenstein analyzed the artificiality of conceptions and creations of nature in his 1920 book *Die Kunst in diesem Augenblick* (Art of This Moment), stating that "all the winds of time are adverse to pure naturalism. What is to be done? Are we arriving at a phase where naturalism is the last of all the tricks? Where nature is fabricated?"[14] Doubtless urban environments and human figures in Grosz's painting are simplified, yet also equipped with a surplus of mimetic detail. As if filtered through the visual properties of objects, they are not unlike the Italian village in Kanoldt's painting—namely, an artificial construction, a visualization of inanimate nature. Hartlaub, in his conviction that Grosz's anti-art stance separated him from Kanoldt, failed to acknowledge their common aesthetic qualities. Yet these are put toward different ends: Grosz inserts himself within the political conventions of historical realism, while Kanoldt demonstrates alienation through hybrid and abstracting appropriations that recall both nineteenth-century landscape painting and timeless classicism.[15]

Despite formal allegiances, the meanings of realism in the art of New Objectivity are consequentially more diverse than homogeneous. Both Kanoldt's *Olevano II* and Grosz's *Gray Day*, as well as contemporary critics such as Balázs, Hausenstein, and Michel, emphasize the object character, both as a quality of this new realist art and as its mark of distinction. Tectonic abstractions, meticulous surface simulations, exaggerations, and distortions, as well as simplifications, which concurrently obscure and expose a living reality that appears inanimate, all shape artworks whose meanings are exceedingly ambiguous. Hartlaub's investment in the idealizing qualities of this art was certainly mistaken. Whether explicitly socio-critical or iconographically more autonomous, these paintings suggest an experiential reality that has lost its soul. Consequentially it is by negation that these artworks subscribe to the relevance of human values, which Hartlaub recognized.

THE LEGACY OF REALISM

Realism signifies an artistic focus on the visible world that is articulated through mimetic methods. Yet realism, in contrast to naturalism, does not imply an exact replication of reality, nor is it measured in terms of the degree to which it resembles the real.[16] It doesn't necessarily accommodate truth to nature. Rather, realism entails questioning and inquiring into the nature of the real to reveal truth, or *vérité*—hence the appellation "Verism" for one New Objectivity approach. Importantly, realism denotes an artistic approach that is deliberately detached from *l'art pour l'art*, from autonomous art, which is invested in its own means (as so much of modernism testifies to) rather than in an engagement with experiential reality. Realism suggests a humanistic dimension, with its claim to truth and subject matter over established and innovative artistic conventions. And in some instances, its credo was and is a politically committed art practice.

However, over the last several decades, since the rise of postmodernism in the 1970s, realism as an artistic practice has been devalued on the grounds of its alleged unproblematic relation to reality.[17] As Jean-François Lyotard famously wrote in 1982, "realism, whose only definition is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implied in the question of art, stands always somewhere between academicism and kitsch."[18] This argument not only demonstrates postmodernism's radical dismissal of realism, which was based on the assumption that realism presented totalities, grand narratives, and universal values, but also sums up significant prejudices against

ALEXANDER KANOLDT, *Olevano II*, 1925
Galerie Berinson, Berlin

realism that center on a simplistic approach. These are most often grounded in a preference for avant-garde experimentation over mimetic renderings, with the former understood to deliver complex aesthetic mediations of contemporaneity that offer a decoding of reality, while the latter is understood to provide more or less direct replications of experiential reality. While abstracted images of the visible world as found in Cubism, for example, are frequently seen as demonstrating a keen sensibility toward the relativity and instability of contemporary scientific and philosophical insights into the constitution of reality, realism is often perceived as forgoing such knowledge, neglecting the challenges brought about by modernization, and instead retaining traditional worldviews. Importantly, the political use of different forms of Socialist Realism under Stalinism, Nazism, and East German communism, which were intended to advance dictatorial regimes and their ideologies, further augmented a sincere unease with realistic art during the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet the turn of the millennium has seen this course of reception beginning to change, as evinced for example in 2002 at *documenta 11*, which pointedly demonstrated the increasing importance of realist strategies in international contemporary art that penetrate both new and old art forms. Okwui Enwezor has theorized artistic practices that embrace documentary means to disclose a new twist in the history of realism, since the concept of *vérité*, the search for truth, would ultimately be unattainable in the domain of the visible, yet drives much of recent aesthetic inquiry.[19]

GUSTAVE COURBET, *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine (Summer)*, 1857
Oil on canvas; 68 ½ × 81 in. (174 × 206 cm)
Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris,
Don Etienne Baudry through Juliette Courbet, 1906

In light of this latest reception of realism, when inquiring into its historical forms it is important to consider both subversive and stabilizing factors, whether political or philosophical, that make up the multiplicity of realisms and "provide cognitive as well as imaginative access to a material, historical reality that, though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness…is nonetheless independent of it."[20] Consequently, modernism does not have to be conceived in opposition to realism. On the contrary, art historians such as Klaus Herding have even argued that abstraction would be the underlying principle of realism as evinced through simplification of form (for example, caricature-like distortions and amplifications); an emblematic visual language aiming to convey the essential and other methods of concretion; non-narrative depictions of fragments of reality; and the choice of subjective rather than naturalistic colors. According to Herding, realist art is only then dangerous and poised for success when it distances itself from neutral mimeticism in order to transgress existing norms.[21]

Although most contemporary critics of New Objectivity in the 1920s, such as Carl Einstein, Hartlaub, and Roh, saw the new realism (which, as discussed earlier, was also considered as a form of naturalism) as something decidedly different from the nineteenth-century Realist movement as developed since the 1830s by painters such as Gustave Courbet, Honoré Daumier, and Jean-François Millet in France and Wilhelm Leibl and Adolph Menzel in Germany, doubtless there also exist similarities and continuities. In his writings—especially his "Realist Manifesto" of 1855—Courbet highlighted Realism as a critical concept, a democratic rather than aristocratic endeavor, and he connected this social plea to individual self-realization and visual characteristics that express empathy and other emotional responses. Though Realism—a term primarily applied to painting—was frequently seen in the nineteenth century as the most accurate reflection of reality possible, due to its rejection of idealized

GUSTAVE COURBET, *The Sleepers*, 1866
Oil on canvas; 53 ¼ × 78 ¾ in. (135 × 200 cm)
Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, purchase, 1953

compositions, Courbet also stressed innovative aesthetic forms. In this sense, Realism was devoted to a new and unfamiliar form of depicting the world. This included developing new iconographies, such as the working class and sites of industrialization, as well as rural environments and peasant laborers—the latter being a class that, until this point, had not been deemed worthy of representation within the realm of the fine arts as subjects by themselves. Similarly, Courbet abandoned enlightened traditions of art and beauty by painting the ugly and the disgusting, underscoring their viability to attaining visibility.

Significant characteristics of nineteenth-century Realism reveal correspondences to New Objectivity through an iconographic focus on disturbing themes such as cripples, prostitutes, homeless people, social injustices, and political opportunism as well as a general common focus on the underrepresented working class. In Germany these images are often penetrated by forthright violence, possibly effects of World War I and its traumatic aftermath. These themes are evident in such artworks as Heinrich Maria Davringhausen's *The Prostitute* (p. 169), Otto Dix's *The Salon I* (p. 34), Otto Griebel's *The Unemployed One* (p. 153), George Grosz's *Eclipse of the Sun* (p. 147), Rudolf Schlichter's *Sex Murder* (p. 173), August Sander's *Disabled Ex-Serviceman* (p. 158), Paul Kleinschmidt's *Drunken Society* (p. 143), and Jeanne Mammen's *Chess Player* (p. 141). Hence a variety of artists took up such subjects, not all of whom were associated with the Verist wing of New Objectivity. These artists employed exaggerations, distortions, and simplifications to distill and concretize critical aspects of their subject matter, forming a bridge between the nineteenth century and the 1920s. Equally important was their common emphasis on the ugly and disturbing, which illuminates undesirable sides of contemporary society without necessarily committing to direct political criticism. Dix's *The Salon I*, for example, stands out not only as a portrayal of prostitutes of different ages but also as an artwork that exposes the brutality of victimized female bodies rarely found in the history of art. Compared to Courbet's provocative, individualizing paintings such as *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine* (1857), which depicts two prostitutes, or *The Sleepers* (1866), of two women in a sexual scene, Dix's painting displays its creator's deep loss of faith in ethical values as he visualizes mistreated bodies over and over again, illuminating a soulless present.

The degree to which New Objectivity paintings confront this disenchanted world populated with damaged bodies evinces its differences with nineteenth-century Realism as well as its distinct understanding of social relations and humanism. Despite their commitment to the visualization of deliberately shocking themes and forms, Courbet and his contemporaries stressed human subjectivity and emotional identification. By contrast, Dix, Grosz, and other New Objectivity artists were invested in creating dispassionate works that appear unconcerned with individuals. Nevertheless, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, they were interested in local and regional topics as seen in such paintings as Georg Scholz's *War Veterans' Association* (p. 149) or Gustav Wunderwald's *On Landsbergerstrasse* (p. 190), which risks comparisons to the petty-bourgeois world of nineteenth-century German and Austrian Biedermeier. Whereas Courbet and his contemporaries employed regional imagery to guarantee empathetic identification, New Objectivity artists did so to reflect distance and boundaries rather than community and social compassion. While nineteenth-century Realists undertook modernist experimentation to deviate from mimicking reality in order to invent it anew—the process by which they established artistic subjectivity in the first place—for New Objectivity artists, the opposite was at stake. Opposing Expressionism and forms of subjective abstraction, such as the hermetic and spiritual worlds of Wassily Kandinsky, they sought to desubjectivize artistic expression in order to articulate "thingness," as the philosopher Ernst Bloch underscored it in 1927.[22] As Grosz stated, "The human being is no longer depicted individually, with carefully dug out psychology, but rather as a collective, almost mechanical concept."[23]

OTTO DIX, *The Salon I*, 1921
Oil on canvas, 33⅞ × 47½ in. (86 × 120.5 cm)
Kunstmuseum Stuttgart

Balász's criticism is similar to Bloch's position; he sharply attacked New Objectivity as a failure of the Realist endeavor because it immersed itself in Americanism, materialism, and commerce rather than committing to the social(ist) project of Weimar Germany and, more broadly, the humanistic values that had governed nineteenth-century Realism. Balász argued that one shouldn't "silently permit a swindle, namely, that this objectivity [*Sachlichkeit*] behaves like a revolutionary! That this wonderful Dionysian dream, this masochistic ecstasy of self-denial, this wanting to drown in the thing, in the mechanism of social and technological activity, this wanting to be an object, this self-alienation of the human—that it still claims to be socialist! No, this new objectivity has nothing at all to do with revolution, with socialism, or with the proletariat."[24] According to Balász, Bloch, and Grosz, New Objectivity had severed its connection to Realism through its overt, explicit visualization of the truth of its time, one that frequently resulted in renderings of the soullessness of the human condition. This pessimism lacked any faith in social relations, instead revealing at best an anti-utopian pragmatism, at worst human estrangement, heightened through the economic and industrial rationalization of Germany in the mid-1920s.

THE NEW REALISM AND THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THINGS

This loss of an individual, empathetic worldview is reflected in works of art that mediate a living reality with unreal qualities—that is, a derealized present. Unsurprisingly, a cult of objects dominated over human concerns. Consequentially contemporary critics of New Objectivity, including prominent voices such as Carl Einstein and lesser-known ones such as Paul F. Schmidt, challenged the idea that New Objectivity, including its left-leaning and critical Verist wing, was a continuation of nineteenth-century Realism. While Einstein focused on the early unstable phase of Weimar Germany, Schmidt wrote in 1924, at the beginning of the stabilization period.

How did these critics assess New Objectivity as a modernist revision of classical Realism of the nineteenth century and a critique of this paradigm? Einstein, who saw Constructivism and New Objectivity as the two decisive art forms of the early twentieth century, only considered Verism as a valid artistic practice and sharply distinguished it from other mimetic representations associated with New Objectivity. He, along with Westheim and Hausenstein, is credited with using the term Verism as early as 1920, understanding it as a form of political art that would articulate the real through a process of critical aesthetic mediation. In this sense, he asserted, "the Verism of German artists…evaluated the real as 'grotesque,' as 'caricature' in itself."[25] In line with his preference of art as a reflexive tool, Einstein advised German artists, "when Germans think of reality, they think of something other than spring, a flowerpot, and a plushly vulgar salon"[26]—a statement through which he took stances against both trivial subject matter and what he called surface realism. Instead, given the volatile and explosive German sociopolitical context, he supported the artist as what Grosz called an assertive reporter,[27] observing that "Grosz, Dix, and Schlichter demolish the real with concise objectivity, unmask this era, and force self-irony; painting as a means of cool execution; observation as an instrument of bitter attack."[28] Pointedly foregrounding the anti-empathetic approach of Verist art, which employs a clinical dissecting and unveiling gaze, Einstein highlights a new model of realism—one that is politically committed yet devoid of individualism and subjectivity,

with an unemotional, sober, even cold approach that brutally confronts contemporary society rather than exploring Enlightenment-influenced concepts of emancipation designed to improve social conditions.

CHRISTIAN SCHAD, *Lotte*, 1927–28
Oil on wood; 26 ¼ × 21 ½ in. (66.5 × 54.5 cm)
Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany

From the outset art critic Paul F. Schmidt took it for granted that Verism was not concerned with aesthetic strategies; on the contrary, he noted the intentionally non-artistic qualities of Verist images underscoring their repulsive characteristics. Despite recognizing its formal similarities to other contemporary European forms of figuration, he (like Einstein) insisted that Verism was a new art form, and one that could only develop in Germany.[29] "It is the sharp, very German, and very polemical attitude toward the representational; the emphasis on a fanatical love of truth that does not want problems of form but rather direct statements about our present, about the chaotic quality of a heinous era, which they wish to overcome through excessively German objectification," he wrote in 1924.[30] Schmidt conceived of Verism as an unsentimental endeavor to concretize a mechanized, even nihilistic contemporaneity, with artworks characterized by rigid compositions, soberly meticulous yet distorted renderings of perspective and three-dimensionality, an excessive inclusion of details to the point of irony, "a cold passion for the exactness of clichés,"[31] and a machine-like precision that disclosed "qualities of horror"[32] in relation to compositional logic and representation.

Unsurprisingly, he was bluntly critical of Hartlaub's position, put forth earlier that same year in a *Frankfurter Zeitung* article in which he had condemned Verism on the grounds of its unethical stance and faithlessness in humanity and art, describing it (just one year before including representatives of Verism in his seminal exhibition *Neue Sachlichkeit*) as cynical.[33] In addition to Einstein's observation of Verism's unemotional qualities, Schmidt importantly underscored the repulsive and atrocious as significant characteristics while dismissing the issue of innovative aesthetic forms, an aspect Einstein had stressed in order to assess Verism as modernism.[34] While both an aesthetics of the ugly and modernist innovation dovetail with nineteenth-century Realism, interestingly enough it is the specific German mentality and political context that is seen as necessitating a new form of realism characterized by unconditional attack, excessive exposure, and radical critique transgressing the paradigm of empathy.

Whereas these critics predominantly engaged with Verism, other writers were concerned more generally with the very nature of the real, or perhaps more precisely with experiential reality, and its aesthetic translation by New Objectivity artists. Art historian Alfred Neumeyer, in particular, closely examined the artistic methods of New Objectivity as they related to new conceptions of reality. In his important essay, "On the Spatial Psychology of 'Neue Sachlichkeit'" (1927), his point of departure was a reflection on the artistic intention of neutral representation. He emphasized that the viewers of these artworks would have the strange impression of "facing a meticulously depicted reality that nevertheless lacks any quality of reality" and described the process of perception vis-à-vis these artworks as an irritating one, removed from New Objectivity's goal of sober and neutral observation and underscoring the mimeticism of these artworks as non-real.[35] "The paradoxical situation has arisen," Neumeyer explained, "that painting devotes itself to a cult of the object without possessing a reality, an awareness of reality."[36] He observed that in art making since 1922, there had been a focus on the isolated object or thing, freezing time and living reality, which resulted in a hyperreality through over-exactness.[37] In contrast to Einstein, Neumeyer did not challenge the aesthetic articulation of space; instead, he described a formation of space that would be created through the concrete presence of objects and figures, as in Christian Schad's *Lotte* or Schlichter's *Margot* (p. 26). Alternatively, objects in a painted space would create a view into the real, as exemplified in Scholz's *Cati and Semaphore*. These efforts to recover space in the wake of Expressionism and abstraction were classified by Neumeyer as Germanic naturalism.[38]

According to Neumeyer, the aesthetic reception of a frozen un-, non-, or hyperreality, heightened through three-dimensional concreteness, is accomplished in particular through different viewing distances and visual acuities. For example, while some surfaces of a painting might be treated with microscopic precision, other areas in the same painting may include an experiential perspective; both methods used together produce an unreal manifestation. At other times, Neumeyer noticed, the focus functions similar to a reversed opera glass, so that objects and people in the background are depicted as precisely as if they were in the foreground, while other elements in the same image are simultaneously depicted as if they are far way, depriving such paintings of an experiential logic through which the viewer usually engages with the real. These so-called composite images, which merge illogical viewing acuities and various perspectives, not only deny an atmospheric unity, but also establish a perceptual disconnection between objects and figures that share the same space, as in Schad's *Self Portrait* (p. 275).[39] Although Neumeyer's argumentation is at times distinguished by an overbearing internal logic, he is the only one (with the possible exception of Roh) to closely base his findings on concrete visual evidence. According to Neumeyer, these new realist paintings, which reveal an anti-individual style of observation, probe the nature of seeing in order to heighten a naked reality and existential insecurities.

Other critics such as Roh, Westheim, and Emil Utitz, by contrast, approached the realism of New Objectivity from a phenomenological perspective. As Westheim wrote in 1922:

> For some people, a lot of exciting things seem to have happened and been achieved in art in recent years; one has grown tired, desires calm again.... The painting on the wall should once again be a way to cover up the impossible wallpaper. A bromide to calm the nerves. Inside a gold frame, one wants to have a bouquet of flowers or a meadow beyond the gate, rendered vividly and realistically, with all the deposits left behind by the cows who grazed here.... One wants to "smell, taste" reality again.[40]

Ironically, here Westheim not only criticized the bourgeois notion of art as a pleasant commodity that distracts from political and social realities, but also defended avant-garde forms and experimentation that transcend the imitation of nature and instead reveal art itself as an act of creation. Despite his dismissal of the new representative art found in New Objectivity, like Roh he highlighted aesthetic qualities such as smell and taste that surpassed the reception of art as a pure act of seeing.

Particularly in *Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus; Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Post-Expressionism: Magic Realism; Problems of the Newest European Painting), published in 1925, Roh set out to explicate the ways through which New Objectivity "sought to reintegrate reality into the heart of visibility."[41] Focusing on the dualism between the exterior world and the spiritual realm of the imaginary, he explained that "humanity seems destined to oscillate forever between devotion to the world of dreams and adherence to the world of reality."[42] Similar to Westheim, he foregrounded the importance of the art object in terms of its tactile existence, writing that the new realist art "principally evokes... a most prolific and detailed *tactile feeling*," a notion he also describes as "the possibility of feeling existence."[43] Highlighting this magic of being, he viewed the objects in New Objectivity paintings as spiritual creations, acknowledging their timelessness, yet also noting how they prompted an arresting viewing experience.[44] Similarly in his 1925 essay "Gegenständlichkeit" (Figuration), he observed that "painting once again becomes the mirror of the tangible outside.... A more comprehensive coexistence of colors, spatial forms, tactile ideas, smells, memories of chewing conditions me. An in fact inexhaustible complex that we combine in the concept of the tangible.... Today it is above all the complex experience of touch that is evoked."[45]

Although one could be tempted to make connections here between the rising consumer culture in Weimar Germany and the simultaneous increasing significance of things in the domain of the fine arts, and Roh's embracing of tactility, he frequently pushed this notion more into the direction of spirituality and classicism, underscoring humanism and the miracle of permanence (i.e., timelessness). This line of argumentation is clearly in opposition to the fast-paced transience and constantly changing styles that dominated modernization in Weimar Germany. But Roh asserted that "from this same emotion derives the call for norms, consistencies in the ethical, even in the political, from the right and the left."[46] Nonetheless he also recognized that one could conceive of existence as void,[47] thus invoking a contemporary mindset that relinquished empathy. Similarly, in his interpretation of the sense of magic that emanated from contemporary realist paintings, Roh detected that their spiritual qualities were uncanny ones, despite the serenity and soberness of such works.[48] Franz Radziwill's paintings strongly resonate with Roh's concept of the uncanny. The eerie lighting of *The Street*, for example, underscores a sense of a precarious existence in an inhospitable setting, but the painting's microscopically rendered details also invite a heightened, tactile perception of the real. Irene Guenther has shown that Roh also used the term "Magic Rationalism," connecting

FRANZ RADZIWILL, *The Street*, 1928

the uncanny (*Unheimliche*) to the monstrous and marvelous as it pertains to human conditions in the age of modern technology.[49] This apparent contradiction—between timelessness, classicism, and ethical norms on the one hand and existential vacuity and uncanniness on the other—remained unresolved for Roh.

CARL (CARLO) MENSE, *Divine Coast, Positano*, c. 1924
Oil on canvas; 28 × 28 in. (71 × 71 cm)
Private collection

Most other critics who regarded these new representational paintings as a form of realism avoided existential analysis. One exception was cultural philosopher Emil Utitz, who also stressed the significance of tactility in his 1927 book *Die Überwindung des Expressionismus: Charakterologische Studien zur Kultur der Gegenwart* (Overcoming Expressionism: Logical Character Studies on Contemporary Culture). That same year he asserted in his essay "Der neue Realismus" that the sensual effect of these artworks would only reveal the surface of things rather than their being or existence.[50] Art historian Edwin Redslob, however, emphasized a spiritual relation between artist and experiential reality that would counteract the mechanism of consumer culture and prioritize the concept of human collectivism. "The artist of our time does not want a thing to exist as oftentimes people look at it: he believes in an all-embracing world; he wants to reach it not for the sake of one individual but for the sake of all—hence his symbolism, his will to form, his inner piety, but hence also the new respect for reality."[51] In contrast to notions of modernist fragmentation as they dominated Expressionism and Cubism, writer and intellectual conservative Max Picard too emphasized the object in its totality: "What matters is to see an object when it is still whole, and when it itself insists on being seen whole, so that it cannot be depicted except in its totality."[52]

The realisms of New Objectivity manifest themselves through the various ways in which artists attempted to approach the reality of the 1920s. Spiritual and humanistic values, as they had dominated aesthetic discourses since the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Germany, were challenged by New Objectivity artists and many of their critics as they engaged with a form of realism that had abandoned ties to a meaningful world. Detachment and dissociation, immersion in the artificial and superficial, and playing with surfaces as well as calculated painting methods all took the place of empathy in nineteenth-century Realism, albeit many of these artworks show political commitment even if by negation. Although some critics such as Neumeyer considered the act of seeing and the visual manifestation of the unreal as decisive qualities of this new realism, others, especially Roh, inquired into the nature of tactility and its connection to a haptic experience of existence. Tactility is seen to convey the longing for ethical norms and social stability yet is also shown to expose thingness as it embodies the uncanny and unhomely, often visualized through minute attention to surface, to the skin of things. The ways in which some of these artists suggest and deny tactility and embodiment are through surface imitations (as in Carl Mense's cacti in *Divine Coast, Positano*), uncanny shadows (for example, in Aenne Biermann's *Eggs* [p. 235]), or tectonic simplifications (as in Georg Scholz's *View of Grötzingen near Durlach* [p. 187]). Ultimately then, these New Objectivity artists developed a realism that was turned upside down as they lost their trust in art as a means to imagine better worlds, instead immersing themselves in a disenchanted, often soulless contemporaneity.

ENDNOTES

I thank Nana Bahlmann for providing me with many of the primary sources used in this essay.

1 Intellectual historian Jeffrey Herf, for example, has demonstrated how this society was penetrated by paradoxical allegiances. The broad German middle class was equally drawn to ideals of national redemption and organic notions of community as to modern materialism and technology. Similarly, irrationality and romantic longings didn't automatically imply hostility to technology, as might be assumed. Traditional and even nationalistic values drawing on preindustrial ideals were frequently mingled with the values of modern capitalism and growing urbanization in Weimar Germany. Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 21–22.

2 Uwe Fleckner, "Die gefrorenen Wirklichkeiten der Neuen Sachlichkeit," in *Das wahre Gesicht unserer Zeit: Bilder vom Menschen in der Zeichnung der Neuen Sachlichkeit*, ed. Uwe Fleckner and Dirk Luckow, exh. cat. (Kiel, Germany: Kunsthalle zu Kiel, 2004), 23.

3 These artists were very invested in skill and methodical artistic calculations and many reanimated earlier styles and techniques, especially those of Northern Renaissance artists such as Lucas Cranach and Hans Baldung Grien who, in contrast to Italian Renaissance painters, did not focus on classical conceptions of beauty. See: Georg Scholz, "Die Elemente zur Erziehung der Wirkung im Bilde" in *Die zwanziger Jahre: Manifeste und Dokumente deutscher Künstler*, ed. Uwe M. Schneede (Cologne: DuMont, 1979), 141–43.

4 Karl Hofer in Paul Westheim, ed., "Ein neuer Naturalismus," *Das Kunstblatt* 6 (September 1922): 406.

5 Westheim, "Ein neuer Naturalismus," 369–414.

6 Ibid., 383.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. Unless otherwise noted, translations are courtesy of Steven Lindberg.

9 See, for example, the contributions by Max Picard and Ludwig Meidner in ibid., 377 and 382.

10 Wilhelm Michel, "Die Neue Sachlichkeit," *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* 56 (1925): 299.

11 Béla Balázs, "Sachlichkeit und Sozialismus," *Die neue Weltbühne* 24, no. 51 (1928): 916.

12 G. F. Hartlaub, in Westheim, "Ein neuer Naturalismus," 389–93, trans. in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 248.

13 Sabine Rewald, ed., *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 57.

14 Wilhelm Hausenstein, *Die Kunst in diesem Augenblick* (Munich: Hyperionverlag, 1920), 44.

15 Between these allegedly oppositional strands of New Objectivity were painters and photographers who were invested in both sociopolitical themes and conventional genres such as still life and portraiture. They deliberately sought methods of mimetic representation that staged *Sachlichkeit* through compact compositions. Painters and photographers evaded, through these performative artistic practices, an exact photographic or naturalistic record. Many of them resided in cities such as Hannover or Karlsruhe, far removed from the cultural capitals of Berlin as well as Dresden and Munich, which were associated, respectively, with the left-wing and conservative strands. For example, Grethe Jürgens, who lived and worked in Hanover, not only depicted herself as a progressive New Woman wearing short hair (*Self-Portrait* [1928]) but also depicted the many unemployed, homeless, and wounded citizens that surrounded her without foregrounding a committed stance. Other artists, espousing views closer to Alexander Kanoldt's, revealed their fascination with the world of consumer objects that increasingly populated daily life during this period of rapid modernization. While Carl Grossberg's passion lay with industrial machines (whose surfaces he meticulously depicted), Aenne Biermann photographed banal objects such as eggs or apples, which she captured in innovative ways to abstract formal qualities from the things themselves.

16 Klaus Herding, "Realismus," in *Funkkolleg Kunst: Eine Geschichte der Kunst im Wandel ihrer Funktionen*, ed. Werner Busch (Munich: Piper, 1987), 730–64.

17 Matthew Beaumont, "Introduction: Reclaiming Realism," in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Beaumont (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 1–11.

18 Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 1133.

19 Okwui Enwezor, "Documentary/Vérité: Bio-Politics, Human Rights, and the Figure of 'Truth' in Contemporary Art," in *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary in Contemporary Art #1*, ed. Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 81.

20 Beaumont, "Introduction," 2.

21 Herding, "Realismus," 730–34.

22 Ernst Bloch, "Über die Naturbilder seit Ausgang des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts" (1927), in *Verfremdungen II* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), 78–94, esp. 88–89. See also Fleckner, "Die gefrorenen Wirklichkeiten," 20.

23 George Grosz, "Zu meinen neuen Bildern" (1920), in *Das Kunstblutt* 5 (January 1921): 10–16, and see his complementing statement: "I push color back. The line is drawn unindividually, photographically, is constructed in order to provide volume.... Control over line and form are reintroduced. It is no longer about conjuring up colorful Expressionist wallpapers of the soul on the canvas." Ibid., 14.

24 Balázs, "Sachlichkeit und Sozialismus," 916.

25 Uwe Fleckner, *Carl Einstein und sein Jahrhundert: Fragmente einer intellektuellen Biographie* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), 142.

26 Ibid., 149n84.

27 Ibid., 151–52, and George Grosz, in Westheim, "Ein neuer Naturalismus," 382–83.

28 Ibid., 149.

29 Paul F. Schmidt, "Die deutschen Veristen," *Das Kunstblatt* 8 (December 1924): 368.

30 Ibid., 369.

31 Ibid., 368.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 373.

34 Most other contemporary critics, such as Paul Fechter, embraced Verism as a tendentious naturalism. Fechter, "Die nachexpressionistische Situation," *Das Kunstblatt* 7 (November 1923): 324.

35 Alfred Neumeyer, "Zur Raumpsychologie der 'Neuen Sachlichkeit,'" *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* 61 (1927): 70.

36 Ibid., 72.

37 Ibid., 69: in Neumeyer's words it was "the urge for isolation, arising out of the desire for the densest encircling of the object, it also searches to shut out the temporal aspect." See also Franz Roh's significant book exploring the same issue: *Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus; Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1925).

38 Neumeyer, "Raumpsychologie," 69–70.

39 Ibid., 71–72. On the issue of small and large, near and far, see also Franz Roh, *Magic Realism: Post-Expressonism* (1925), in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 26–29.

40 Paul Westheim, "Kleines Kolleg über 'Naturalismus,'" *Das Kunstblatt* 6 (January 1922): 93–94.

41 Roh, *Magic Realism*, 18.

42 Ibid., 17. See also ibid., 22: "In addition, we see juxtaposed in harsh tension and contrast the forms of the spirit and the very solidity of objects, which the will must come up against if it wishes to make them enter its system of coordinates."

43 Ibid., 19 and 20.

44 Ibid., 22. In relation to Roh's notion of timelessness, see also his essay "Gegenständlichkeit," *Der Cicerone* (December 1925). There he writes about "sensing the miracle of existence in its unmarred durability," 1117.

45 Ibid., 1113–14.

46 Ibid., 1117.

47 Ibid., 1114: "... that one can emphatically feel out the existence from the void."

48 Ibid., 1114: "This interpretation seems more important than that of objectivity.... For the latter would not radiate the magic, the spiritual, the uncanny inherent in the best pictures of the new movement—amid their composure and apparent sobriety."

49 Irene Guenther, "Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic," in Zamora and Faris, *Magical Realism*, 35–36.

50 Emil Utitz, "Der neue Realismus," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (1927): 179–80. "The standpoint seems to be clearly indicated. The mere sensory impression shows only the skin of things; their essence goes unrecognized."

51 In Westheim, "Ein neuer Naturalismus," 275.

52 Ibid., 377. The emphasis on thingness devoid of artistic intervention can also be found in the writings of Herman Keil, who promoted a form of subjective realism that he saw realized in figurative Surrealism as practiced by artists such as Joan Miró and André Masson in France, remarked "It [New Objectivity] went so far as to depersonalize the artist, who almost seemed to be no longer involved. The object manifested itself." Similarly, critic Wilhelm Michel observed in relation to Kanoldt that "the thing... is not even experienced with sensory, creaturely participation; rather it is realized in its 'concept' with undeniable doggedness." And further he writes "the depicted 'things' seem to hold their breath." See Herman Keil, "Der subjective Realismus," *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* 69 (1931–32): 262, and Wilhelm Michel, "Die Neue Sachlichkeit," 300.