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To What End Painting?

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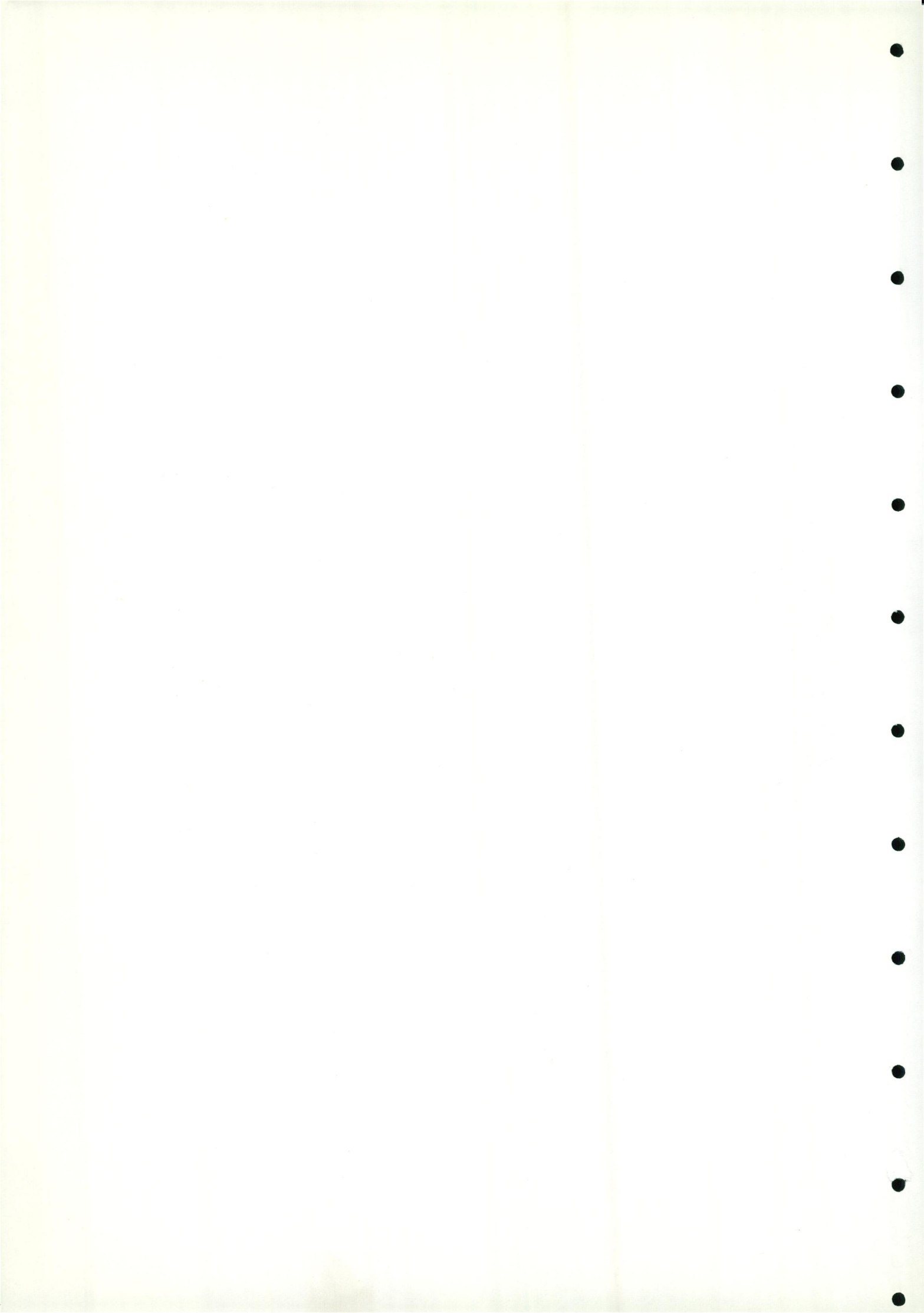
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INTRODUCTION

In the sixties and seventies many artists appeared to have abandoned painting and turned to the new conceptual forms of art, performance in actual time and space, video, photography and others. Minimalism in painting and sculpture still had some hold, but its reductive style, along with Pop and Op Art, seemed to announce the very death of painting. In the early 1980s, however, there was a resurgence of interest in the expressive forms of painting which came to be known as Neo-Expressionism.¹ Not since American Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s did painting steal so much of the limelight and hold centre stage in the art world. The Neo-Expressionist movement was divided into three main groups: The Americans, three of its principal artists being Julian Schnabel, David Salle and Eric Fischl²; The Italian Transavantgarde, whose principal artists were Francesco Clemente, Sandra Chia, Enzo Cucchi and Mimmo Paladino; and the third group and by far the largest were the Germans, led by painters such as George Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer and Jörg Immendorf. The Europeans had first come into prominence at the Venice Biennial of 1980

¹ Other forms of painting developing in Britain and America at this time were Graffiti and related styles, Ghetto, New Image, Neo-Abstraction and New Scottish and English Painting.

² American hegemony in painting had for a long time been taken for granted. It was now being challenged by the new German and Italian imported painting. Certain critics began to identify Schnabel, Salle and Fischl with the new movement. In 1979 at "The New Image Painting Show" at the Whitney Museum these three painters became the centre of artworld attention and were seen as the inaugurators of the Renaissance of American painting.



and by the following year were being exhibited in New York. American critics were having some difficulty in coming to terms with the new resurgence of European painting and its implications. In an article entitled "No Island Is An Island"³, Deborah Phillips claimed that it represented the first substantial challenge in forty years to the international pre-dominance of American art.

On the 15th of January 1981 the exhibition "A New Spirit In Painting" opened at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. There were thirty eight artists in all and all of them were men. Some of these were already major stars, such as Francis Bacon and Willem De Kooning. "A New Spirit In Painting" claimed to demonstrate that painting was very much alive. It attempted to re-establish painting as a high art, with universal principals which cut across political and critical divides. Most importantly it emphasised the subjective vision and creative imagination of the artist and attempted to re-establish the traditional values of painting as known and practised by artists in both the modernist and post-modernist eras.⁴ The re-introduction of the human figure into painting with the works of such artists as Lucien Freud, George Baselitz and Francis Bacon was one of the primary objectives of the exhibition. The exhibition created an international market

³ "No Island Is An Island: New York Discovers The Europeans", Art News, October 1982, pp.66-71

⁴ The Exhibition attempted to assert traditional values such as individual creativity, accountability and quality and thereby sought to demonstrate the condition of contemporary art and the society in which it is produced. Figures, landscapes and objects were present in all the paintings.



break through for the German Neo-Expressionists. Critic Donald Kuspit in reference to the German painting said

It is clearly an art about the power of paint to conjure images that overpower and force the spectator to look beyond his ordinary perception and everyday fantasies. It is about the unpredictability that painting, which is all too regularly declared to be on its last legs, can still have. The Germans show that painting is still of value for an understanding of the complexity of the concept of art.⁵

(Kuspit 1983 p.4-5)

It is perhaps the case that the rise of Neo-Expressionism was propelled by the writings of critics and historians in both America and Europe. Barbara Rose's essay "American Painting: The Eighties"⁶ stressed two very important points: firstly the power of the subjective imagination of the individual artist to create images and secondly that the manner of making a painting reveals the activity of the human hand. In this second point she is re-asserting a much disputed claim made by Richard Hennessy in his essay "What's All This About Photography?"⁷ in which he stated that that which distinguishes painting from photography was the visible record of the human hand. This claim was challenged by Douglas Crimp and others as will be examined further in chapter one.

⁵ It is important to realise that by the 1980s painting badly needed rebirthing because during the sixties and seventies it had lost ground to newer means: photography, video, performance and environment arts began to dominate the great international exhibitions of contemporary art held in America and Europe.

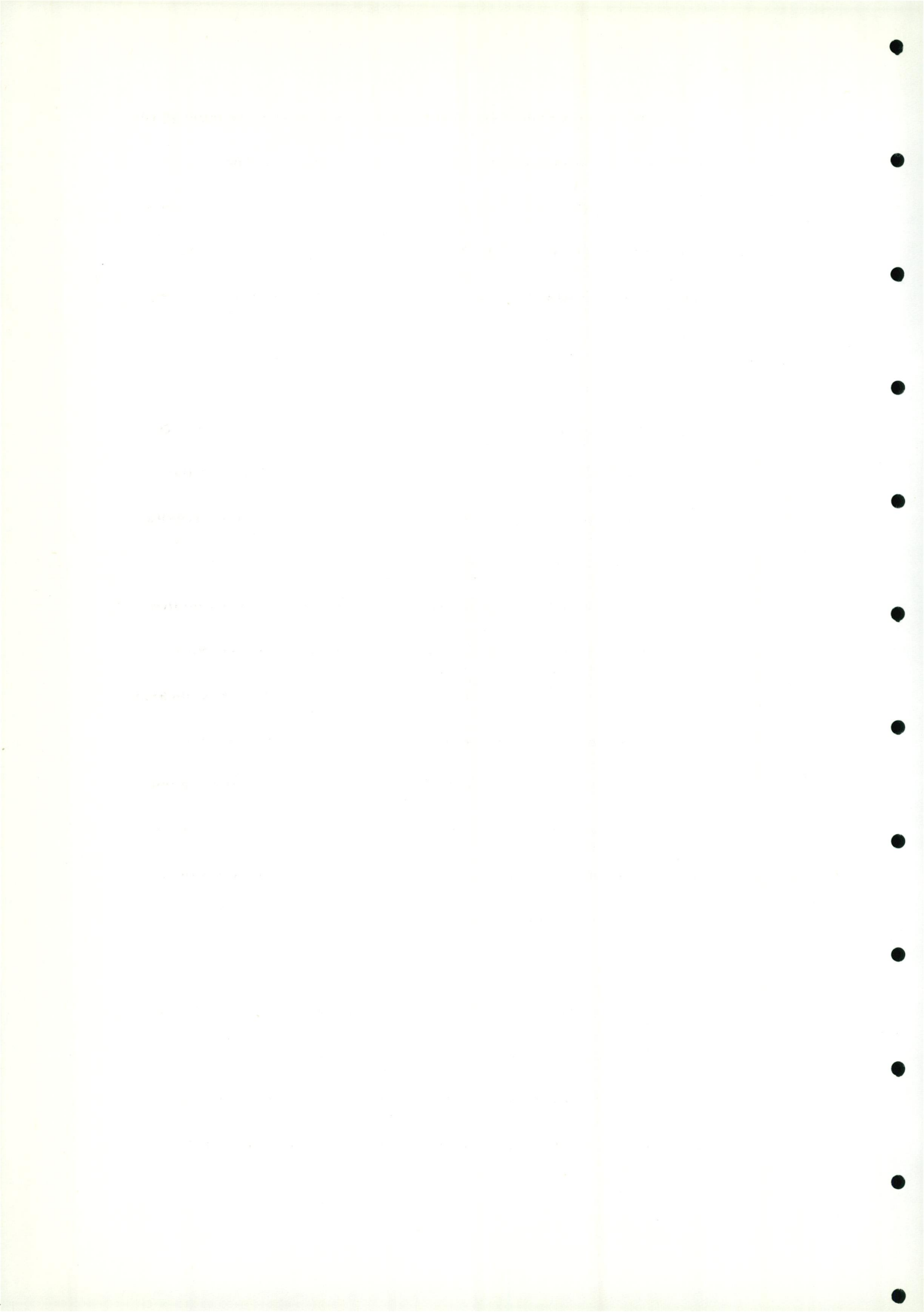
⁶ This essay was first published in the catalogue for the Exhibition of the same name organised by Rose at M.O.M.A. New York in the Fall of 1979.

⁷ Art Forum 17 No. 9, May 1979, pp. 22-25.



Rose wrote in her essay that illusion is the essence of painting: "The artist is free to manipulate and transform imagery into all manner of illusions, belonging exclusively to the realm of the pictorial, i.e. the realm of imagination." (Rose 1988, p.286) She then turns her attention to the question of photography and painting. Forcefully she argues that "photography and the slick painting styles related to it answered the appetite for images". She goes on to claim however that they did so at the "enormous price of sacrificing all the sensuous, tactile qualities of surface", and "the metaphorical and metaphysical aspects of imagery that it is the unique capacity of painting to deliver." (Rose 1988 p. 280) Furthermore she adds that painting is the "visible record of the human hand as it builds surfaces experienced as tactile" It is this which differentiates painting from the mechanically reproduced imagery. (Rose 1988, p. 281) "Serious painters of the eighties", she continues are united in that they are "dedicated to the preservation of painting as a transcendental, high art, a major art and an art of universal as opposed to topical significance". She further claims that their aesthetic both "synthesises tactile with optical qualities" and "defines itself in conscious opposition to photography and all forms of mechanical reproduction". (Rose 1988, p. 282)

In her essay she praised the work of Jasper Johns as one who had rejected the iconography of Pop art to paint with oil and brush on a rectangular canvas a "personal subjective vision, a world of psychologically charged imagery and painterly surfaces." (Rose 1988, p. 274) She praises



also Gorky's technical skill which she claimed re-affirmed a commitment to painting as a sensual tactile experience involving hand as well as eye and brain. She praises Hans Hofmann as an artist who had remained loyal to the Western tradition of painting and had insisted upon a "maximal art that was sensuous, tactile, imagistic, metaphorical and subjective." (Rose 1988, p. 282)

Rose's essay was severely criticised by Douglas Crimp in his essay "The End of Painting" and some of these criticisms will be considered in Chapter One. Crimp also condemned the type of painting which in previous times had been created merely to comply with the Art Galleries and Museums. To him the latter were bourgeois inventions created to reconcile the larger public with art. He disliked the way they are controlled by an elite, private patronage. These museums and galleries were seen by many as a necessary condition of the artworks intelligibility. Thus he asks the fundamental question: "Under such conditions of its representation to what end painting, now at the threshold of the 1980s?" (Crimp 1983 p. 94) He criticises the work of Robert Rauschenberg saying that it makes visible the most literal of paintings material conventions: its supporting surface, stretcher, frame and the wall upon which it hangs. He concedes that Rose's show "American Painting: The Eighties" had been a resounding success and had proved that faith in painting had once again been restored. However, he goes on to say that the rhetoric which accompanied this resurrection was almost entirely reactionary. "It re-acts", he says, "specifically against all



those art practices that had abandoned painting and worked to reveal the ideological supports of painting as well as the ideology that painting in turn supports.” (Crimp 1993, p. 90) Crimp also denounced Hennessy’s essay and the historical understanding of painting as an ontological process, saying that this way of thinking ultimately reduces painting to a series of styles. In relation to stylistic changes Crimp refers to the work of Frank Stella. Stella’s earlier paintings such as the striped or black series of the late fifties and sixties were taken by some as an indication of the death of painting.⁸ In the seventies, however, Stella’s work underwent a major change and he began to produce paintings of an extremely flamboyant and colourful nature⁹. Crimp asks how can the phenomenon of these recent works be accounted for. He sees their execution as an act of desperation, “An expression of paintings need for a miracle to save it”. (Crimp 1993, p. 102)

After “A New Spirit In Painting” other exhibitions followed in the Eighties which gave prominence to Neo-Expressionist Painting. These are described in greater detail in Chapter Two. It is important to note that within the Neo-Expressionist movement and as the 1980s progressed the

⁸ Stella’s colleagues, Donald Judd, Sol Le Wit and Robert Morris had given up painting completely in the sixties.

⁹ Stella’s black-striped paintings of the 60’s offered an alternative to what Clement Greenberg called “painterly painting” in that they were non-gestural, non-referential in image, colour or space and above all non-illusionistic. Stella had abandoned every painterly variation, accent and nuance of pictorial space. “My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there”, he said, “it really is an object.” (Sandler 1978, p. 311) As a result Greenberg, whose formalist approach continued to dominate in the 60’s, was unsympathetic to Stella’s work.



greater interest from critics, historians, curators and exhibition organisers was towards the Nordic painters and in particular the German contingent. The Germans, in fact, were heavily criticised for promoting their own art above that of the other Europeans and the Americans. Donald Kuspit called it “aggression” and that one sensed a “militant determination to get the art across, to convince us of its value, to declare its uniqueness”. **(Kuspit 1983, p. 4)**

The larger Neo-Expressionist movements, especially the Italians, came in for further criticism from Kuspit and from other sources including Craig Owens and Thomas Lawson. These criticisms are discussed in more detail in Chapter One with a view to understanding more clearly the claims made by Barbara Rose and the counter-claims of Crimp. It is important to remember that Rose herself was not a supporter of Neo-Expressionism.¹⁰ It will be one of the main purposes of this Thesis to demonstrate that through the work of the German Neo-Expressionists and that of Anselm Kiefer in particular, painting is still a valuable means of artistic expression in the latter part of this century. The Italian Transavantgarde condemned by critics for what was felt to be a misuse of the medium proved, however, that traditional values in painting were still valid. The German Neo-Expressionist painters by contrast demonstrate that painting, far from being

¹⁰ Her criticisms tended to support more the artists of the late-modernist period, in particular Hans Hoffman, Jasper Johns, Arshile Gorky, Miro, Jackson Pollock and a number of younger painters who took up the challenge of Pollock's all-over technique in a variety of ways.



an archaic art form to be manipulated, is in fact a relevant and valid medium for tackling the most emotive issues of contemporary society. In order to demonstrate this fact more clearly, Chapter Two will include a brief historical analysis of contemporary German art. In this Chapter also a closer examination of the work of five German Neo-Expressionist painters will be undertaken. These painters are: George Baselitz, A.R. Penck, Jörg Immendorf, Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer. A final chapter will be dedicated to the work of Anselm Kiefer.

It is hoped that this entire work will go some distance in responding to the questions concerning painting as raised by Rose, Crimp, Oliva and others. It is also hoped that it may succeed in answering Douglas Crimp's pertinent question: "To what end painting?" It is for that reason that this question has been chosen as the title for this Thesis. It is therefore the life or the death of painting which will be one of its main pre-occupations.



CHAPTER ONE

Four Critics

In this chapter it will be necessary to present for analyses the ideas as laid down in four essays by four of the main art critics of the 1980s.

These essays are: "The Italian Transavantgarde" by Achille Bonito Oliva, "Honour, Power And the Love of Women", by Craig Owens, "The New (?) Expressionism: Art As Damaged Goods", by Donald Kuspit and "Last Exit: Painting", by Thomas Lawson. There are a number of reasons for choosing these particular essays. Both Oliva and Rose seem to favour the idea of the subjectivity of the artists' vision, the individuality of the artist and the possibility of the artist working through the power of his or her own imagination. These concepts would seem to form part of the modernist legacy in painting and are challenged by Douglas Crimp in his essay "The End of Painting". With regard to Neo-expressionism, however, Owens, Kuspit and Lawson seem to be of the same mind. They denounce it as pseudo-expressionism and compare it unfavourably with the original German Expressionism. Neither Owens nor Kuspit, in the essays chosen, seem to be directly concerned with the deeper question of the life or the death of painting, as is Douglas Crimp. However after some investigation it may be seen that their arguments are closer to the point than might, at first, be expected. While Thomas Lawson also condemns Neo-expressionism along roughly the same lines as Kuspit and Owens, he also addresses the



more fundamental question of the future of art and in particular the role of painting. In doing so he makes reference to Douglas Crimp's argument in support of Daniel Buren's work. He seems to indicate that the only way forward for art is to assume a subversive role and sees painting as ideally suited to that role because of its quality of illusion. He appears to say that painting is the only option left open to the radical artist who wishes to avoid co-optation by the art institutions, the museums and galleries. To return to Rose for a moment, it is important to realise that her beliefs as to what constitutes radical and subversive practices, being rooted in the modernist tradition, would differ fundamentally from those of Lawson. However in order to raise these questions it will help to present the arguments raised by all of the four critics mentioned here.

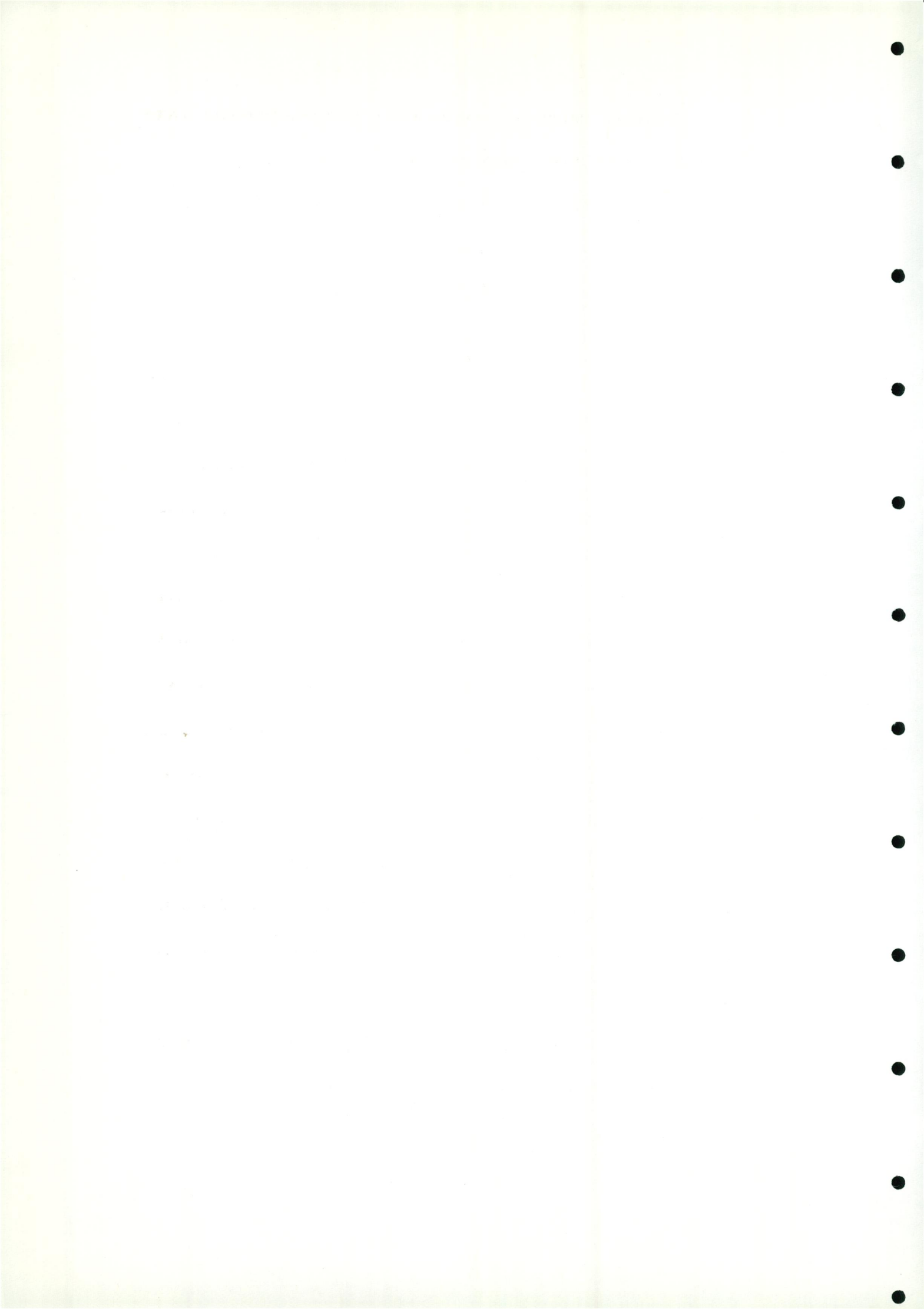
According to Achille Bonito Oliva in the art of the seventies the "Individual immaginario presides over artistic creativity, previously mortified by the impersonal synchronic character and even by the political climate of the sixties, which preached de-personalisation in the name of politics". (See Oliva 1981, p.10) Now instead, he claims, art tries to repossess the artist's subjectivity - to express itself through an "internal form of language, bringing the individual artist back to a state of renewal of a sentiment towards himself". (Oliva 1981, p. 10) The new "expressiveness", he states, sinks its roots into an "open and drifting nomadism": the art of the seventies represents a nomad creativity, i.e. it offers to the artist unlimited free transit inside all territories with open



reference in all directions. Citing the work of the Italian Transavantgarde, Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, De Maria, Palladino and others he claims that their work is situated in a “mobile field” which means the crossing of every experimental notion of the avant-garde and according to the idea that every work “presumes an experimental manuality”. **(Oliva 1981, p. 19)** With regard to the presence of the artists’ hand and in relation to the Transavantgarde he says:

Their work is constructed no longer according to the certainty expected of a project or of an idea, but forms itself before his (the artist’s) eyes, under the pulsions of a hand, which dips inside the substance of art in an immaginario, embodied somewhere between an idea and sensitivity. **(Oliva, 1981, p. 11)**

Many critics were in disagreement with these views and among them were Owens, Kuspit and Lawson. According to Craig Owens the work of the Transavantgarde demonstrated a lack of conviction in, and even contempt for, painting. It is, he said, a pastiche of modernist impulses and plunders a wide range of anti-modernist sources as well. Owens claimed that the very term “Neo-Expressionism” had to be rejected. The original Expressionists had “real” spontaneity and immediacy, i.e. they were truly alert to the historical reality of their time. “They attacked convention and were not afraid to register the unconscious effects of trauma and shock, without disguise, through the media of art”. **(Hertz 1993 p. 62)** The “pseudo-expressionists”, on the otherhand, used modernist strategy against itself and attacked the anti-authoritarian stance of the modernist artists as



authoritarian. Furthermore, Owens claimed, the pseudo-expressionist artist had withdrawn from any conscious, political engagement and this “estheticist isolation”, he says, “is celebrated as a return to the essence of art.” (Hertz, 1993, p. 62)

For Donald Kuspit it is Neo-expressionism’s relationship to feeling which is the central issue. Referring to Baudelaire’s concept of the artist, whose life is comparable to that of a child, he says the true artist is someone who sees the world through the spiritual eyes of a child. However the Neo-expressionists are “calculatedly childlike”. It is therefore, he concludes a false expressionism because it is “blasé and sophisticated about what it sees rather than childlike.” (Kuspit 1988, p. 33) Furthermore, he states, that Neo-expressionism popularised the condition of decline and alienation as understood by the older expressionists, turning it into a cliché. This popularisation was in turn accompanied by an excess of emotion, a “mania more associated with addiction to celebrity than anything else”. Once again he reiterates that the new expressionism only mimics its origins, thereby dissolving them and dissipating their force. (Kuspit, 1988, p. 34) With regard to American Neo-expressionism he says that its’ spirit issues from its’ encounter with the American popular culture mentality and is therefore a neutralised expressionism. “The Old Expressionist”, he declares, “was an adult who had the revolutionary inner life of a child, who



experienced without play-acting, completely unconsciously, what it was to be a spiritual child.” (Kuspit, 1988, p. 33)

Thomas Lawson agrees with Owens that the painting revivals of the seventies including Neo-expressionism represent the last gasps of an over-worked idiom, modernist painting. Lawson points out that there is an understanding of what is post-modern as the appropriation of styles and imagery from other epochs and cultures. The “pseudo-expressionists”, he argues, represent the “last decadent flowering of the modernist spirit”. Their work seems to belong to art history and to pay homage to the past, but what they deliver is a “pastiche of historical consciousness, an exercise in bad faith” (Lawson 1981, p. 42) Furthermore he states that Neo-expressionist tactics are opposed to critical analyses - the marriage of early modernism and fashionable anti-modernism is a forced union of opposites, a well established rhetorical tactic, for rendering discourse immune from criticism. Lawson also points out that much artistic activity that started out as subversive is now as thoroughly academic as the painting and sculpture, practices it sought to disavow. What then, he asks, is the radical artist to do if he or she wishes to avoid co-optation by art institutions or inactivity. He sees painting as the only option.

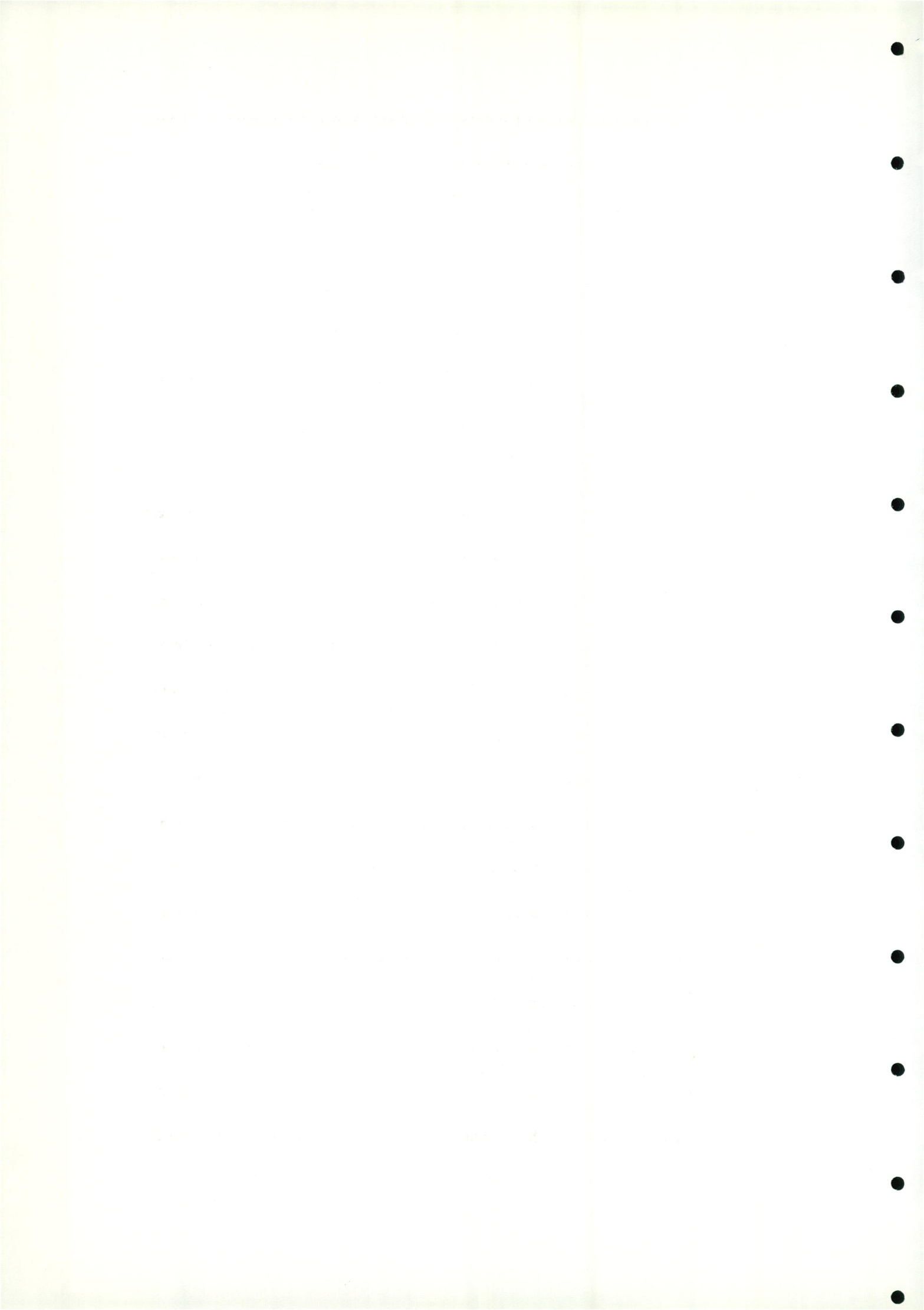


In his book, "The Art Of The Post-Modern Era", Irving Sandler gives an overview of the situation within the art world at the turn of the 1980s. Certain trends which had begun in the 1960s led to galleries preferring, for the first time, to show contemporary art over art from previous eras and even over old masters. The recession of the mid-seventies, exacerbated by the oil crisis and rapid inflation gave rise to a new kind of thinking about investment in art. The art world became increasingly more money conscious and artists like Schnabel, Salle, Fischl and the Italian Transavantgarde profited from this situation. A characteristic of the art world at this time was hype. The new, modern painters became celebrities in a similar way to the rock stars of the sixties. Sandler says that "the process of promotion, selling and culturalisation of art ideas and images had become an art form itself." (Sandler, 1997 p. 428) The taste-making power of such collectors as the Saatchis was greatly increased. Critics writing catalogue introductions had become vulnerable to compromise and according to Sandler they could not be genuinely critical by writing for such publications. Corporations stepped in and began shaping museum policies organising block-buster shows which turned museum-going into mass entertainment. In the light of these developments one can perhaps begin to understand some of the conditions of Neo-Expressionism's phenomenal success. Whatever the case may be, it is important when passing critical judgement on their work to keep these developments in mind. In the light of what Owens, Kuspit and Lawson say about the Italian Transavantgarde and Neo-Expressionism it is unlikely that Rose had them in mind when she



wrote about the serious painters of the eighties, who were dedicated to the preservation of painting as a transcendental high art.

Before examining precisely Douglas Crimp's response to Rose's essay it will be necessary first to reassess some of the principal points she makes in relation to the art of painting. She states firstly that it is the unique capacity of painting to evoke, imply and conjure up magical illusions that exist in an imaginative mental space. This space, she emphasises, must not be confused with the tangible space that exists outside the canvas frame. It is this capacity she says that differentiates painting from the other arts and from everyday visual experience of life itself. Painting is, for Rose, a visionary and not a material art and the locus of its inspiration is in the artists' sub-conscious. Thus she concludes that "the liberating potential of art is not as literal reportage, but as a catharsis of the imagination." (Rose 1988, p. 287) As Oliva saw the art of the seventies characterised by a repossession of the artists' subjectivity and a renewal of the artists' individuality so also Rose speaks about what she calls "the current rehabilitation of the metaphorical and metaphysical aspects of imagery". These aspects are linked to what she calls the "imaginative poetic fantasy", which she claims had been lost for almost two decades in favour of an object art based exclusively on verifiable fact. (Rose 1988, p. 287) For both Rose and Oliva what is indispensable in the creative process is the role played by the artists' hand. Oliva claims that "working with your hand



means knowing how to place the task of art alongside a subjectivity which utilises every possible expressive instrument and language.” (Oliva, 1981, p. 19) While for Rose the role of the artist’s hand also enhances the artwork’s aura:

It is, in fact, the enhancement of this aura, through a variety of means that painting, now intends, either by emphasising the involvement of the artists’ hand or by creating highly individual visionary images, that cannot be confused either with reality itself or with one another..... (Rose, 1988, p. 282)

According to Douglas Crimp in his essay “The End of Painting” art before the invention of the art museum was always created in situ. This no longer exists for us today because over the years art has been stolen from the places for which it had been made and sequestered in museums. “Art as we think about it”, he says, “only came into being in the 19th century with the birth of the museum and the discipline of art history, for these share the same time-span as modernism.” (Crimp 1992, p. 98) He goes on to criticise the ontological understanding of painting’s development which he sees as something taken for granted by the art establishment and the public at large. This understanding is one in which paintings development is seen as a long uninterrupted progression in which its essence remains the same but its styles constantly change. The art museum and art history “the imaginary museum” ultimately reduce painting to a succession of styles and these styles are unpredictable and governed by the artists expressing their (and here he quotes Rose) “boundless imaginations”. He concludes that the



“idea of art as autonomous and separate from everything else and destined to take its place in art history is a development of modernism and it is an idea that contemporary painting upholds.” **(Crimp 1993, p. 98)**

Crimp criticises Rose’s essay on a number of levels. Firstly, for her asserting that during the sixties and seventies there was a group of noble survivors, all painters, who had kept the faith, maintaining a conviction in quality and values and a belief in art as a mode of transcendence. Her show “American Painting: The Eighties”, he says, was biased and parochial in its selection of artists, given the thousands of artists who were practising painting at that time. He called the work a “hackneyed re-capitulation of late modernist abstraction” and claimed that such a narrow range of painting when pluralism was the critical byword left Rose open to severe criticism. **(Crimp, 1993, p. 98)** While the critics argued about the selection, nobody, he says, asked the really important question: “Why Painting? To what end Painting, now on the threshold of the nineteen eighties?” **(Crimp 1993, p. 90)** Crimp goes on to criticise Rose’s received ideas about the art of painting and claims that they offer a provisional answer to the whole question of the purpose of painting. He summarises these received ideas as follows:

For Rose then, painting is a high art, a universal art and an art through which we can achieve transcendence and catharsis. Painting has an essence, and that essence is illusionism, the capacity to render images conjured up by the boundless human imagination. Painting is a great, unbroken tradition that encompasses the entire known

history of man. Painting is, above all, human.” (Crimp 1993, p. 91)

Crimp’s main criticism of all this, however, was that it stood in direct opposition to much of the art of the previous two decades. Again he says: “The unifying principal in the aesthetic of Rose’s painters is that their work defines itself in conscious opposition to photography and all forms of mechanical reproduction which seek to deprive the art work of its unique aura” (Crimp 1993, p. 95) As an example of work that sought to contest the myths of high art, Crimp uses Daniel Buren’s striped paintings. He says that Buren deliberately chose a format that was not assimilable to the established codes of art, when in 1965 he decided to make work in situ, using 8.7 centimetre wide, vertical stripes. Buren’s art was, according to his own words, nothing less than an attempt at “abolishing the code that makes art what it is in its production and its institutions” (Crimp 1993, p. 103) He sees Buren as a conceptual artist, who follows Marcel Duchamp’s idea that the artists should be unconcerned with the visible aspects of painting. Yet he concedes that Buren always insists upon the visibility of his work and the necessity for it to be seen. He sees it as fundamental that it comply with the museums and galleries and it does so, he claims, by posing as painting. He states also that because Buren’s work merely poses as painting it thereby runs the risk of invisibility. “It is fundamental to Buren’s work that it function in complicity with those very institutions it seeks to make visible as the artworks intelligibility.” (Crimp 1993, p. 87) Crimp then asks a series of fundamental questions: “What makes it possible to see

a painting? What makes it possible to see a painting as a painting? And, under such conditions of its presentation, to what end painting?" (Crimp 1993, p. 87)

Crimp elaborates on the risk of invisibility, which he believes Buren's work courts by pointing out that since everything to which Buren's work points as being cultural and historical, is so easily taken to be natural. Many people look at Buren's paintings, vainly asking them to render up their meanings about themselves. And since they categorically refuse to do so, since they have by design, no internal meaning, they disappear."

(Crimp 1993, p. 88) If Buren's work runs the risk of invisibility by "posing" as painting, then it might be said that Neo-Expressionist work is all the more visible precisely in posing as something other than what it is.

The Neo-Expressionists would seem, on the surface, to have had all the important qualities of painting as proclaimed by Rose and Oliva. Furthermore these qualities would not seem to have been in conflict with Kuspit's idea, based on Baudelaire's concept, of the artist possessed with the revolutionary inner life of the child. Why then does Kuspit condemn Neo-Expressionism so forcibly? Lawson's principal criticism of Neo-expressionism was that it used a sinister, well established rhetorical tactic, a forced union of opposing styles, to defy critical analyses. This would seem



to indicate that Neo-expressionism had abandoned the subjective, visionary principals as understood by Rose and Oliva and that their dipping into tradition was not a nostalgia for the past, as such, but a mockery of it.

In his essay "Last Exit: Painting", Thomas Lawson points out that it is painting itself, that "Last refuge of the mythology of individuality" which can be "seized" to de-construct the illusions of the present. For, he maintains, that "Since painting is ultimately concerned with illusion, what better vehicle for subversion? (Lawson 1981, p. 45). Lawson claims that by resorting to "subterfuge" and using an "unsuspecting vehicle" as "camouflage", the radical artist can manipulate the viewer's faith and dislodge his or her certainty. "The intention of that artist", he concludes, "must be to unsettle conventional thought from within." (Lawson 1981, p. 45) At this point we touch on one of the fundamental and crucial differences between Rose on the one hand and Crimp and Lawson on the other - their understanding of what it means to be radical and subversive. Both Lawson and Crimp seem to be of the same mind in that they both see paintings illusionistic qualities as a weapon that can be used to deconstruct. For Rose, however, the ungoverned, subjective vision of the artist is by its own nature and of itself subversive without trying self-consciously to be so.

Because the creation of individual, subjective images, ungoverned and ungovernable by any system of public thought or political exigency, is ipso facto revolutionary and subversive of the status quo, it is tautology that art must strive to be radical. On the contrary, that art which commits itself self-consciously to



radicality.....is a mirror of the world as it is and not a critique of it.
(Rose 1988, p. 287)

The implication seems to be that if painting is going to be used as a weapon for radical change in society it will, according to Rose, be far more successful if the artist is working creatively and to some extent unconsciously, from within the complex world of his or her own subjective experience. Art which is self-consciously radical will be less successful.

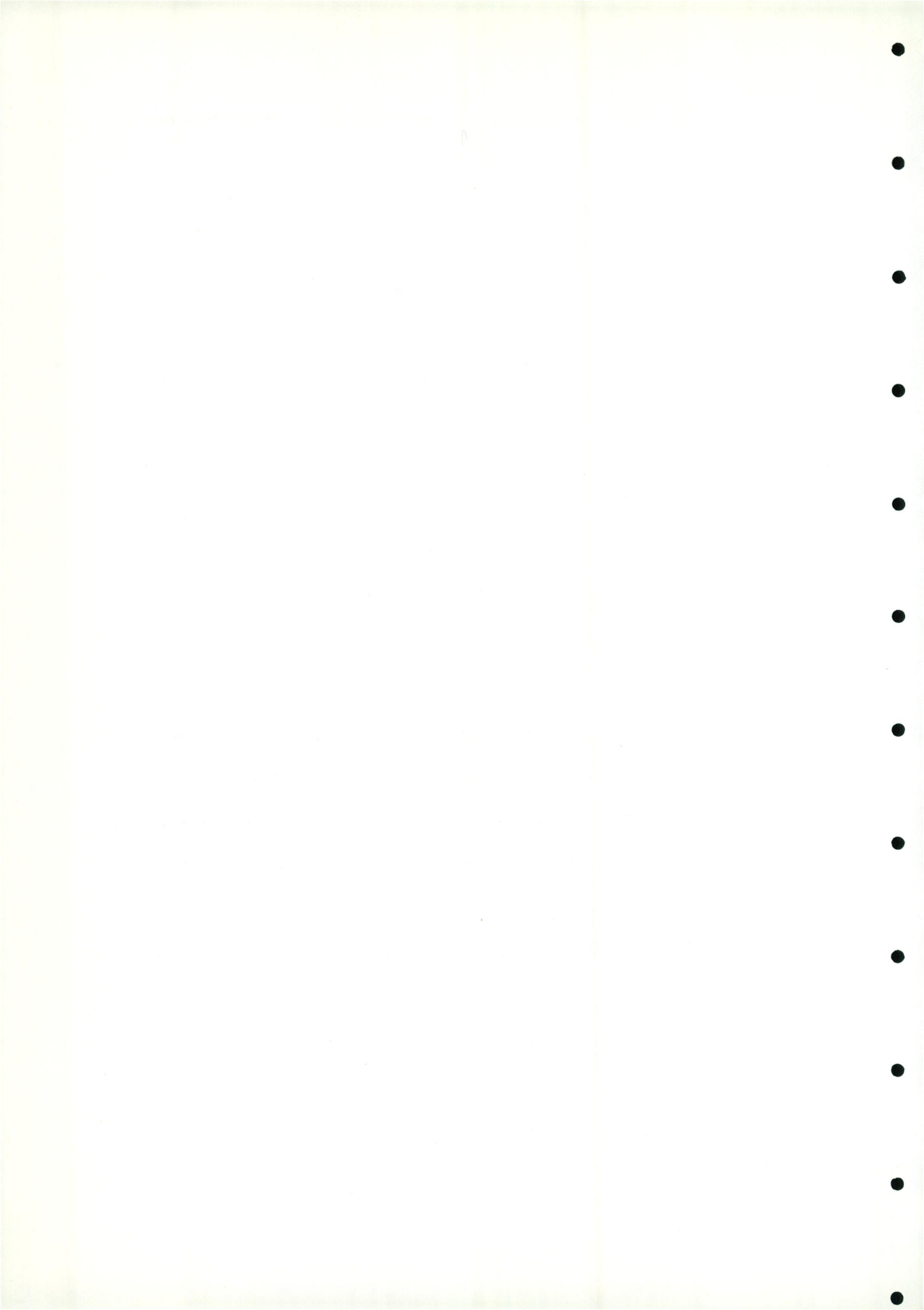
In this chapter we have seen some of the competing claims for painting which might be drawn on to respond to Crimp's question "To what end painting?" The way forward here is to perhaps consider in detail the specific case of Neo-Expressionism in the 1980's as a celebrated 'test-case' of the possibilities of painting. In order to do this it will be necessary to look at some of the key exhibitions of the 1980s and to attempt to address some of the paintings as directly as possible rather than privileging any one critical response to them. It is worth remembering also that Rose did not champion their work and therefore it should prove to be a challenging object of consideration in this respect.



CHAPTER TWO

Seven Exhibitions: Six Artists: The Emergence of German Neo-Expressionism

From 1981 to 1989 there were at least seven major exhibitions which featured Neo-Expressionist paintings either exclusively or as part of an overall show of contemporary art. The first and perhaps the most successful was "A New Spirit In Painting" which opened on the 15th of January 1981 in The Royal Academy of Arts in London. Its' organisers were Christos M. Joachimedes, Norman Rosenthal and Nicholas Serota. There were thirty eight artists, all male. Some were already major stars such as Francis Bacon, Willem De Kooning, Picasso and Andy Warhol. There was a large group of German artists whose work was related, although only loosely, to the old, pre-world war German Expressionists. Some of these artists were George Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lupertz, A.R. Penck, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter. Most of them were already well established in Germany itself, but for the majority the exhibition at the Royal Academy marked their international breakthrough. A number of Italians were present also, from the Transavantgarde, Sandro Chia and Mimmo Paladino. Americans included Frank Stella, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol and Julian Schnabel. The School of London, spanning several generations included such artists as Francis Bacon, Lucien Freud, Frank



Auerbach and Howard Hodgkins. Despite the inclusion of the British and Italians and no fewer than nine Americans, the organisers felt that the new creative energy was to be found elsewhere and the emphasis seemed to be upon the Nordic countries and in particular the German artists. The latter were deeply concerned with what it meant to be German and tackled issues of German trauma and culture. One of the main concerns of the exhibition was to discover whether there were certain commonalities which crossed national boundaries and related back to the greater traditions of European and American painting. Overall "A New Spirit In Painting" emphasised the subjective vision of the artist. One of its central propositions was that human experience, emotions, the human figure, landscape and still lives should once again be brought to the fore in the argument of painting.

"Documenta 7"¹¹ took place at Kassel in the summer of 1982 and was organised by Rudi H. Fuchs. It featured a number of key artists, such as Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke and Cindy Sherman. National identity was high on the agenda and most of the art presented was symptomatic of national attitudes. Italian, German and American painters were present. In her article "No Island Is An Island", Deborah Phillips quotes critic Roberta Smith as saying that Documenta 7 seemed to be an effort to make painting a

¹¹ In his article, "The Night Mind", Donald Kuspit asserted that Doc. 7 highlighted the basic problem of contemporary art - the search for a clear and distinct modern identity. "Art", he said, "no longer finds itself speculative in the old way. Its options are now shut down almost as soon as they are recognised, for they are already recognised as used." (Kuspit 1982, p. 66)



specifically European activity: it presented American art which was derived from minimalist and conceptual backgrounds, while artists such as Julian Schnabel were excluded. Overall the exhibition seemed to confirm the hegemony of painting and was widely seen as promoting the new German painting.¹²

“Zeitgeist”¹³ took place in Berlin from October 1982 to January 1983. Its organisers were two of the three curators who had organised a “New Spirit In Painting”, Norman Rosenthal and Christos Joachimedes. It demonstrated an expressionist and figurative bias and seemed to imply that Neo-Expressionism was exemplary of the most significant work being done at that time. There were forty five artists in all: twenty Germans forming the largest national group, ten Americans and six Italians. There were also five Englishmen, a lone Frenchman, a Dutchman and a Dane - Per Kirkeby. There was also a sole woman painter Susan Rothenberg. The site of the exhibition¹⁴ was of great significance as it was alleged to be on the site of a former Gestapo torture chamber. The Berlin wall itself ran along the back of the buildings exterior. It was claimed by some reviewers that the show was purposely structured around the work of Joseph Beuys and his

¹² Rudi Fuchs in his introduction note to the catalogue asserted that the artist is one of the last practitioners of distinct individuality and that the artist as individual is part of the tradition of all. He sees as the enemy of this individuality the desire for novelty. He explains that it is the great unity that exists between culture and the individual which was the main theme of Documenta 7.

¹³ Title which means “Spirit of the Times”

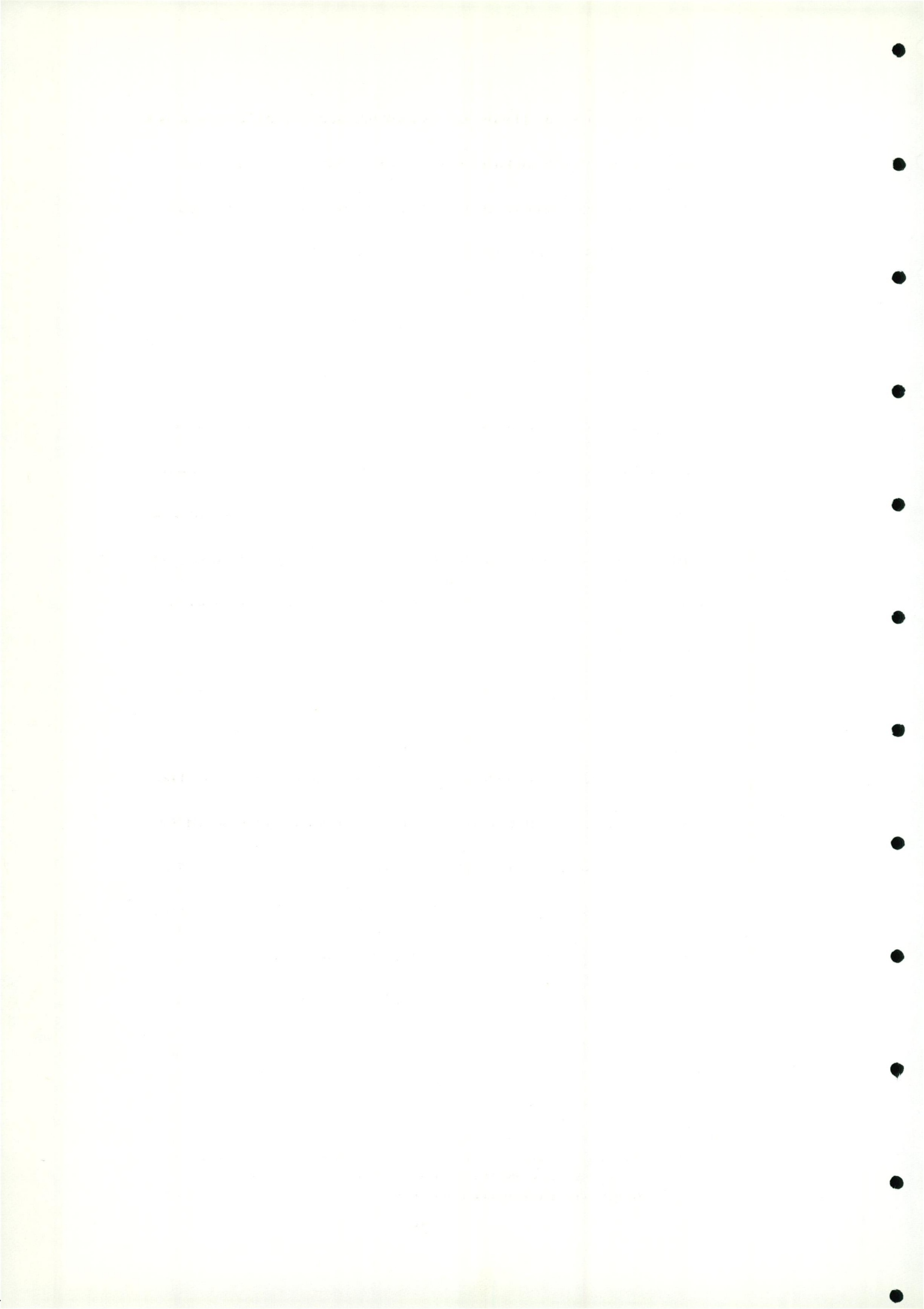
¹⁴ Martin Gropius Bau Institute



historical importance. The organisers took into account the buildings heavily loaded history and used it as part of the programme. The line-up of artists resembled somewhat that of "A New Spirit In Painting" featuring painters such as Baselitz, Immendorf and Kiefer from Germany and Schnabel, Salle, Stella, Twombly and Andy Warhol from America.

"Expressions: New Art From Germany" took place at the St. Louis Art Museum from June to August 1983 and was organised by Jack Cowart. It featured five German Neo-Expressionist artists. These were George Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Jorg Immendorf, Markus Lupertz and A.R. Penck¹⁵. In his essay to the catalogue for the exhibition Jack Cowart explained that a study of the activities of these five artists was central to the evaluation of so-called figurative art and its mingling with hybrid abstract and conceptual arts. He explained that the exhibition represented the first, focused, American museum inspection of the new German painting. The exhibition chose these five artists because of their common threads of relationship to style, imagery and art function.

¹⁵ The exhibition organisers were not proposing that these were the only artists of note in Germany at that time, but were fully aware of the emergence of a whole new generation of active, younger artists in Berlin, Cologne, Düsseldorf and elsewhere. However they felt that the artists chosen had broken into the International scene and offered the purest case of aggressive, aesthetic development relative to new expressionist attitudes.



An exhibition of Neo-Expressionist painting entitled "States of War: New European and American Paintings" took place at the Seattle Art Museum in the summer of 1985. Its organiser was the museum's curator Bruce Guenther. Twenty two painters were featured coming from the US, Germany, Italy and Spain. Their work combined a figurative element with the formal and subjective concerns of the artist, who were not afraid to deal with such emotional issues as aggression, anxiety and apprehension. In their works they also dealt with the problem of political action, violence and contemporary situations of sociological and cultural dilemma. Among the artists appearing at this exhibition were Leon Golub, Kiefer, Immendorf and Jean-Michel Basquiat. The Italian Transavantgarde were also present and a number of women artists, perhaps the best known among them being Susan Rothenberg.

"Berlin Art 1961-1987", organised by curator Kynaston McShine, opened at M.O.M.A. New York on June 4 and continued until September 8, 1987. The show later went to San Francisco M.O.M.A. from October 1987 to January 1988. The organisers presented a conceptual agenda and a wall text stated that young Berlin artists had, after the war, begun doing figurative work as a means of expressing the hopelessness, despair and isolation of their situation.¹⁶ The exhibition presented Berlin both as

¹⁶ This statement made the curatorial imperative clear: it proposed the notion of politics as stylistic destiny and encouraged the viewer to see the work as coming from politically sensitive circumstances.



political trouble spot and centre of art. This was the subject of six essays by McShine and others in the exhibition catalogue, which detailed the history of Berlin phase by phase. Some of the artists appearing were Baselitz, Lupertz, K.H. Hödicke, Rainer Fetting, Middendorf and Salomé. Holland Cotter in his article "Art From The Exiled City"¹⁷ points out that after the culturally disorientating Nazi period some of these artists were influenced by two important exhibitions - a touring show of the American Abstract Expressionists and a Jackson Pollock Retrospective, both organised by New York's M.O.M.A. and shown concurrently in Berlin's college of visual arts in 1958. Wieland Schmied in his catalogue essay¹⁸ suggests that it was the subsequent melding of American Painterly Abstraction with pre-war, German, figurative Expressionism that produced the Neo-Expressionist Movement.

The exhibition "Re-Figured Painting: The German Image 1960-1988" took place at the Toledo Museum of Modern Art, Toledo, Ohio from October 30 1988 to January 8 1989. It was organised by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum New York and The Williams College Museum of Art, Massachusetts. It was an exhibition of exclusively German painting and featured no fewer than forty two German artists among them Baselitz, Immendorf, Kiefer, Bernd Koberling, Penck, Lupertz and Gerhard Richter.

¹⁷ Art in America V.75 October '87, pp.43-49.

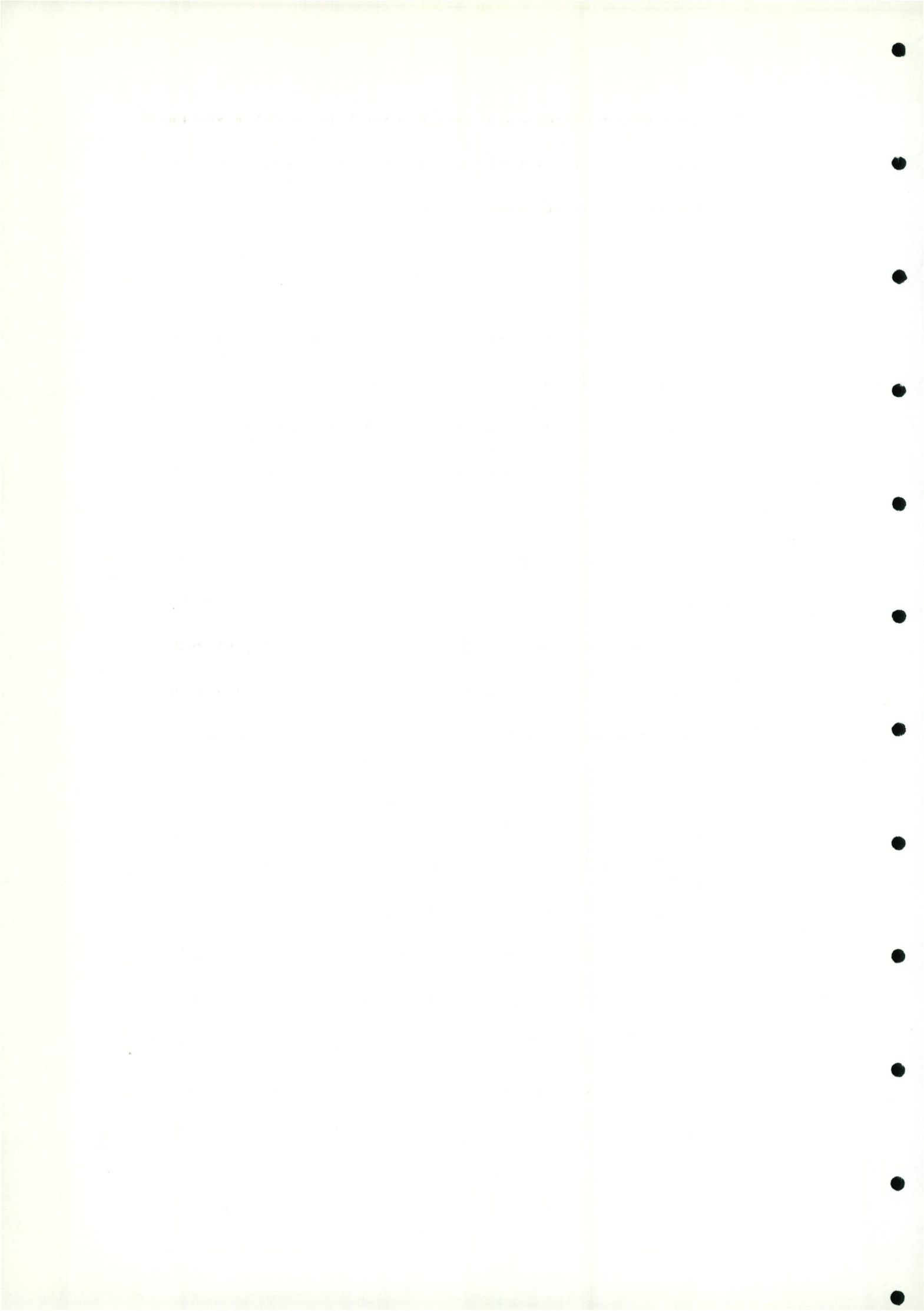
¹⁸ "Typical and Unique: Art in Berlin 1945-1970"



There were also some second generation Neo-Expressionists among them Walter Dahn and Jiri George Dokoupil. In these and other Neo-Expressionist exhibitions of the 1980s the greater emphasis seemed to be upon the German artists. The various organisers felt that it was from Germany, in particular, that the most creative energy was emerging at that time. So in general it would be true to say that the German artists of the Neo-Expressionist Movement had received by far a greater prominence than their European and American counterparts. It will therefore be necessary to situate German painting of the 1980's historically in order to address the larger questions at stake.

In his essay "The Difficulties of German Painting With Its Own Traditions"¹⁹, Siegfried Gohr points out that in Germany not only has new art had to struggle for public acceptance but art itself, "true art" as he terms it, has had to struggle against the "dominance of a rigid artistic mediocrity." (Coward 1983, p. 28) To create a public realm for the visual arts, then, has been the problem continually faced by German artists. In Nazi Germany modern art and artists were defamed and expelled from the country. This situation destroyed what little freedom had been established to produce art independent of the official line, which had only slowly been achieved since 1880. Artists in Germany had to fight on two fronts. Firstly they had to struggle against traditional modes, without which painting could undergo no

¹⁹ In "Expressions: New Art From Germany" catalogue. (Coward 1983)



historical development and secondly they had to defend themselves against the demands of a mediocre society “which had always constricted the space in which they moved.” (Coward 1983, p. 30)

In the 1960s anti-authoritarian movements in Germany became pre-occupied with the relationship between art and ideology. Numerous exhibitions evolved and Fluxus and Neo-Dada events abounded. Perhaps the most notable exhibition at that time was “Kunst Und Politik” (1970), which toured many towns in Germany. At this time also there were a number of student revolts and there was an emerging crisis in the West German economy. It is crucial to the understanding of German Neo-Expressionism that the artists themselves had a direct engagement with the West German cultural, social and political situation. They were also deeply aware of the attitudes expressed in “Kunst Und Politik” Exhibition.

Within the German Neo-Expressionist Movement there are perhaps six artists who would seem to hold a prominent place. They are George Baselitz, A. R. Penck, Anselm Kiefer, Jörg Immendorf, Markus Lupertz and Gerhard Richter. George Baselitz was perhaps the most senior figure of all the German artists. He merged abstraction with pictorial representation and even at times applied paint with his fingertips (Fig. 1). His paintings are almost always turned upside down which seems to suggest a world turned



upon its head. From the late seventies to the present his work involved many representations of the human figure. His portraits show evidence of tribal, Gothic and mannerist influences. The elements within his pictures are given various placements sideways, up and down and seem to be gravity free. They are reminiscent of serial imagery and cinematic conventions. (Fig. 2) Both Baselitz and Penck are perhaps the most interesting colourists among the German painters. Penck had achieved permission to leave East Germany in 1980 and moved to Cologne. His work deals with crossing over and seems to indicate a bridging of the void. His painting "The Crossing" 1963 might be read as an embodiment of the ruptures and dichotomies caused by the East/West cultural condition (Fig. 3). Other elements in his later works include stick figures, warriors and Tribal festivities (Fig. 4).

Anselm Kiefer is a landscape painter and his work may be described as possessing a sombre power. There are resemblance's between Kiefer's work and that of Casper D. Friedrich, the leading German painter of the Romantic era, whose work always carries a strong symbolic overtone. His depiction of devastated terrains are described by Edward Lucie-Smith as a "Reverential gesture directed towards the mystical love of nature which is deep rooted in German Romantic poetry and painting" (Lucie-Smith 1990, p. 18) Many of Kiefer's paintings use imagery taken from the Holocaust. Two of his works "Margarete" (1981) and "Shulamite" (1983) are based on





Fig.1 Baselitz, George: Eagle, Fingerpainting

1972





Fig. 2 Baselitz, George: Painter with Sailing Ship 1982





Fig. 3. Penck, A.R.:

The Crossing

1963





Fig. 4. Penck, A.R.:

Untitled

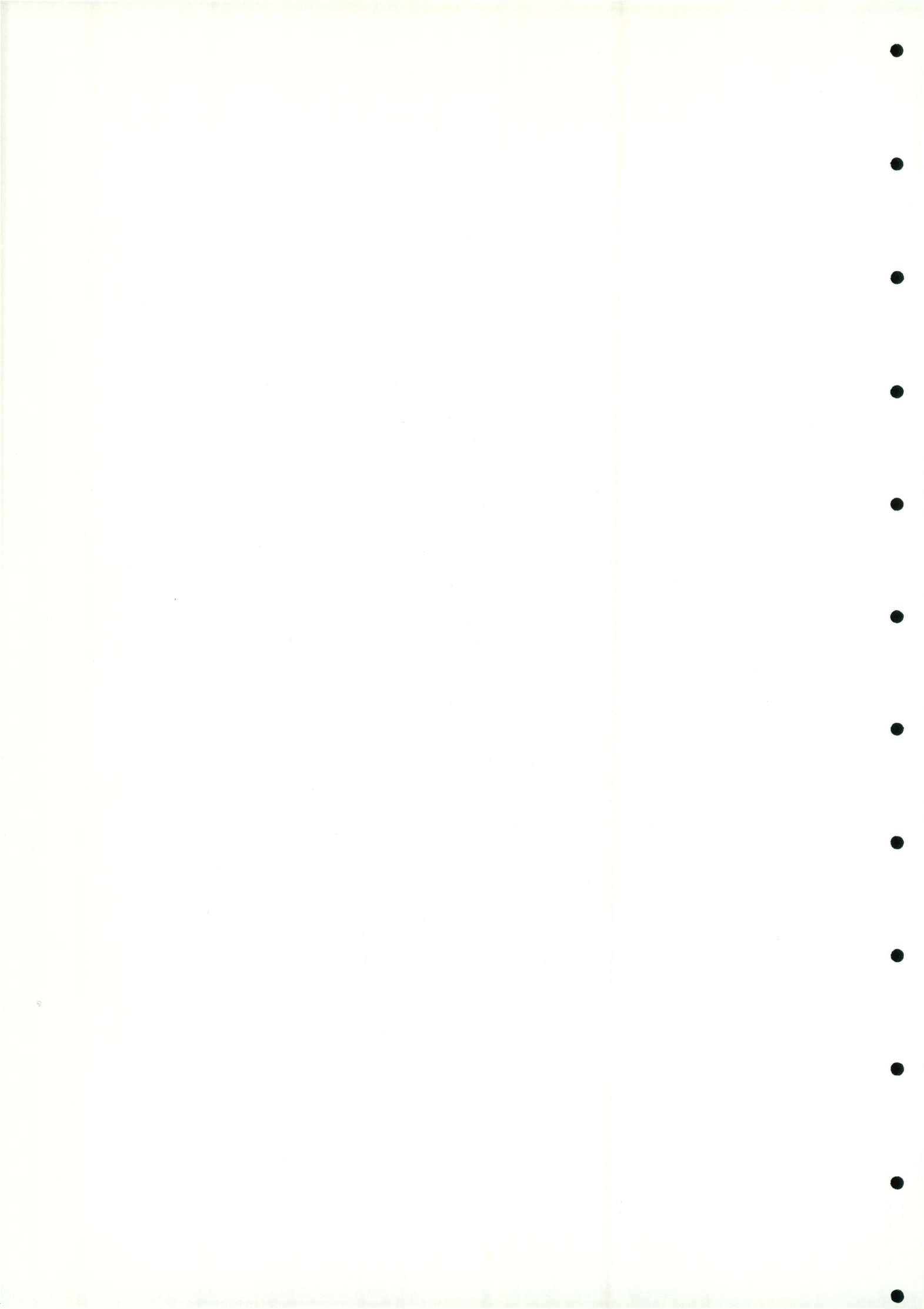
1971



a poem by the Romanian Jewish poet Paul Celan entitled "Todesfuge" or death fugue. Two of the chief images of the poem are the golden-haired Margarete - personification of Aryan beauty and Shulamite the Jewess whose hair is ashen, as a reference to the infamous crematoria (Figs. 5, and 6). Kiefer raises problems by mixing cultural, military, philosophical and ancient history. His work is on a grand scale and relates also to important European, conceptual and performance arts.²⁰ His work may best be termed organic and his paintings, books and drawings are built up with dirt, sand, wood, straw, over processed photographs, woodblock prints and lead. His dark brown and carbon black surfaces are made to look like scorched remnants of a fire. A flat, cold, wintry, light pervades much of his imagery (Figs. 7 and 8)

The works of Jörg Immendorf represent a divided culture and country. They are contemporary statements about totalitarianism, power and corruption. In each work can be seen different types of individuals playing out their roles of good and evil. This is evident in his "Café Deutschland" series (Figs 9 and 10). Immendorf uses bars, discos and street culture as a basis for his work. Markus Lupertz takes critical advantage of certain taboo German items: Nazi helmets, uniforms and military insignia, etc.. Lupertz appropriated the historical triptych format and repetition of

²⁰ Kiefer, a pupil of Joseph Beuys, started as a painter and then turned to performance art. Only later on in his career did he return to painting.



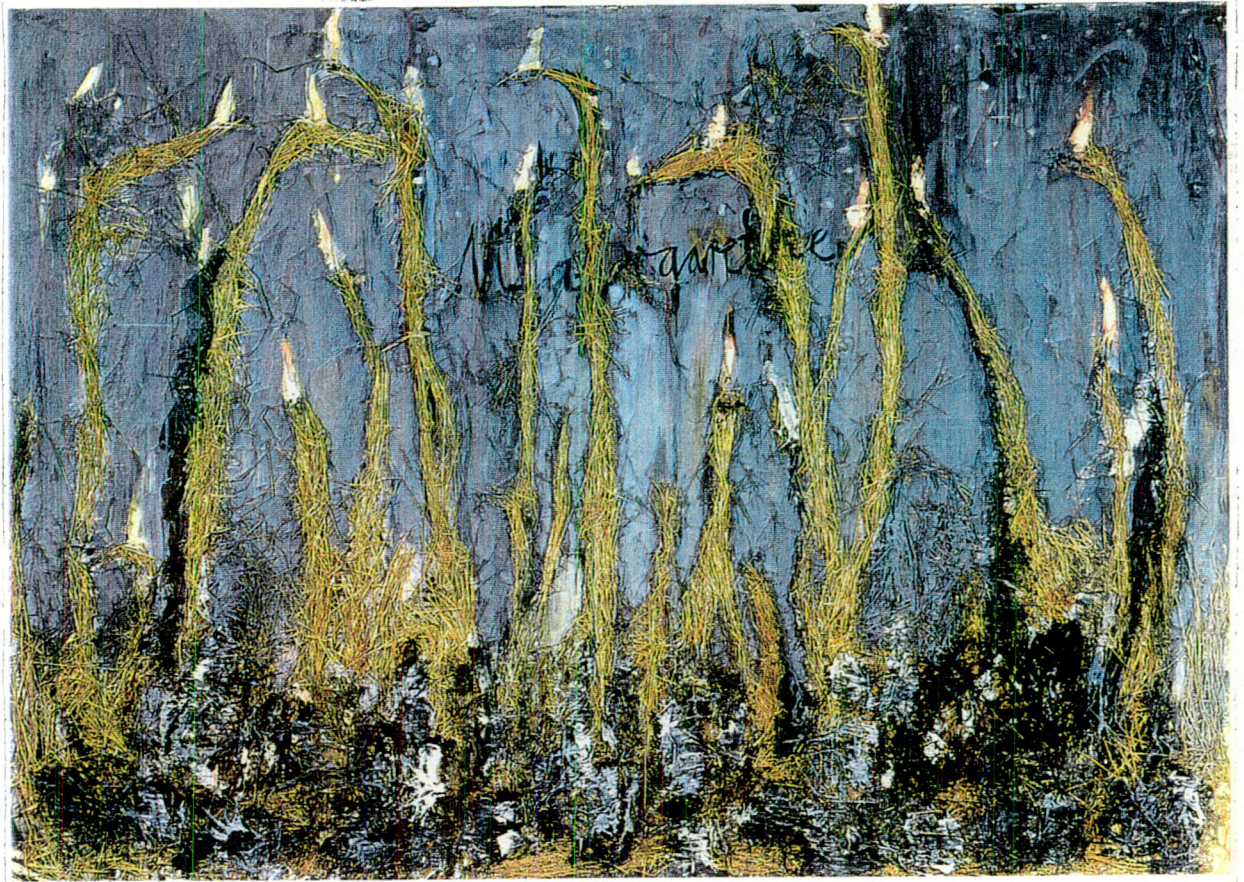


Fig. 5. Kiefer, Anselm: Margarete

1981



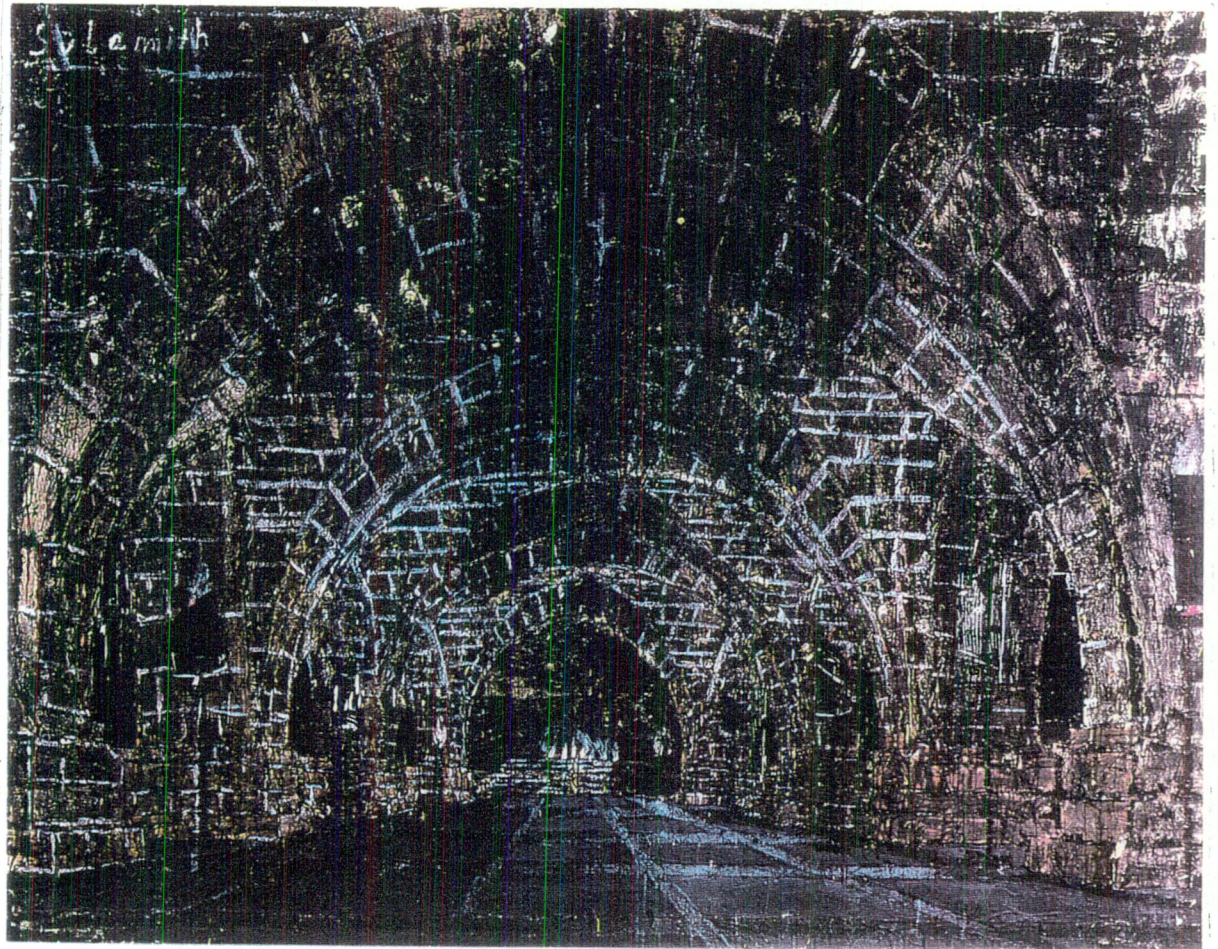


Fig. 6. Kiefer, Anselm:

Shulamite

1983



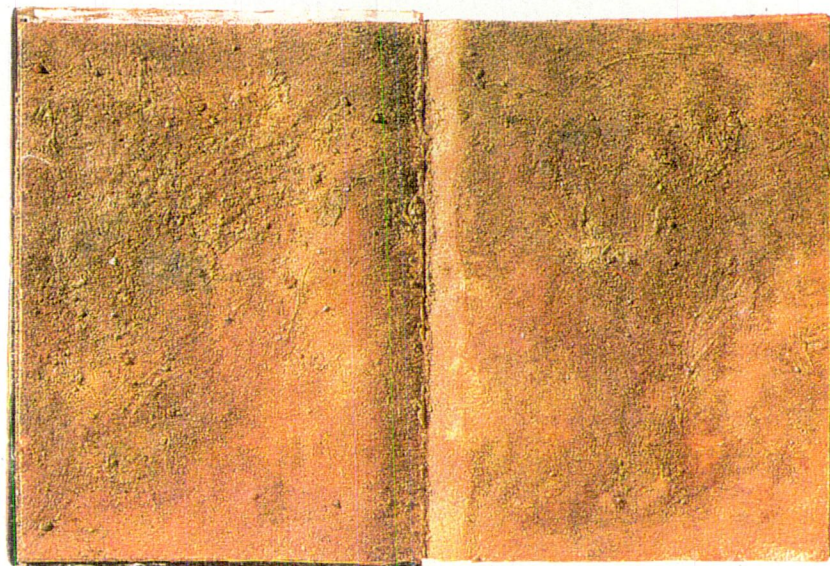
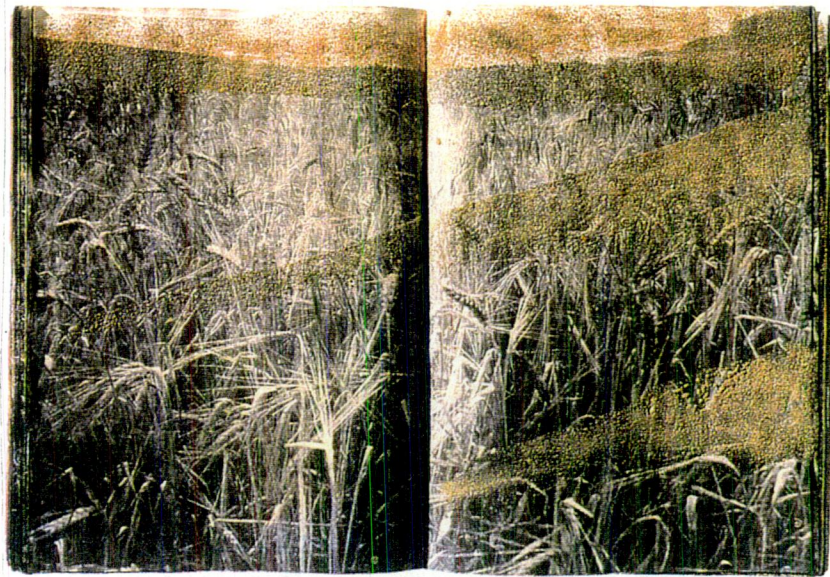


Fig. 7. Kiefer, Anselm: Notebook excerpt 1980's



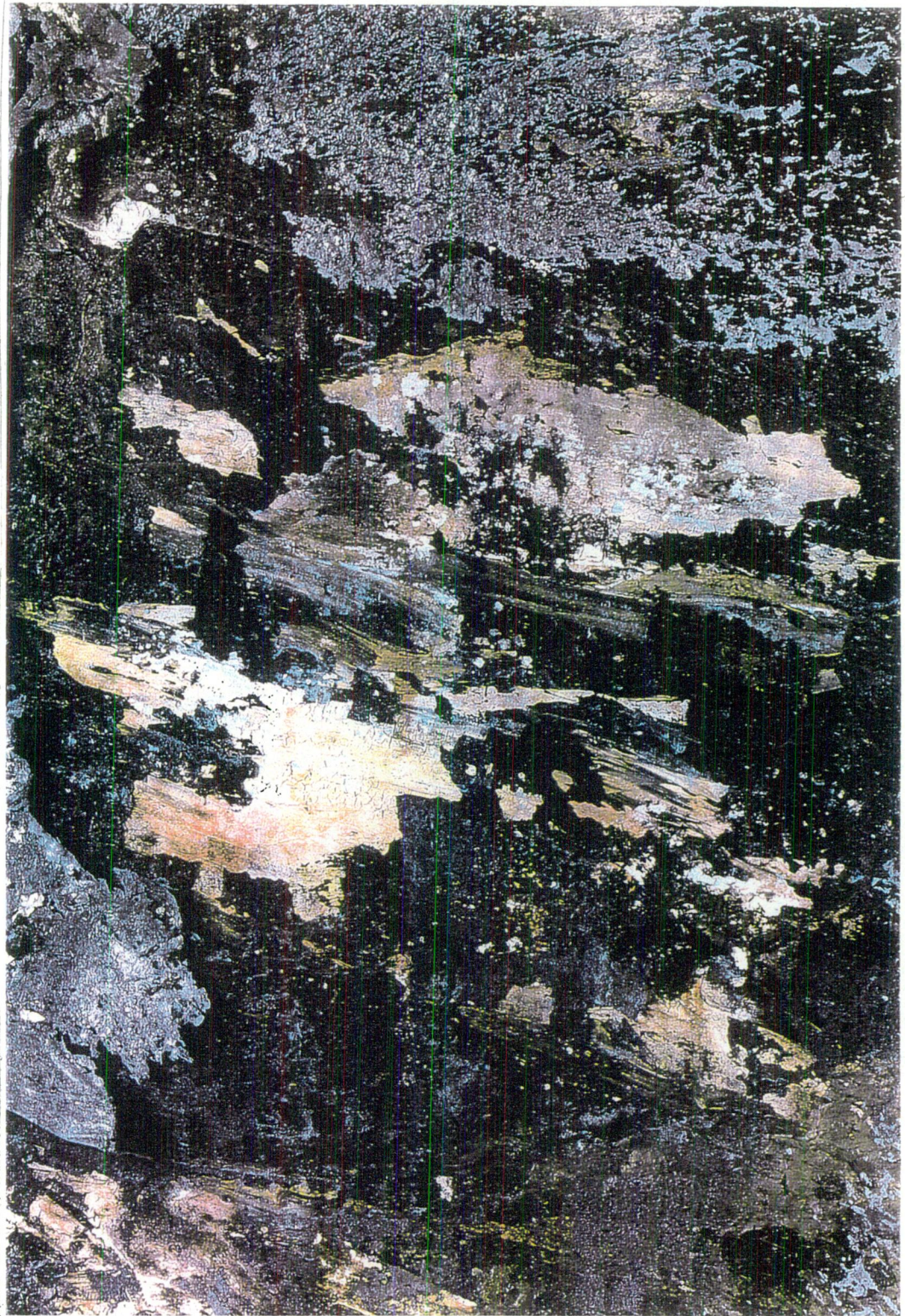


Fig. 8. Kiefer, Anselm: Jerusalem detail

1986





Fig. 9. Immendorf, Jörg: Cafe Deutschland Parliament I 1981



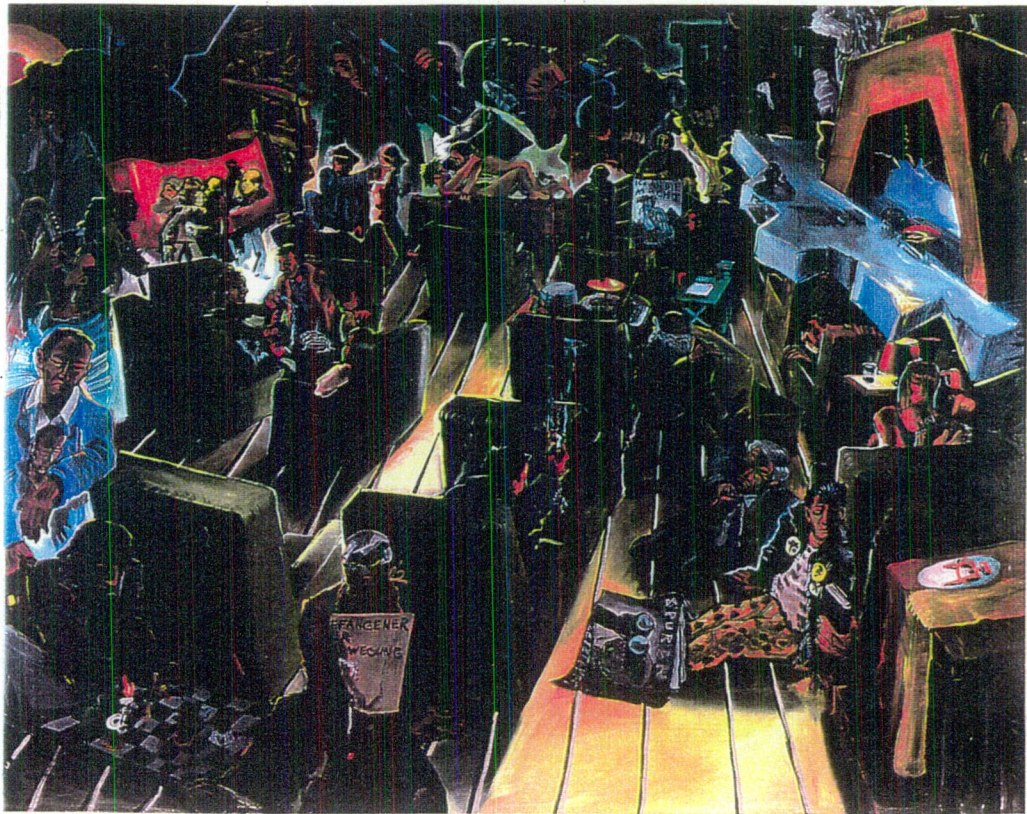


Fig. 10. Immendorff, Jörg: Cafe Deutschland Parliament II 1981



central images. He became an expert at artificial composition which was concept laden, abstracted and representational. Within his work an impulsive commentary on German social, historical and cultural stereotypes in constantly taking place. He also appropriates elements from Picasso, Cubism and Surrealism (Figs 11 and 12).

Gerhardt Richter and Kiefer are perhaps the two most interesting of all the German painters. Richter uses many styles and has been referred to by Heinrich Klotz in his essay "Abstraction and Fiction"²¹ as a pyrotechnician who took pluralism in painting to radical extremes. Much of his work is photographically derived and he frequently juxtaposes apparent incompatibles. Klotz says "Richter has made painting on canvas into a field in which he undogmatically meditates on the various positions of contemporary art". (**Guggenheim 1989, p. 52**) He charges each stylistic move with parody and thereby explodes the programmatic earnestness of the earlier avant-garde. In the 1980s Richter was placed alongside the German Neo-Expressionists at numerous exhibitions, most notably "A New Spirit In Painting" and "Zeitgeist". His works then were of a grand abstract type and were texturally very sumptuous (Fig. 13). He paired these paintings often with small, photographic images of landscapes. Klotz reminds us that for Richter "Abstraction and figuration are no longer diametrically opposed but viable alternatives that emphasize the richness of

²¹ From the Catalogue "Re-Figured Painting: The German Image" 1960-1988.



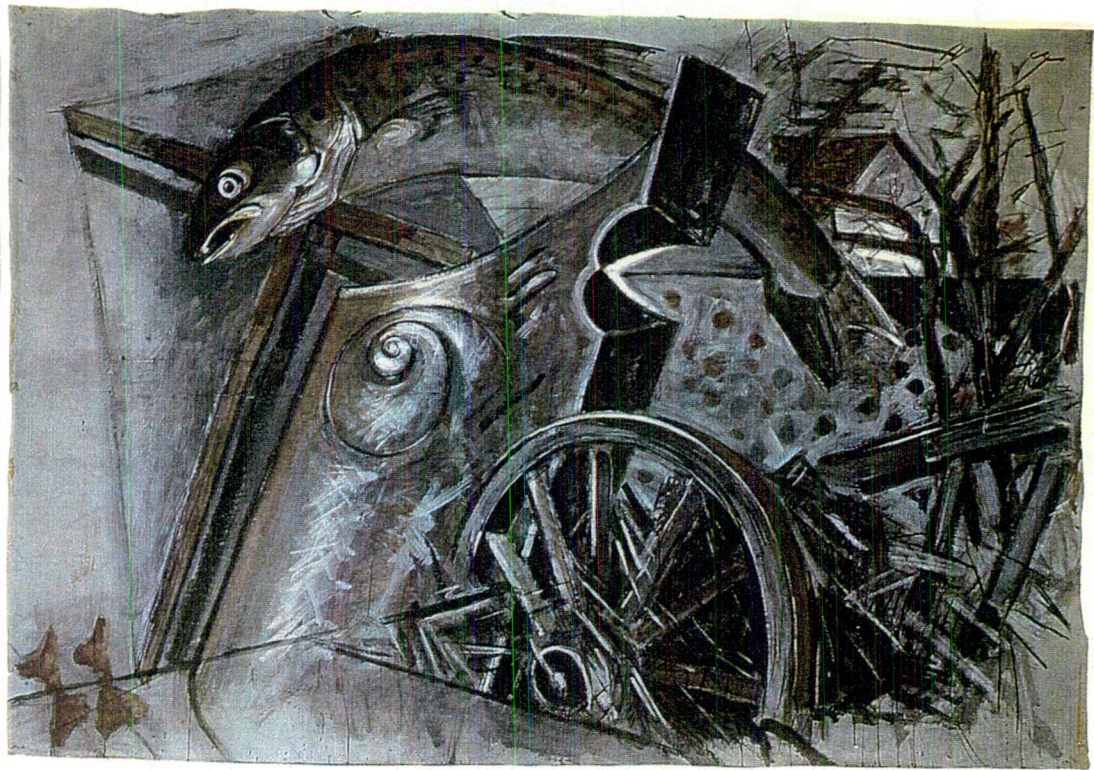


Fig. 11. Lupertz, Markus: Legend-Dithyrambic

1974



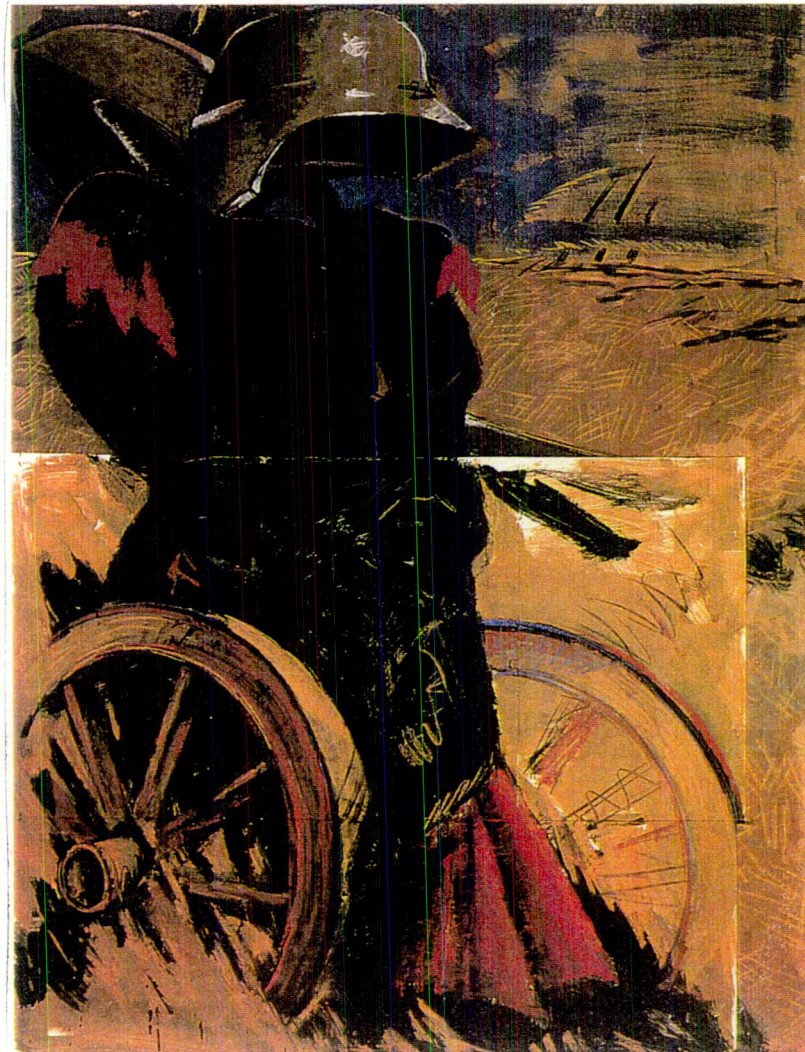


Fig. 12. Lupertz, Markus: Schwarz-Rot-Gold

1975





Fig. 13. Richter, Gerhardt: Abstract Painting

1985



his pluralism.” (Guggenheim, 1989, p. 52) Each painting while seeming complete in itself actually makes reference to his entire oeuvre. This is not a case of serialism or of fragmentation either. Richter’s rapid shifts in stand point and styles does not imply that his aim is to fall back on the storehouse of history, as did the Transavantgarde, but rather they are an earnest effort according to Klotz to test all the possibilities of the here and now, both in terms of technique and subject matter.

In his catalogue essay Klotz accepts that the revival of figurative painting on canvas could represent a relapse into an obsolete craft - a conservative recapitulation of what has long since been accomplished. For Beuys, he explains, the canvas was no longer a serious medium of art, but for some of his students it became so again. The static image in contrast to moving pictures seems to preserve what it depicts and to make it permanent. Painting on canvas argues for the survival of the handmade in a world of technological perfectionism. The imagery of the new media expunges all traces of its human origin but the painted canvas still attests to the mode of its making. Painters like Baselitz and Penck he says “create highly charged personal works which reject the brave new world and remind us that an automated existence is not necessarily a meaningful one”

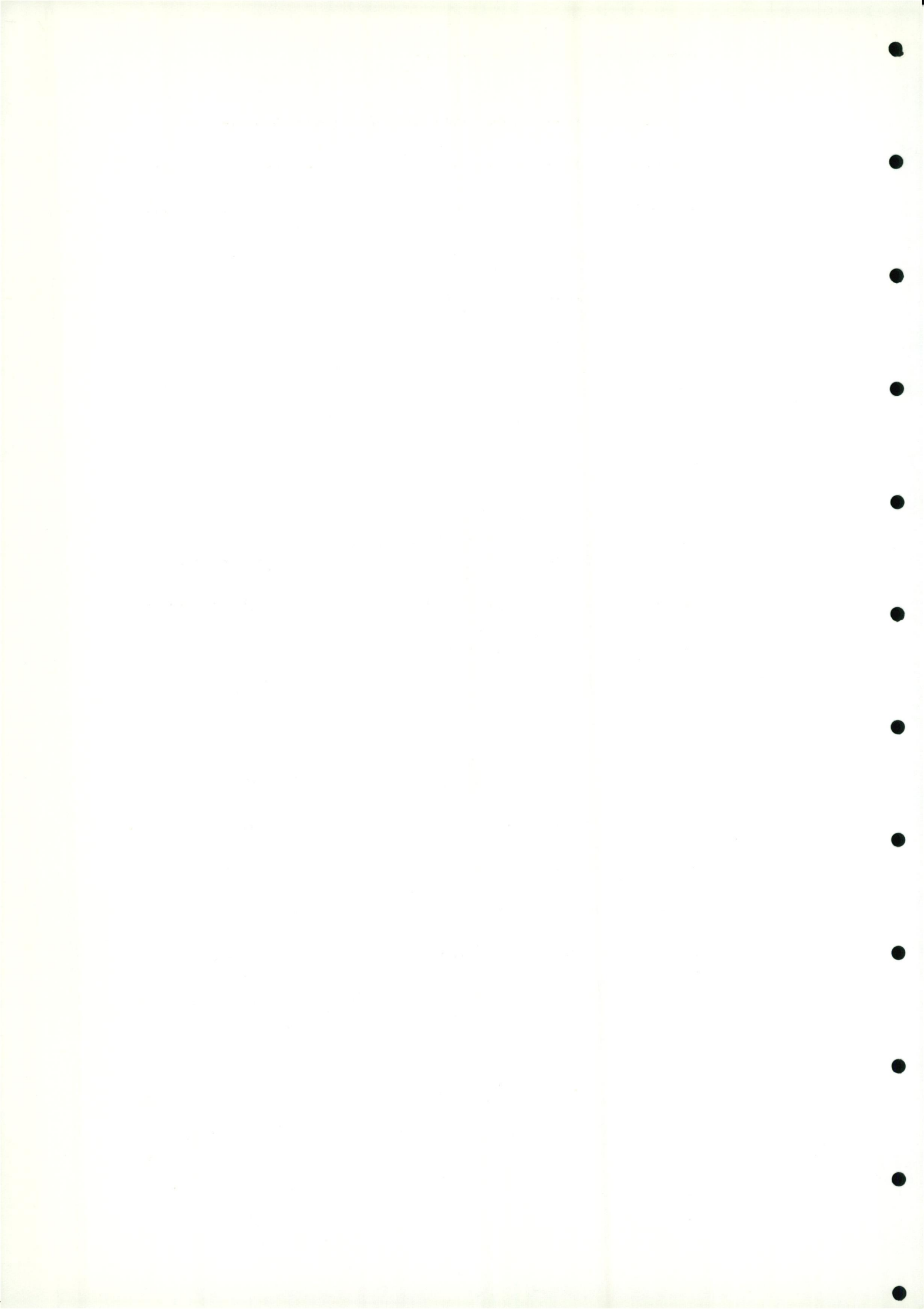
(Guggenheim 1989, p. 50) Klotz believes that the intellectual strategies of the new German painters were aimed precisely at restoring the credibility of painting on canvas. He takes the works of Gerhard Richter as example of



exercises which represent the most intelligent strategies developed by any contemporary artist to rescue painting on canvas as a meaningful medium. "Richter proves", he states, "with each successive picture that, in spite of all fashionable misgivings, painting is indeed a viable means of addressing reality." (Guggenheim 1989, p. 50)

Klotz explains that the intellectual strategies of which he speaks originated in a response to attempts to play abstraction against figuration and vice-versa. "No medium", he states, "is better suited than painting to staging confrontations between these two poles of 20th century art and to exploiting the possibilities for aesthetic challenge and enlightenment that issue from the clash." (Guggenheim 1981, p. 51)

For example Baselitz' inverted motifs, while accepting the premises of representation, are nevertheless painted in a quasi-abstract, non-representational mode. His upside down imagery is thus set to disorientate the viewer. Lupertz deployed large, unrecognisable objects on the picture plane. They were not "actual" objects or things from everyday experience but were invented. They could perhaps be called abstract objects. Later, however, he began employing imagery of actual objects. These objects were German motifs with a symbolic meaning; helmets, sheaves of wheat, tree trunks and officers caps. Baselitz, Lupertz, Richter, Jörg Immendorf,



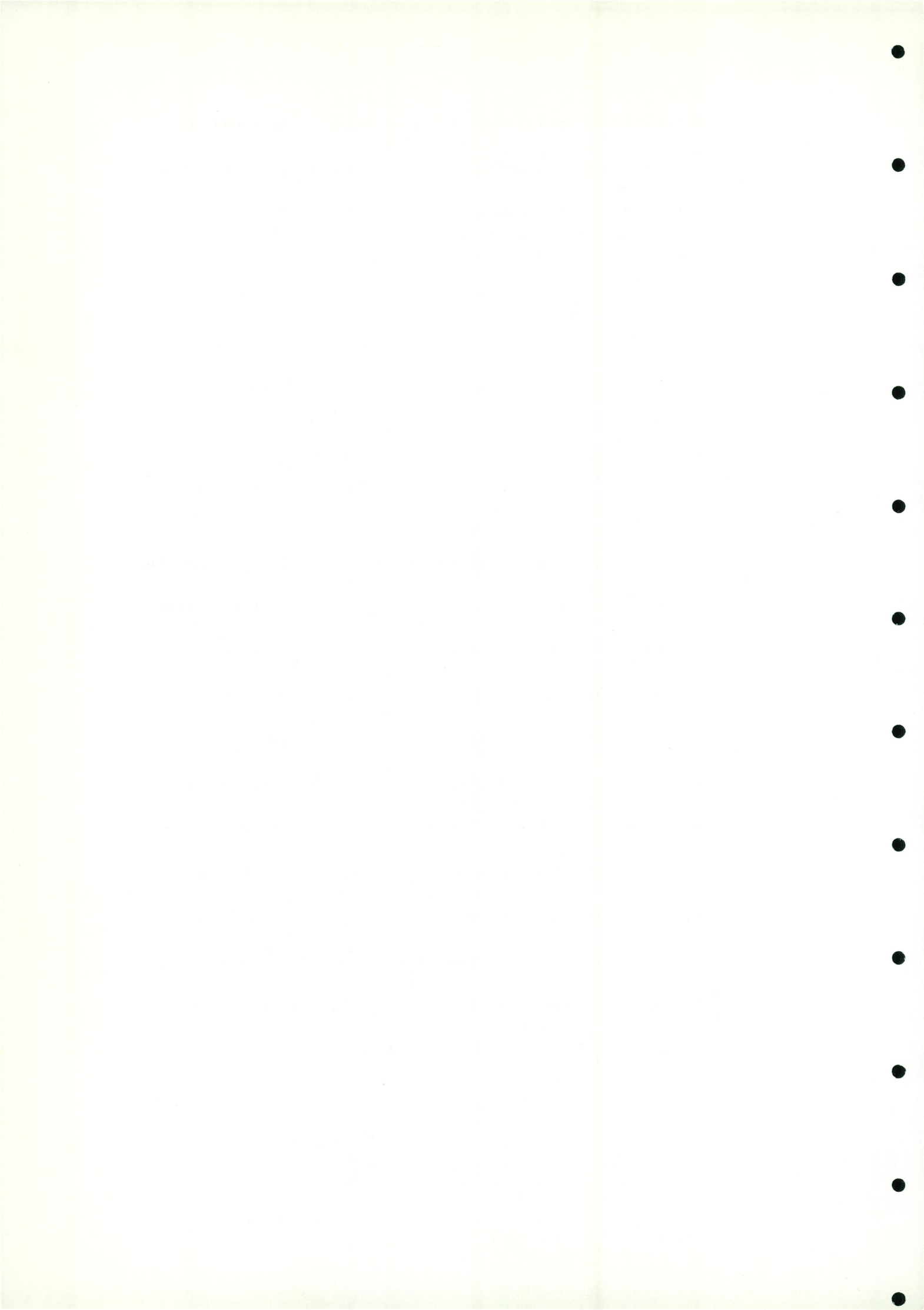
Polke and A.R. Penck belong to the first generation of New German painting.²² Their strategies may be seen to have countered the long drawn out discourse of later modernism. Klotz claims that to the history of 20th century painting they have contributed one essential finding namely that “doubt concerning the validity of the painted image can itself be transmuted into painted imagery, and that intellectual reflection on the medium need not preclude the creation of an aesthetical presence.” (Guggenheim 1989, p. 52)

A common feature of their work, according to Klotz, combined dark memories with existential fears. In other ways the artists did not develop a common or consistent contemporary style as such but each one tended to work in isolation. This isolation led to the development of more independent and individual styles evident especially in the work of Koberling, Kiefer and Penck. Jürgen Schilling in his essay “Metaphors: Positions in German Painting”²³ explains that one central aspect of their approach deserves emphasis. It is that they attach equal if not greater importance to the process of painting than they do to the figurative content that is so prominent a feature of their work,²⁴ though they have never relinquished such motifs as the human figure and the inanimate object as

²² Baselitz, Penck and Richter came from Saxony (East Germany) and the home of German Expressionism at the turn of the century (Die Brücke, Dresden).

²³ From the catalogue “Re-figured Painting: The German Image 1960-1988”.

²⁴ Schilling quotes Baselitz as saying “What matters in painting is not the content factor but visual invention. The necessity of pictorial structure” (Guggenheim 1989, p. 47)



points of departure. "Their interpretations tend to issue", he says, "in a highly expressive, almost abstract imagery. Their inward visions demand expression, compels alienation from purely figurative representation."
(Guggenheim 1989, p. 47).

In this chapter it has been shown how the work of the German Neo-Expressionist painters of the 1980's was highlighted by exhibition organisers. Some details of a number of International Exhibitions have been described and the apparent importance of the German contingent, within the Neo-Expressionist movement, became clearer. This might seem to indicate that certain organisers held the German painters in high esteem. This may have been due in part to the German painter's cultural back-ground or partly also because the new German painting represented, for the organisers, some dramatic new innovations which would have contributed as they saw it to the resurrection of painting. As this Chapter pointed out the interest in German painting was not confined only to Europe, but stretched across the Atlantic to America, where a number of Exhibitions in the 1980's, featuring sometimes exclusively German painters, took place. This Chapter also examined the connection between German Neo-Expressionist painting and the cultural and historically situation within Germany itself. This was in order to understand more fully how painting can still be used as a meaningful means of artistic expression in the late 20th



century. In order to develop this point further an examination of the work of Anselm Kiefer will be undertaken in the next Chapter.



CHAPTER THREE

The Work of Anselm Kiefer

An exhibition of Anselm Kiefer's work went on tour in the United States from December 1987 to January 1989. It was organised by A. James Speyer and Mark Rosenthal. Its itinerary included four venues in Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and New York, respectively. The exhibition had been organised in response to increased interest in the work of Kiefer: his unconventional use of materials and the controversial issues with which he was dealing.²⁵

By 1983 Kiefer had become more elaborate in his manipulation of surfaces. He used real materials for symbolic as well as representational purposes. By his manipulation of these materials, Kiefer implies that landscapes and buildings achieved their meanings through the human events that occur there. He used layering techniques²⁶ and in an archaeological sense it could be said that, theoretically, layer upon layer of human activity could be uncovered in his structures. The physical materiality and visual complexity of his surfaces became a major source of interest to critics and reviewers from the 1980s. Kiefer used oil, lead, photography, woodcuts, sand and straw. His paintings were on a grand scale and their complexity

²⁵ Germany's cultural and social history and in particular the relationship of that history with the Jews.

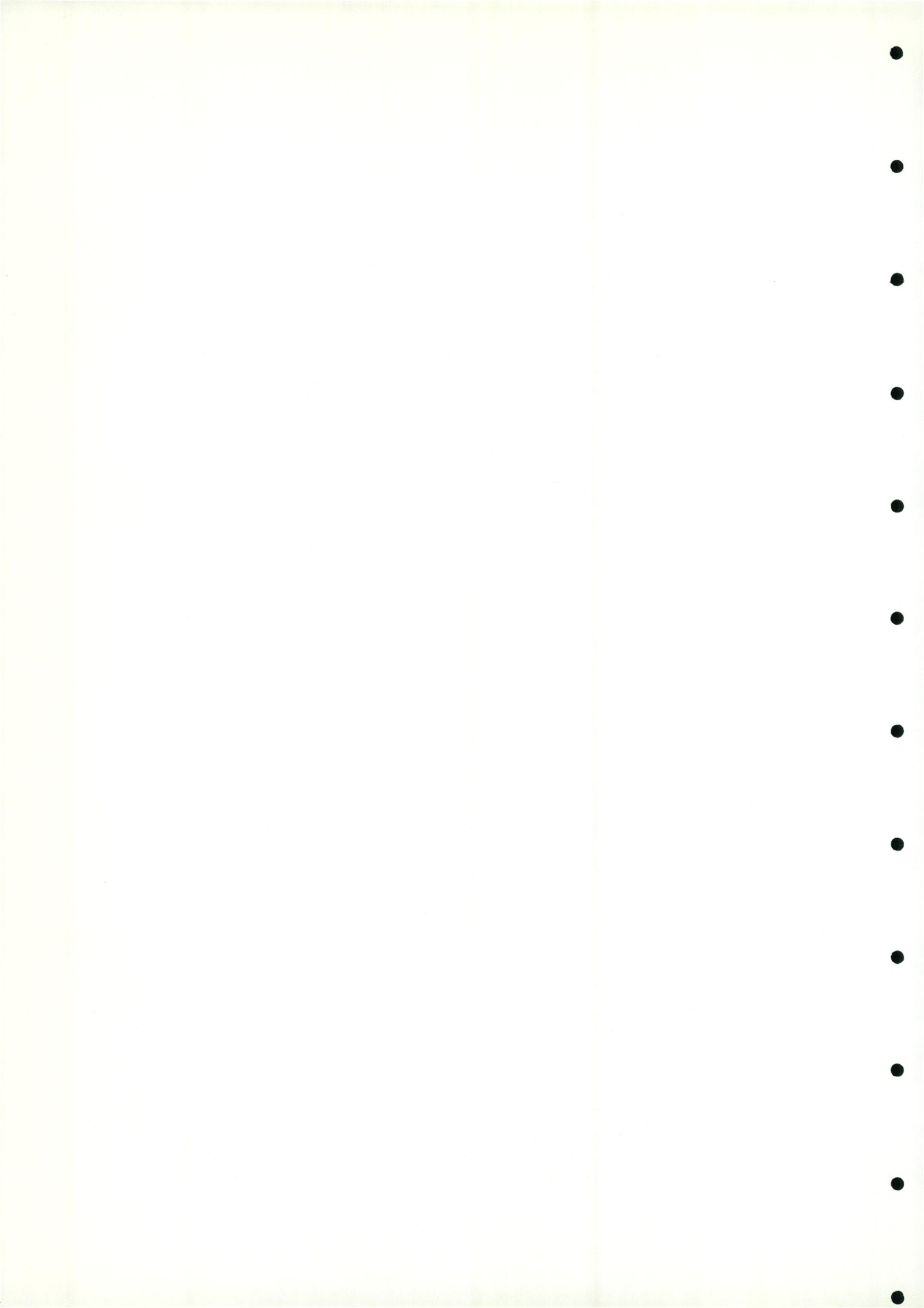
²⁶ Often to show the results of the effect of time or visual and chemical change.



gave them a forceful presence. Kiefer's conceptualist leanings had led to his unconventional approach to materials and he had always insisted upon the literalness of his work.²⁷ There is a symbolism also in the materials manipulated. Kiefer's straw paintings of 1981/82 became vehicles for thoroughly German themes which evolved in paintings such as "Nuremberg", "Margarete" and "Shulamite". The straw paintings became a new version of landscape in art. Straw, chosen by Kiefer because of its vulnerability to fire became a symbol for him of human history.

Kiefer had asked himself some difficult questions concerning the history of the Germans and the Jews. In the 1980s he made a number of trips to Israel in search of Jewish legends. This search was linked to his discovery in 1980 of Paul Celan's poem "Todesfuge" (or death fugue), which related the historical tragedy of the Germans and the Jews. Paul Celan was born in Czernowitz, Bukovina which later became part of Romania. During the German occupation he lost his entire family. In 1970 Celan committed suicide. His poem was written in a concentration camp in 1945, but was only published in 1952. Before his trips to Israel Kiefer had already been immersed in Celan's poem. The following lines were those

²⁷ Kiefer's use of materials is comparable to that of a group of Italian artists of Art Povera Movement who were conceptualists and were uncomfortable with the processes of commodification within the art market.



which inspired a number of paintings by him such as “Margarete 1981”, “Your Golden Hair Margarete 1981” and “Shulamite 1983”²⁸.

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown, we drink it at noon,
in the morning we drink it at night. A man lives in the house, he
plays with the serpent he writes. He writes when dusk falls to
Germany your Golden hair Margarete, your ashen hair
Shulamite. Death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue, he
strikes you with leaden bullets, his aim is true. (Rosenthal 1987, p.
95)

In “Your Golden Hair Margarete 1981” Kiefer creates a lock of her hair with straw and superimposes this over a barren countryside and furrows stretching far into the horizon (Fig 14). Shulamite is an image which has haunted Kiefer for over ten years. She is the main character in the biblical poem of the Song of Songs. It is an allegorical love poem which describes God’s love for Israel and Israel’s love for God. It conveys its message under the imagery of a relationship between husband and wife. At a certain point in the poem the lover is separated from her beloved. This event Kiefer related to the situation of the Jews in his own country. Shulamite represents the persecuted Jews.²⁹ Kiefer equates the woman at the centre of the most beautiful poetry in Jewish literature with a dark claustrophobic, military castle (Fig. 6). Shulamite personifies the Jewish poetical soul and is represented as a bunker. The brooding atmosphere of Shulamite has great psychological tension. At the top left of the picture Kiefer has inscribed the

²⁸ Kiefer admitted that he felt incredible despair in creating these works - his sense of the physical fragility of the materials correspond with his sense of Germany’s fate.

²⁹ “Shulamite” means Girl from Shulam or one who belongs to Solomon. It is also a feminine form of the name Solomon, or can mean she who belongs to the lover.



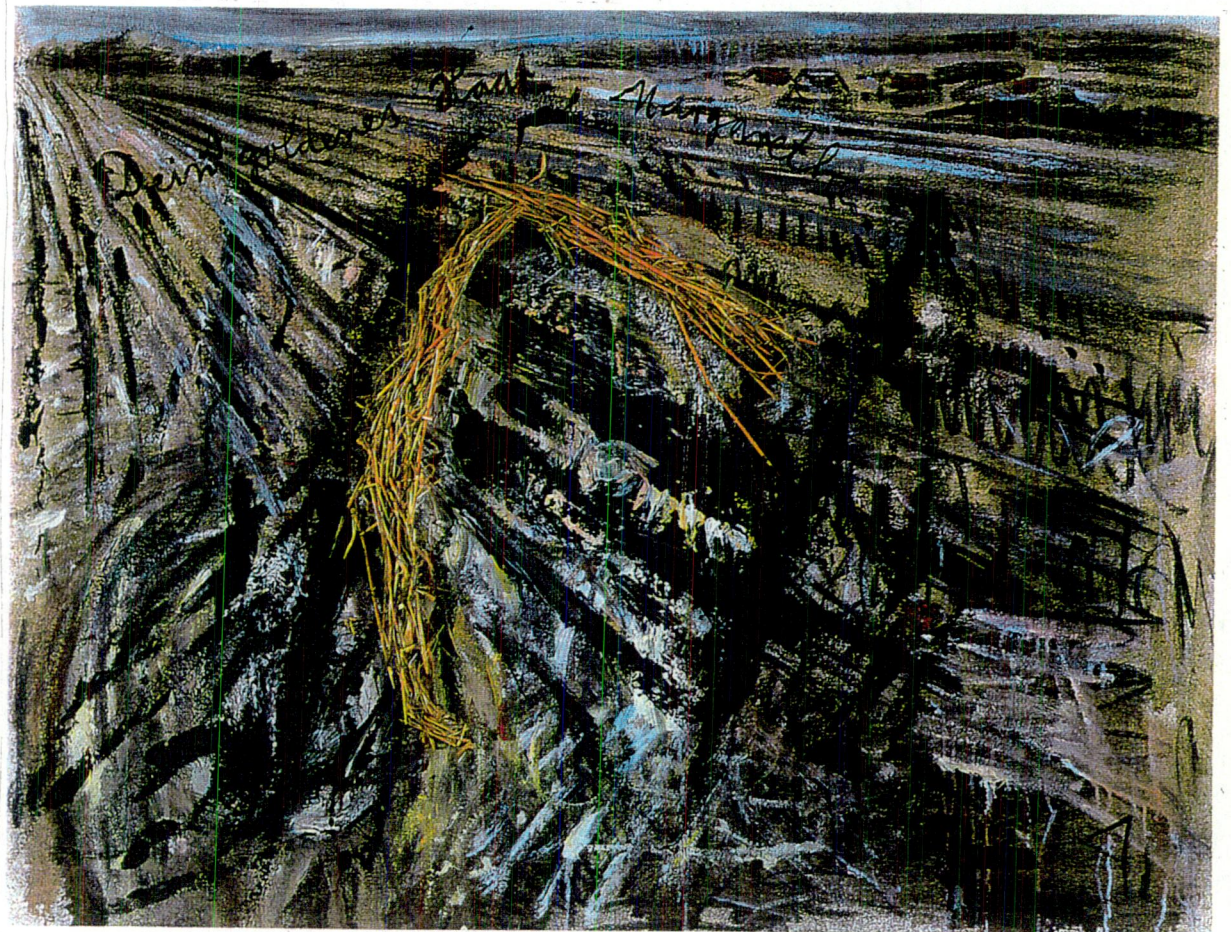


Fig. 14. Kiefer Anselm: Your Golden Hair, Margarete 1981



word "Shulamith" as taken from Celan's poem. Both poet and painter bring a vision of historical transition of the Jewish poetical soul from Solomon's "Song of Songs" to a concentration camp. The Jewish poetical soul is imprisoned in this bunker. Margarete and Shulamite are inseparable. Kiefer makes this point in his painting by implying the presence of the other: Shulamite's black hair is usually painted while Margarete's is described with straw.³⁰ In "Your Golden Hair Margarete 1981" a black curved line echoes the shape of Shulamite's hair. The blond haired Margaret symbolises Aryan beauty and the old German love of the land.

In his catalogue on the Kiefer exhibition Mark Rosenthal describes how Kiefer's work calls into question the most fondly held views of German tradition and renders them bankrupt for he says that Kiefer shows that "the land has long since been blackened and destroyed by the inheritance of these ideals." (Rosenthal 1987, p.) In Kiefer's view Germany maimed itself and its civilisation by destroying its Jewish members.

"Shulamite" is one painting in a long series which begun in the seventies. His paintings of buildings in the eighties, however, did not depict any wood (an indication of their closeness to nature) but were isolated from nature and even light. They have the aspect of monuments which have an

³⁰ There is a terrible irony in Kiefer's use of straw to depict the noble German soul because straw is essentially a vulnerable material, capable of burning easily.



air of destiny about them. Mark Rosenthal compares the architecture of Shulamite with the funeral wall of the Great German Soldiers in the Memorial Hall of Soldiers in Berlin.

In his visits to Israel Kiefer was struck by Desert geography which became the main subject in his painting "Departure from Egypt 1984/85". Here he finds a setting for expressing his reflections on the theme of the Exodus³¹ and the dramatic concrete topography of the desert origins of the Jewish people. A photograph of part of the Desert of Judah is the starting point for this painting. The upper and lower parts are two distinct spheres. In the upper part of the painting a large cloud drips to earth - an allusion to the Exodus story. The people of Israel were led out of captivity in Egypt and a pillarlike cloud accompanied them. This cloud denoted the presence and protection of God (Fig. 15). The book of Exodus³² in the Bible recounts the oppression by the Egyptians of the ever increasing descendants of Jacob. The Jews and their miraculous deliverance by God, through Moses who led them across the Red Sea to Mount Sinai and the Desert. These events were of prime importance to the Jews because it was through them that they became an independent nation. For many years they had been in captivity in Egypt and had been engaged in forced labour making

³¹ The Exodus an event said to have taken place in Jewish history around 1250 B.C.. The Jewish people having been led in captivity in Egypt were led out to freedom by Moses only to wander for forty years in the desert of Sinai.

³² The word "Exodus" a Greek word meaning "Departure".



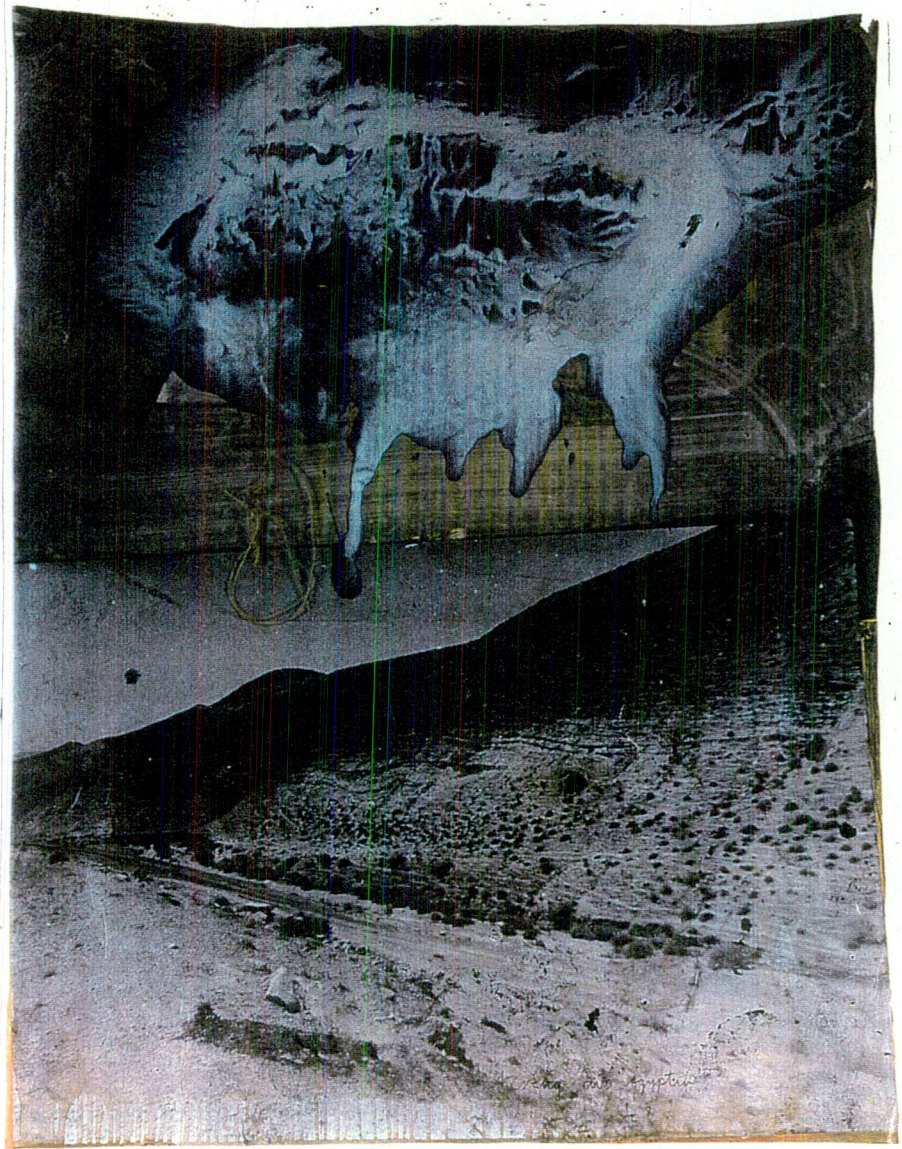


Fig. 15. Kiefer, Anselm:

Departure from Egypt

1984/85



bricks.³³ The making of these bricks involved the use of straw for greater consistency. At one point in the story when Pharaoh is approached by Moses and asked to release the people, Pharaoh refuses and issues an order that the Israelites are to be deprived of straw for the making of the bricks. This made their task doubly difficult³⁴. In the Exodus story Pharaoh and his officials greatly feared the growing numbers of Jews and the possibility that in the event of war these might even join forces with their enemies. So he issues an order to all midwives to kill all male infants of the Israelites at birth.³⁵

In "Aaron" 1984/85 and "Departure from Egypt" 1984, a lead rod of Aaron is the focal point for both canvases.³⁶ They appear with a group of vertical staffs that represent the twelve tribes of Israel. A second time when Moses and Aaron went before Pharaoh to ask for the release of the people, Pharaoh again refuses. Aaron then throws his staff down and it turns into a snake. The King's magicians then do the same but Aaron's snake devours theirs.^{37 38} (Fig. 16 and 17) By his use of the rods in these

³³ It is interesting to note that Kiefer may have received the idea of using straw on his canvases from the episode in Exodus involving the making of the bricks. The brickwork structure in "Shulamite" must also have had something to do with this episode.

³⁴ When the Israelites complain that they have no straw Pharaoh replies "Go and gather it for yourselves wherever you can find it but there must not be the slightest reduction in your work." Ex. 5:11

³⁵ Ex. 1: 15-22

³⁶ In biblical terms the rod or staff symbolises an instrument of transformation. It is also used by the shepherd to guard his flock.

³⁷ Ex. 7:8-13

³⁸ Furrows in these two landscape paintings resemble the coiling forms of snakes. Snake-like forms are a regular feature in Kiefer's work after 1980.



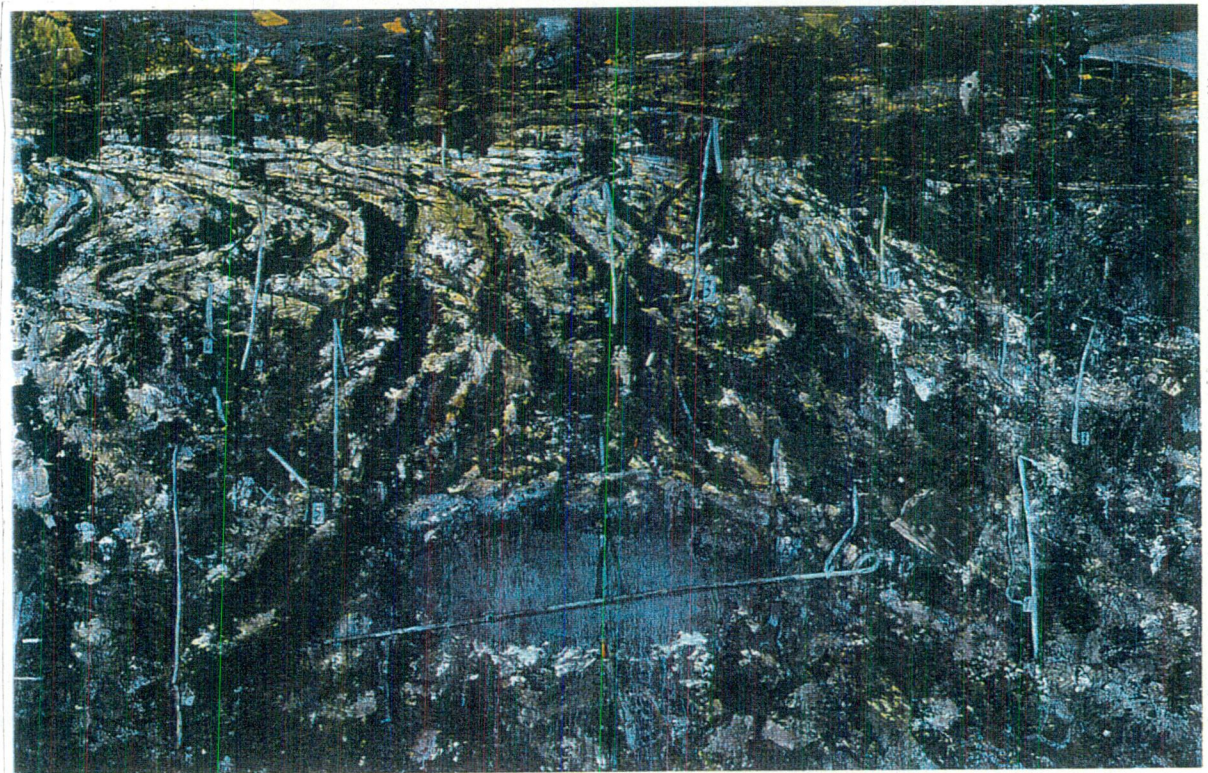


Fig. 16. Kiefer Anselm: Aaron

1984/85



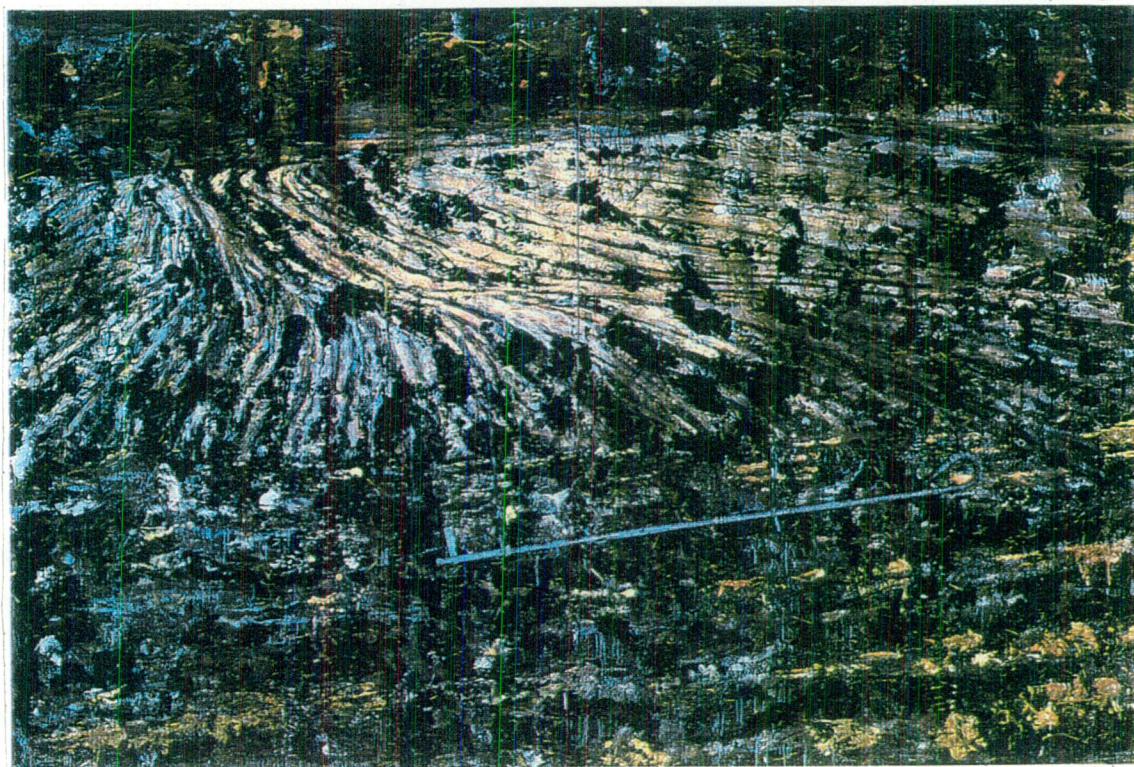


Fig. 17. Kiefer Anselm:

Departure from Egypt

1984/85



two paintings Kiefer would seem to be indicating his belief that the Jewish race is in some way divinely protected and guided. They would also seem to serve as a stern reminder to his fellow countrymen in that they bear witness to the truth that the oppression of others does not pay.

There is a connection between the Exodus story and Kiefer's "Operation Sea Lion I" (1975). The motif of the bathtub is used by Kiefer as a metaphor. It relates the German general's fantasy of crossing the English channel to Moses' parting and crossing of the Red Sea. This metaphor links German and Jewish complexes and appears to put aspects of the German and Jewish Psyches into the same psychological vessel (Fig. 18). It appears that Kiefer takes a step backward by millennia in order to tackle an image of Jewish contemporary history so as to uncover the forces which brought about the Holocaust. "The Red Sea 1984/85" is a carryover of the Nationalist Socialist bathtub from "The Operation Sea Lion" series which equates the foolishness of the Nazis with that of Pharaoh and his horsemen, who in pursuit of the Israelites were swallowed up in the Red Sea. The tub, full of red liquid, also links two biblical events, the first plague in Exodus when Aaron turned water to blood with his rod³⁹ and Moses' parting and closing of the Red Sea with his staff (Fig. 19). Each of these events is divinely instigated and a punishing blow for justice. Kiefer

³⁹ At the command of the Lord, Aaron stretches his rod over the waters of Egypt, whereupon the seas become blood, which is then drunk by the Egyptians. (Ex. 7:14-24)



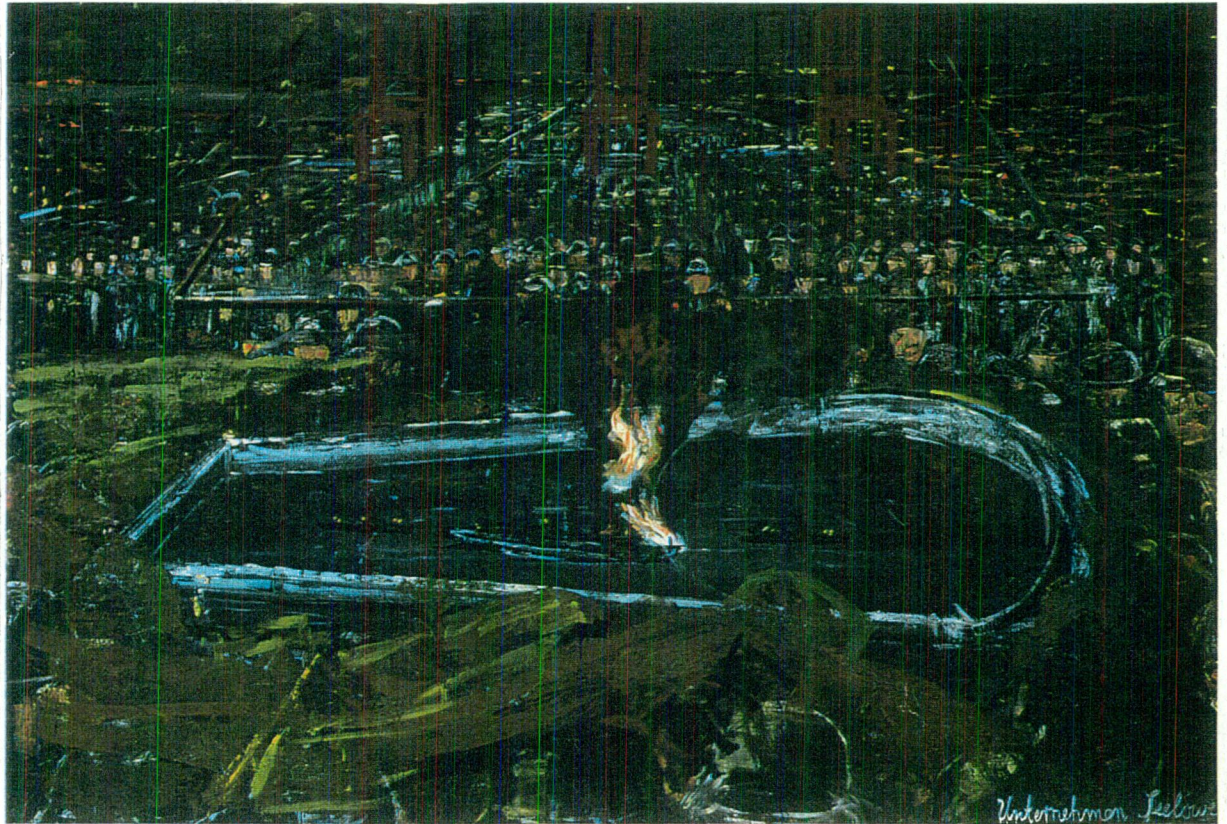
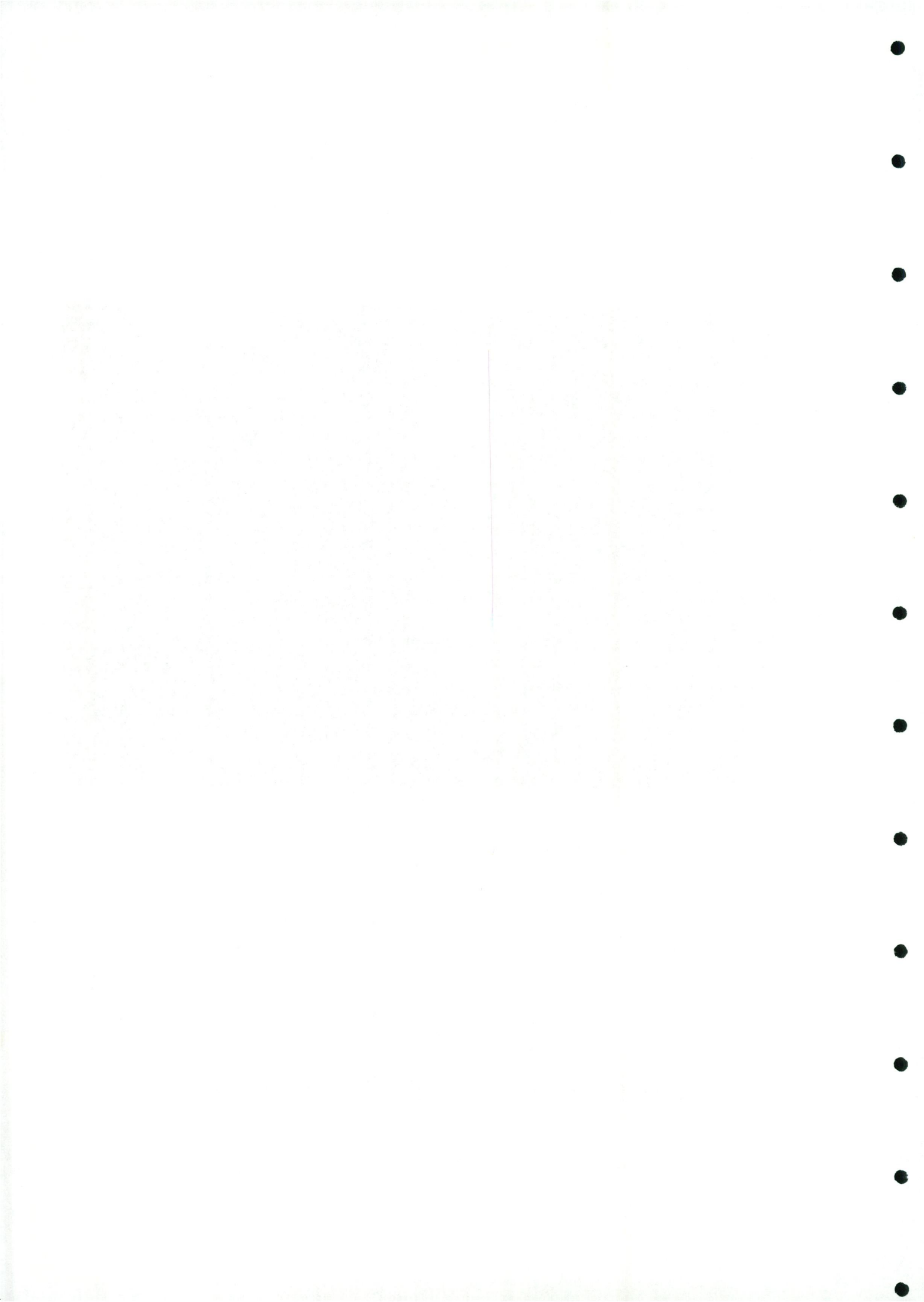


Fig. 18. Kiefer Anselm:

Operation Sea Lion I

1975



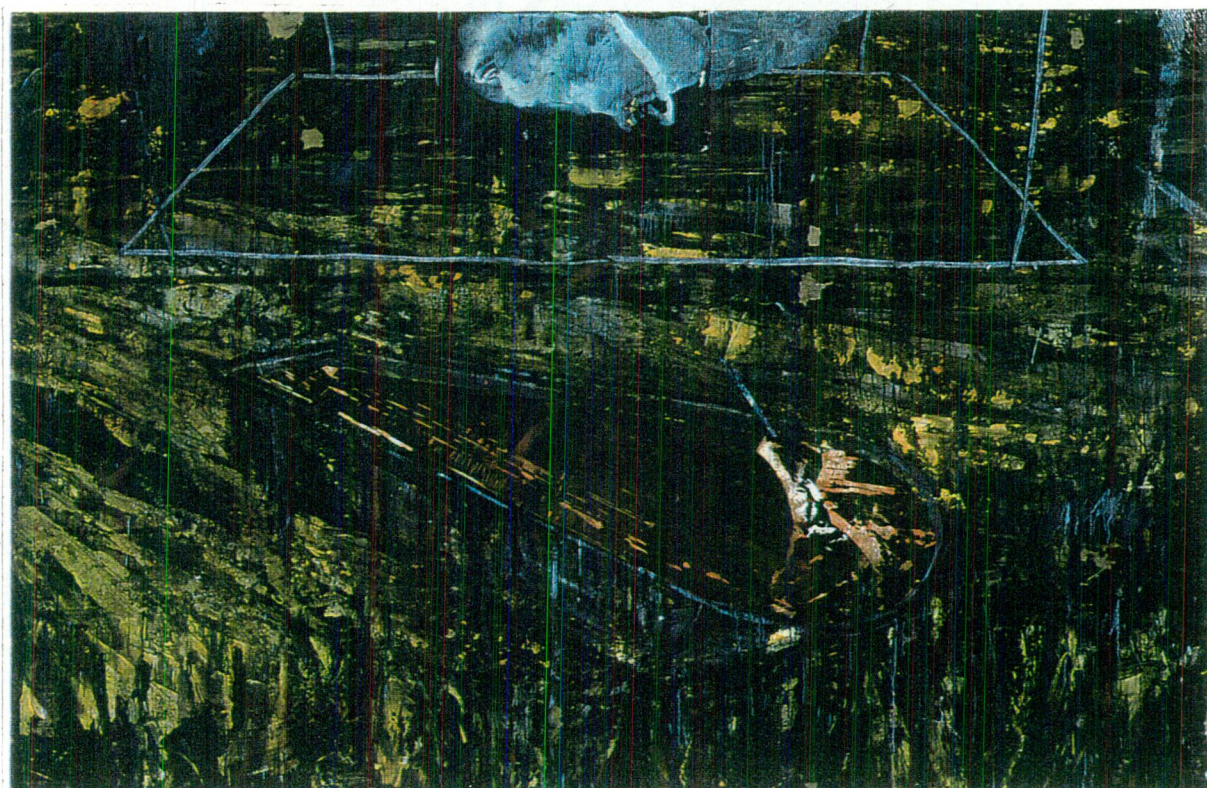


Fig. 19. Kiefer Anselm:

The Red Sea

1984/85



has thus transformed the image of the tub offering an entirely new meaning. It now becomes a place of figurative baptism - a new beginning for the Jews. As in "Operation Sea Lion I", events are divinely controlled. A glass plate appears above the earth holding the mysterious white pillar of cloud as in "Departure from Egypt" 1984/85.

Kiefer's work of the late eighties and early nineties combines cabalistic legend⁴⁰ with the complexity of the German/Jewish problem. In the "Lilit" series of paintings, Lilit represents the transformed image of Shulamite who appeared in the former works as a counterpart of Margarete. "Lilit At the Red Sea" 1990 is one of the paintings which exemplifies Kiefer's use of lead. Alchemists once believed that gold and silver could be extracted from it. It was also said to have two other qualities related to melancholy and time. These qualities of melancholy (sadness of loss) and time (transcendence) occur often in Kiefer's work. In "Lilit At The Red Sea" (Fig. 20) 1990, Kiefer has fixed garments (dresses) to the surface of the painting. They are covered in ashes. The ashen clothes evoke the ancient Jewish ritual of mourning. According to Doreet Le Vitte Harten in her text to the catalogue for Anselm Kiefer's exhibition "Lilit"⁴¹ the dresses evoke many associations that could be extended to the memory of the

⁴⁰ Mystical legends based on the traditions of the Jewish Talmud or books of the Law and written about 5th or 6th century A.D.. Most of Kiefer's cabalistic works are based on The Lurianic Cabala. Luria was a 15th Century Spaniard and his doctrine was based on the 5th Century Cabala. It gave comfort to Jews of the Diaspora after events following the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492.

⁴¹ Held at the Maria Goodman Gallery, New York, May/June 1990.



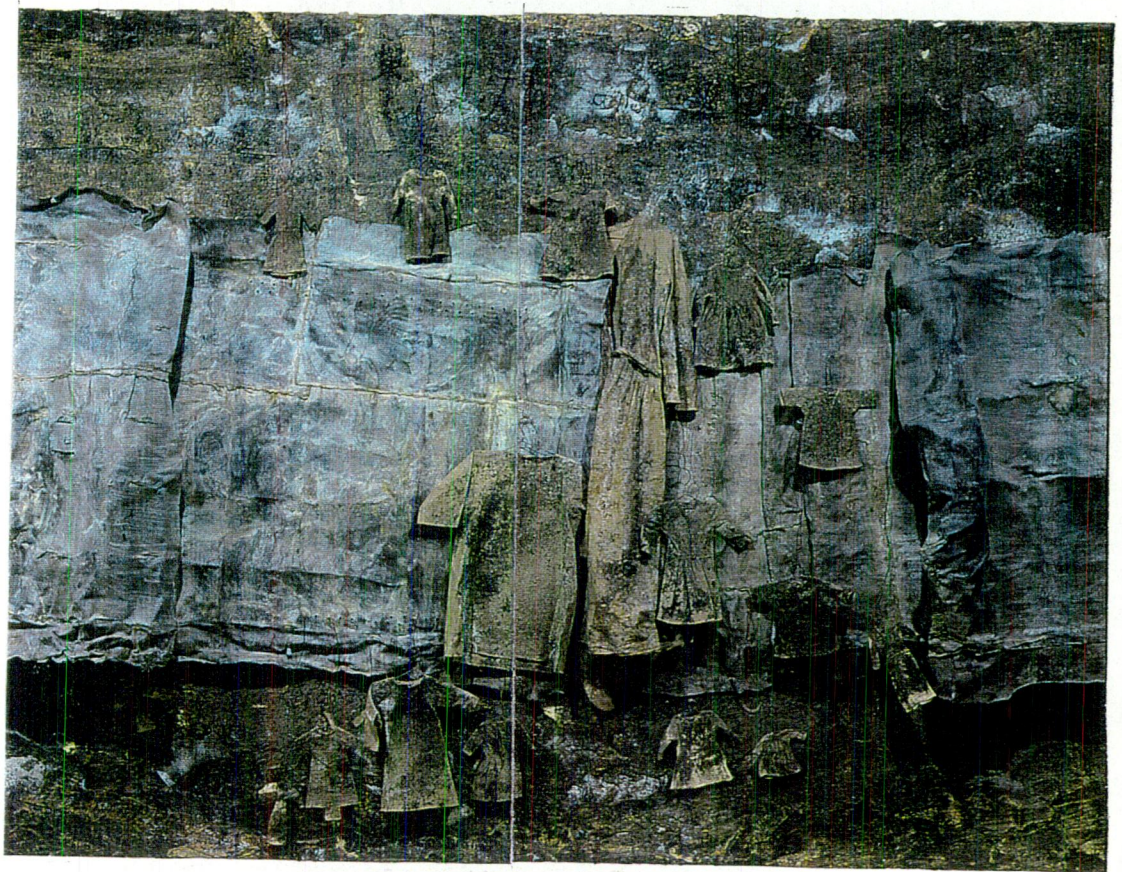


Fig. 20. Kiefer Anselm:

Lilit At the Red Sea

1990



Holocaust since hair shorn from victims and abandoned clothes are two of the most vivid images that we have in respect of these victims. (**Goodman 1990, p. 15**).

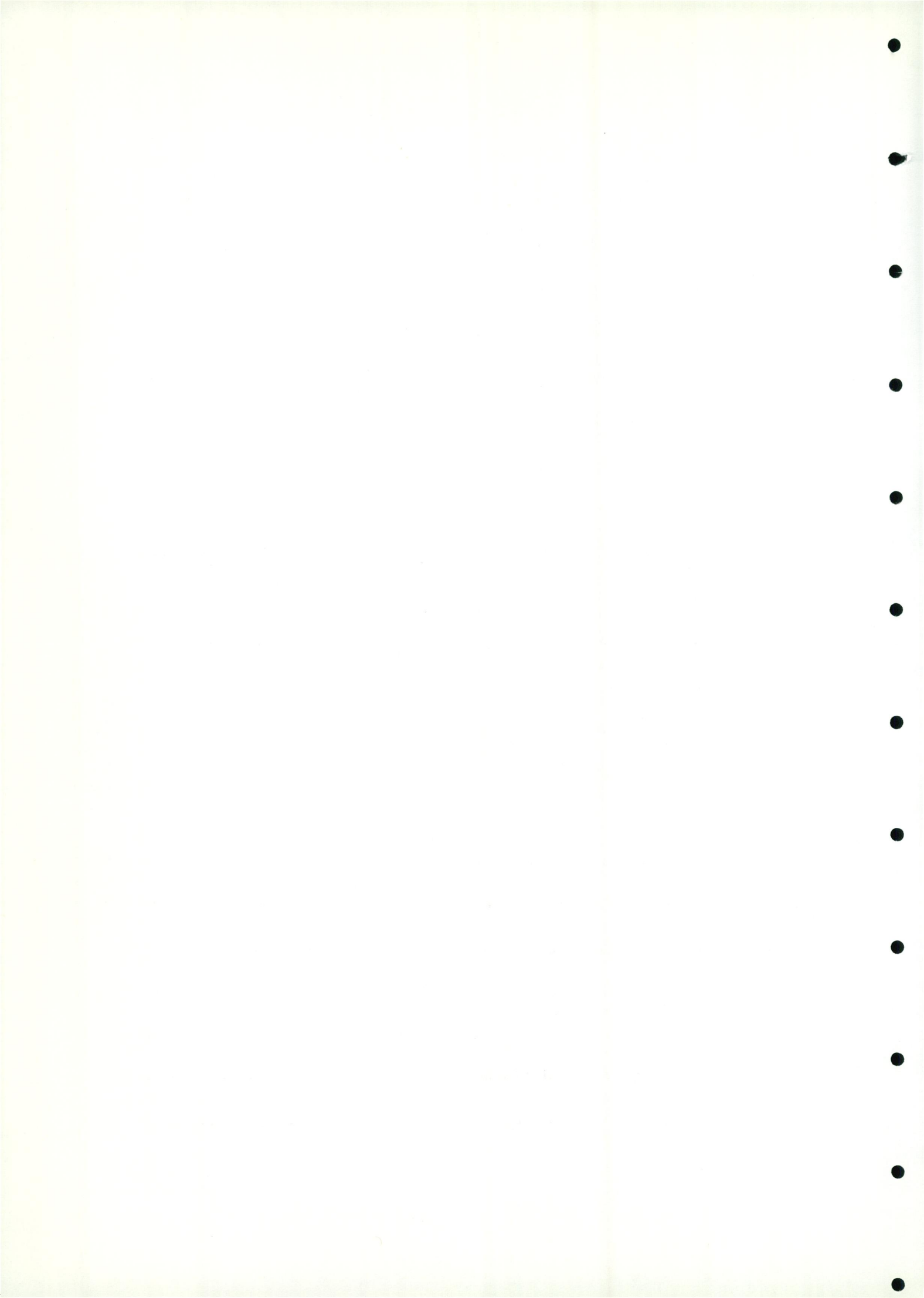
In this chapter note has been taken of Kiefer's unconventional use of materials and his method of addressing contemporary anxieties and traumas through the medium of paint. He achieves this mainly through a metaphorical use of landscape imagery and ancient biblical mythology, using legends of the past to bring to life problematic issues of the present. In this Chapter certain aspects of Kiefer's work have been discussed, his approach to materials, his own German history and culture and the traumas as expressed through his work, which have affected and continue to affect his country. It is hoped that this Chapter will have served to indicate the importance of painting, not just as a subjective visionary art form, but as a medium which the radical, contemporary artist may use to convey important political and social messages and thus challenge conventional thinking. To this end it is hoped that it will contribute to some degree to an understanding of the purpose and meaning of painting in the late 20th century.



CONCLUSION

In this dissertation an attempt has been made to cover some aspects of painting as put forward by some leading art critics. These aspects included the subjective imagination of the artist, the role of the artist's hand and the sensual, tactile qualities of surface. An attempt was also made to deal with some questions of a transcendental nature: the metaphorical and metaphysical aspects of painting. For Barbara Rose painting is a visionary art and derives its inspiration from the artist's subconscious. However, the Italian Transavantgarde, who were championed by Achille Bonito Oliva were denounced for their lack of conviction in painting and for what was seen as a withdrawal from any conscious, political engagement. Their appropriation of different styles from art history was also seen as a tactic to avoid critical analyses. Douglas Crimp saw the idea of the ontological process of painting's development as something too easily taken for granted. He criticises Rose's received ideas about painting and champions the work of Daniel Buren, among others, which he claimed was aimed specifically at abolishing the code that makes art what it is in its production and in its institutions. Both Crimp and Lawson see painting as an art form that can be used to de-construct and de-stabilise the status-quo.

As mentioned in the above Chapters the organisers of "A New Spirit In Painting" were convinced that the best creative energy at that time was



coming from Germany. German Neo-Expressionist painters were concerned with what it meant to be German, German traumas and culture. In this century this involved the First and Second World Wars and the Holocaust. While some German artists gained recognition at the exhibitions mentioned in Chapter Two, many more younger artists were emerging in Germany itself. This movement became recognised by some critics as the most important aesthetic development related to expression to have arrived on the art scene for some time. Siegfried Gohr in his essay explained that German artists had to struggle for acceptance in their own country and against the traditional and mediocre tastes of their own society. It is important to remember also that the German Neo-Expressionist painters had a direct engagement with the anti-authoritarian and student revolt movements of the nineteen sixties and they were deeply concerned and aware of the issues surrounding the current state of their country. These issues concerned Germany's past and its divisions.

It was to demonstrate this point and to show also how painting can be used as a vehicle to communicate important present issues that the work of Anselm Kiefer was chosen for specific investigation in Chapter Three. Another reason for this choice was to demonstrate how his work stands in contrast to some of the claims made for painting by Rose, Crimp, Oliva and others. If, as Barbara Rose claims, the focus of the artist's inspiration is in the sub-conscious, then Kiefer's work is, by contrast, on a very conscious



level. He is, like other German artists, acutely aware of present issues: the contemporary, historical situation within his own country and the political problems interwoven with that. Consequently it would seem that his work present a challenge to conventional thinking, particularly in his own country. It is highly unlikely, however, that his unconventional use of materials would have conformed to the thinking of Rose and Oliva. He does dip into the past in order to construct his themes, but this is a return to antiquity and not a plundering of art history. His work certainly reveals some aspects of the German Romantic tradition of landscape painting, such as love of the land, which in Germany is associated with the highest spiritual values. These elements are evident in his paintings which show long rolling fields and furrows stretching off into a distant horizon. Kiefer uses all these elements in a metaphorical way as described in Chapters Two and Three.

This latter point needs to be emphasised. The entire body of Kiefer's work bears testimony to the power of metaphor and the ability of the contemporary artist to convey a deeper message through the medium of paint. Kiefer's painting does possess all the tactile qualities and the power of the imagination spoken of by Rose and Oliva. The trace of the artist at work is present in his paintings, though not necessarily the trace of the hand or the brush. Because Kiefer deals with some of the most terrible events of European history both the metaphorical and metaphysical aspects of his work would seem to operate through a form of negative transcendence.



Kiefer's work would seem to uphold, to some degree, the arguments of Crimp and Lawson that painting is at its most subversive when it poses as something other than what it is. His paintings look like landscapes, but these landscapes are metaphors for something else. They represent the land and its noble heritage which has now become scarred and charred by warfare. Kiefer's work is an example of what Donald Kuspit describes as "the power of paint to conjure images that overpower and force the spectator to look beyond his ordinary perception" (Kuspit, 1988, p. 4).

It might be wrong to suggest that the German painters were the only Neo-Expressionists with an important message to deliver. There were many artists in the London School, for instance in Scotland, America and elsewhere, who were doing similar. However, because of Germany's position in the making of recent European history and its central role in the First and Second World Wars, the work of the German Neo-Expressionist painters takes on an important significance. Close examination of this work is important in understanding the role of art in our present day society and the question which is under discussion here, which is the purpose and meaning of painting. The subjective vision of the artist and the power of the imagination are both present in the work of the German Neo-Expressionist painters. Yet, their vision is not fantasy. The work of Baselitz, Kiefer, Penck, Immendorf and others is connected to a tragic history and the consequences of that history are experienced by many today. Their vision is real, accountable and responsible but at the same time visionary and



expressive. The work of the German Neo-Expressionist painters proves conclusively that painting is not an obsolete art - but is a powerful medium which can be used to challenge, confront and pose questions to the most difficult problems of today. To what end painting? To this end if no other.



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