

Neo Rauch: Archives of the Mind

In 2008, I was introduced by the artist Paolo Canavari, to the Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica (ING), located at the side of the Trevi Fountain in Rome. The ING is a historical archive of 24,000 historical printing matrices dating from 1500s to the present by Italian masters like Raimondi, Ghisi, Vasi, Piranesi, Morandi, Accardi and Dorazio. To see the collection, one is taken in a small two-person elevator down to a protected area, through a two lock vault door opened by ancient skeletal keys, and then is lead into a series of rooms filled with flat files, screens and shelves upon shelves of archival boxes.

I have been around printers and print shops before, from my days as co-director of Dieu Donne, a non-profit handpaper making studio in New York, and have had the opportunity to watch prints being created from start to finish by artists and master printers, so for me, the experience of holding original printing plates made by this incredible pantheon in brass, cooper, zinc, steel, wood and stone in my hands, was magical. However, beyond just the tactile experiential moment - there was another more profound thought that had been planted in my mind – which was the question of whether or not these matrices could be considered drawings?

That question, prompted several more visits to the ING over the next three years. By 2011, I had finally convinced the curators and director to allow me to bring about 100 metal plates, no drawings and no prints accompanied them, to NY for the exhibition entitled, *Drawing and its Double*. The conceptual conceit of this exhibition could be nicely summed up by a quote attributed to Giovanni Battista Piranesi, spoken to the French painter and engraver, Hubert Robert, to describe his artistic processes: “The drawing is not on my sheet of paper, I admit, but is complete in my head and you will see it through the plate.”

Since *Drawing and its Double*, I have continued to be interested in the confluence of printmaking and drawing, so I was excited last year in 2021, when I was asked to write about Neo Rauch’s prints from the position of drawing. In 2016, when I was beginning to organize a large show with Rauch’s drawings for The Drawing Center (*Aus dem Boden/From the Floor*), I was able to do a research visit to the Grafikstiftung Neo Rauch (GNR) in Aschersleben, Germany. This museum, which houses all of Neo’s editioned and printed works, was co-founded by the artist in 2012. The corpus of the collection was given by the artist at the inception of the museum and he has committed to add any new prints or editions he makes to the collection in perpetuity. Today, there are more than 100 Neo Rauch works in the collection, the earliest prints are from 1988 and the latest from 2022. The museum is open to the public, does several rotating exhibitions each year, and the full collection is available to researchers and academics.

Since the museum is in his formative childhood home, where he was brought up by his grandparents after his parents died in a train crash in 1960, many Neo Rauch enthusiasts come to Aschersleben to try and find some missing links to his enigmatic paintings in this “ancestral” landscape and in the images of his prints. In my mind, this search in Aschersleben for some sort of geographical codebreaking cipher for Neo’s work is destined to fail. The problem is that all of Neo’s works are and are not about his own origins. As he says “...all of the prints that I have made until now are simply derived from my life in Leipzig; not a single one of them makes any deliberate reference to the town where I spent my childhood and teen years. At the same time, however, I know that this region, which stretches from the Harz to Aschersleben all the way to Leipzig, has provided all of the motifs for everything I do ... this stretch of land simply has everything that you’ll find in my pictures. And it is not actually the things

themselves so much; they're probably more like moments, circumstances that can hardly be precisely identified. They are very particular kinds of forms, in this landscape, in the lines of the horizon, in unique architectural feature. In the light."¹

So what is the best approach to understanding Neo's prints and what is their relationship to his drawings, if any? From my own experience with Neo's drawings, it was not through a semiotics or psychology of symbols and forms but rather by developing my own personal taxonomies of different affinities and modalities - which I called fragmentary drawings, character studies, scenarios and finished drawings - that I was able to establish organizing principals and meaning for this medium within his oeuvre. I would say that drawing for Neo is a free, low-stress, low-stakes activity. Often they are left on the floor of the studio and collected and haphazardly put away when the studio is cleaned after a series of paintings have been completed and moved out of the space. They are not preparatory for paintings or for the prints. Neo rarely sells his drawings and they are not part of the collection of the museum so there is little commercial and archival pressure on these works. Where drawings have significant value to Neo is that they catch the flotsam and jetson of his mind and put things into useable physical form for the first time so that maybe later fragments of architecture, electrical lines, characters and situations can be redeployed in his picture making.

According to Neo, however, there is more anxiety associated with printmaking than drawing and significantly more than painting. The canvas for him is a "playground," one where he feels in total control of the medium, the grandness of the gesture and his implicit understanding of its uniqueness as an object. Prints on the other hand, require a different set of hand skills, technical knowhow, and the scale is much smaller. As well, the inherent idea of the reproducibility and the history of printmaking to propaganda and poster making adds to Neo's burden of personal responsibility to make images that are worthwhile to edition 35 times. There is now the pressure of the clock to complete prints each year to add to the museum's collection, so embedded mentally into the process is a bit of timekeeping, scheduling and practical work which artists always despise.

It is important to note that Neo, notwithstanding his bluster about the stifling effect on his creativity and his fears and apprehensions about printmaking, does see the medium as a valuable language that he can develop alongside drawing as a counterpoint to his paintings. It is my opinion, that his prints operate in similar ways to his drawings. Their genesis is an act of drawing, not painting. In some cases, like in his single or two color chalk lithographs (*Erdgeschoß*, 2009; *Schnitt*, 2009; *Einschnitt*, 2010; *Geschenkbblatt*, 2010), there is a strong overlap with a set of "finished" black ink and crayon drawings from 2016 (*Rondo*, *Roder*, and *Stromer*). In both the prints and drawings inky blocks of space, give way to ghostly underdrawings, and faint outlines of semi-discernable shapes that share the pictorial plane with rough and finely rendered lines and cross hatches. What I like about these works is the push and pull, the tempest on the paper between the drawn or printed image and the unpredictable runny and sometimes revealing or obscurant nature of pure ink.

Where the prints and drawings diverge however, is more related to the indexical and archival functions of the GNR. Neo's drawings are treated more as personal material and although they are documented and eventually archived in his studio they are not collected by his own museum as they are too fragmentary and incomplete to be able to carry the burden of being an index of his thinking. His

¹ Wolfgang Büscher and Neo Rauch, "Conversation in Aschersleben with Wolfgang Büscher, on the Evening of November 26, 2011 at the Villa Westerberge," in: *Neo Rauch The Graphic Works 1993 to 2012*, ed. Grafikstiftung Neo Rauch, Ostfildern, 2012, p. 40

paintings, of course, are the penultimate repository of Neo's ideas – but they have been dispersed across the world over the years into museums and collections – and to get them all back would be a herculean task. The only way to see all of the paintings now would be as simulacra in a catalog raisonné. Through his print work, consciously or unconsciously, Neo has now created at the GNR an invaluable de facto archive of his mind that traces the arc of his thinking, modes of working and visual encyclopedia of his characters and imagery.