

ARTS



'The hottest place on earth'

It's bleak, depressed, run down – and local artists are selling works for a million dollars.

Gordon Burn goes to Leipzig to see why the art world is flocking to a mill in the former GDR

The history of modern Germany is, in part, a history of silences," Neal Ascherson wrote in a recent essay for the *London Review of Books*. "First there were things one learned not to say, soon followed by questions one learned not to ask, leading to sights one learned not to see." The silences, as Gunter Grass last year made clear in his autobiography, held on both sides. In the west, the decision not to speak about the past was, in some sense, voluntary; in the east, these silences and others were enforced. If the painters of the communist GDR wanted to register a protest against the oppressive state, they had to do it slyly, mock-classically, in code. Icarus, tumbling to earth after flying too close to the sun, like members of the dictatorship deformed by power, was a popular symbol.

But then the Wall came down, in 1989, and the pupils of the old painters of the GDR were free to interpret the new world as it was revealed to them. Neo Rauch, a recent graduate of the Art Academy in Leipzig, in the heavily industrial far east of the former



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« East Germany, started painting large canvases that hovered somewhere between socialist realism and pop art.

Rauch's best-known works are peopled by semi-surreal figures from the 1950s performing enigmatic tasks of physical labour, reminiscent of Soviet-era instruction manuals and illustrations. They quickly earned Rauch a reputation as the next great German painter, following an earlier generation that includes Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz, Martin Kippenberger and Anselm Kiefer. The new Leipzig School – Rauch and some of his former pupils – became a collecting phenomenon: a Rauch painting called *Losung* ("Password") sold at Sotheby's in London last June for £456,000. Leipzig – run-down, depressed, increasingly depopulated – has now acquired the art-world cachet of New York in the 1950s or London in the 1990s.

The new Leipzig School has coalesced into what Joachim Pissarro of the Museum of Modern Art described to the New York Times as "suddenly the hottest thing on earth". Significantly, perhaps, having witnessed the failure of two bright new dawns – those of postwar communism and post-cold war capitalism – the Leipzig painters are seen as having an atmosphere of disillusionment in common; their work is imbued with a deep melancholy. They are also a reminder of bygone eras when most artists were painters, and most painters were men.

The Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei, a former cotton mill in a far-flung, dismal suburb, hosts the city's annual art weekend, a recently invented event. The spinnerei used to accommodate 4,000 people in a complex of 19th-century factories and workers' tenements so vast and self-sufficient it was known as "a city in the city". The mills started to deteriorate after the fall of the Wall, and ceased production completely by the mid-1990s. Now half the factory buildings are rented out to about 100 artists, with the galleries representing the cream of them settled into high, white, top-lit spaces at street level. There is a shop selling artists' materials, a fine-wine supplier and a top-notch restaurant with a pretty garden in what used to be the clocking-in shop by the factory gates.

Café Mule was overflowing with visitors in the opening hours of Leipzig's art weekend. It was early evening, and the half-mile strip of cobbled street had turned into a kind of



runway for the well-heeled locals and the fly-ins from Seoul and Cologne and Manhattan, unsteady in their Jimmy Choos and Manolos.

Rauch had a new show, and traffic on the opening night was all one-way. The Rubell family of Miami and the Ovitzes of Hollywood were among the first to start collecting Rauch's work. The Rubells showed two dozen of their Leipzig canvases at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art last year at the same time as the Cleveland Museum was showing the Ovitiz family's *From Leipzig*, a show it described as "the 21st century's first bona fide artistic phenomenon".

Both shows were well received and – ironically, given the current, much-touted American "renaissance" – welcomed for being refreshingly non-American. "Razzle-dazzle effects, wilful trashiness and breezy pop culture signifiers are all shunned," Art in America's reviewer wrote. The Leipzig painters shared a commitment to images more appropriate to "probing issues of belonging and alienation in a reunified Germany".

Neo Rauch makes a point of always talking about his "workshop" rather than his studio. A bridge between the older painters of the GDR and the young artists of a unified Germany, he keeps the hours of a factory worker: nine to six every day, with a mid-day break to prepare lunch for his wife, the painter Rosa Loy. He is now a professor of painting at the art academy in Leipzig, where he was himself a student. During the 1990s, a generation of artists had been forced to emigrate, comply or stay without work under the Nazis. After the war, Soviet socialist realism demanded the kitsch depiction of worthy workers, jolly tractor drivers and smiling peasants.

Reminiscent of a bygone era... (above) *Untitled 2005* by Tilo Baumgartel (below). The artist is a former pupil of Neo Rauch (right), creator of *Tabu* (previous page). The pair are at the forefront of the Leipzig art scene



The Leipzig academy has been said to function as both a training camp and a kind of moral institute. There is an unfashionable commitment to the traditional techniques of life-drawing, draughtsmanship and painting. Although new media were integrated into the curriculum in the 1990s, experimentation is not expected in finished work by students in the painting school and any tendency towards extreme stylisation or abstraction is discouraged.

Rauch's parents were killed when he was six weeks old in a train crash just outside the Leipzig station, and so he has never known why he was given his unusual first name. He strongly dislikes its connection with newness and innovation, because he considers himself to be a "very conservative" person – anti-progressive and resistant to change.

Tall and gaunt, like his paintings, Rauch exudes a kind of chaffing and intimidating, rather unfriendly wit. For the private view of his show, he wore a dark suit; he was the cool centre of a room a-quiver with the purchasing power of many of those on Art Review's 2006 list of the 100 most powerful. Rauch was in at #66. Gerd Harry Lybke, his dealer, was one place behind, at #67 – a disappointment, no doubt, for a man who unabashedly declares himself the powerhouse and kingmaker of the whole Leipzig scene.

At a lavish reception at the Museum der Bildenden Künste, Rauch lurked in the shadows ("an artist's workshop should always be installed on the fringe"), while Lybke clambered onto the seat of a velvet chair and did a comic turn. A life model for many years, he sat for Rauch and a number of the other artists he now represents. He was thinner in those days, with Jimi Hendrix hair; now he is florid-faced and rotund, and likes the kind of clothes Ronnie Corbett is famous for wearing, with an added Bavarian twist.

For the big night, Lybke turned out in pink pinstripes with red braces and cinching buckles. This was in stark contrast to the head-to-toe black of the elderly couple he buzzed around busily. Donald and Mera Rubell (#29 on Art Review's list) started collecting work by the Leipzig artists for their private Miami museum in 2003.

"What happened in Leipzig was unique," Mrs Rubell said. "Discovering five artists in one day had never happened to us in 40 years of collecting." *Vorfahrung*, a 12ft by 16ft canvas from the present show, was the latest giant Neo Rauch jewel in their collection. "Very much pink," the Danish collector Ole Faarup said of the Rubells' million-dollar purchase. "Too

Panel games

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much pink. I don't think Mr and Mrs Rubell have chosen well."

Of all the Leipzig artists, Tilo Baumgartel probably has the closest personal and working relationship with Neo Rauch. They paint in adjacent spaces in the spinneret and have lunch in the studio together every day. Baumgartel follows the same orderly work habits and is imbued with the same self-discipline as his former teacher, who, at the age of 29, was 12 years older than Baumgartel when the Wall came down.

They came across the cotton mill one day and moved in just as the last of the mill-workers were moving out. "Now the old factory has developed into a new one," Baumgartel says. "Raw materials in the art supplies shop on the ground floor, production areas in the studios upstairs, distribution by the dealers. In the beginning it was silent, romantic, a little bit tragic-romantic. Now it is the opposite. A factory without bosses."

Saturday saw Lybke, hungover but still in paunchy Teutonic demigod

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mode, glad-handing the crowd who were eddying through his gallery. "A question!" he commanded. "C'mon, ask me a question! Not one of your tired ones. One that I haven't been asked." OK. What did he think about during the eight years he spent working as a nude model, eight hours a day? "Sex!"

Not Soviet oppression? Not the Stasi? This was still the era of the GDR. "Sex! I had three one-night stands a day, every day! Women were the same. This free sex thing is over since the Wall fell down." He grabbed the arm of a young woman who happened to have wandered within reach. "Is true, ja? Women fuck three men a day in the DDR?" She blushed and pushed him away.

Later the woman told me she was the wife of Vlado Ondrej, a printmaker with a studio on Staircase 3. They had been among the first into the old spinneret buildings when the area was still considered a dangerous place to be - "full of alcoholics, drug-takers, people on the street". These had all since been tidied away into high-rises in west Leipzig. We were being jostled by people carrying glasses of wine, gallery-hopping in the international style, as we talked. "We said," Mrs Ondrej told me, "that when the beer at the corner shop is replaced by champagne, it is time to move on" ●