

THE
DRAWING
CENTER

Neo Rauch
Aus dem Boden /
From the Floor

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The Drawing Center
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Organized by
Brett Littman and Jeff Fleming with Amber Harper

*Essays by Brett Littman and Jeff Fleming
Interview by Ena Swansea*

Neo Rauch: Aus dem Boden / From the Floor

Brett Littman

*Until recently I always used to answer such questions by saying that I don't actually do drawings. I found it easy to react that way because I always expected more from drawing than what's here in the form of these sheets. That of course can be traced back to a deeply entrenched, clichéed [sic] image of what drawing is about. These things here are not preparatory drawings for pictures in the academic sense. They lead a kind of shadowy existence in the studio.*¹ — NEO RAUCH

In November 2014, the painter Ena Swansea and her husband Antoine Guerrero invited me to an intimate dinner for Neo Rauch in their loft in New York. Rauch, for me, has always been one of those artists who “bothered” me. To be clear, I don’t mean bothered in a pejorative way. There are other contemporary painters whose works bother me as well: Leon Golub, John Currin, David Salle, Cecily Brown, Amy Sillman, Kara Walker, George Condo, Dorothea Tanning, and Nicole Eisenman. But Neo is probably on the top of this list—over the many years of looking at his paintings with their atemporal subject matter, unexplainable planar construction, and

¹ “Interview with Wolfgang Büscher,” in Wolfgang Büscher, *Neo Rauch: Schilfland / Works on Paper* (Munich/Berlin/London/New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 94.

deeply enigmatic meanings—I have always left his exhibitions with more questions than answers.

At the party, Ena introduced me to Neo and at the end of the night gave me her copy of *Neo Rauch: Schilfland / Works on Paper*, published in 2009 by Prestel. I have to admit I had never really seen his drawings before and so this book was quite a revelation. From the interview between Neo and Wolfgang Büscher in the catalogue, I gleaned that he has a somewhat adversarial and complicated relationship to drawing. It is a medium with which he only engages in the studio when he is painting, but his drawings are not preparatory in a traditional sense—they act more like image catchers to populate his paintings—he has referred to them as both “illuminated moth collectors” and as “a boat’s wake.” For Neo, paper is a place for mistakes, experimentation, free thinking, doodling, and for testing out new scenarios and characters. Often the drawings are left on the floor and are collected later to be put haphazardly into flat files in the studio. Only when moving furniture in the studio or preparing for a book or thinking about a show do the drawings see the light of day again. For Rauch, drawings are neither precious nor windows into his soul. They are provisional spaces where things can come and go in and out of focus. Drawings are also not his place for “picture making,” a term that represents a different approach and focus when he paints on canvas or works on his large acrylics on paper. That said, Neo does sell certain of his smaller, more resolved, drawings from time to time.

For over a year, I thought about Neo’s drawings and began to plot about how I could make an exhibition of his work at The Drawing Center. I lobbied his gallerists, sent a box of our *Drawing Papers* to him, and hoped that he might be convinced to let me visit his studio. After several months of these entreaties, I finally got word that Neo was open to allowing me to visit him in Germany to discuss the idea of an exhibition in more detail.

In March 2016, I went to Leipzig for the first time. Neo and his wife, the painter Rosa Loy, share a space on the top floor of one of a large complex of buildings that were part of an old cotton mill on the outskirts of town. One has to walk through a maze of hallways, take

the correct elevator, and then find a large metal door with no visible markings or labels to get to the studio.

When I arrived, Neo opened the door and brought me into his painting studio. There were five large paintings up on buckets and some large works on paper all in various stages of completion spread across the room. We were the only ones in the studio—Neo doesn’t have painting assistants, just a studio manager and an archivist—so I felt a bit like an interloper in a very private space. After a bit of small talk, I politely asked him where the drawings were. He replied that he didn’t really have many finished drawings in the studio but pointed me to some old wooden flat files in the corner and said I could look through the drawers. He then went back to working on a painting.

I walked over to the cabinet and opened the first drawer. It was overflowing. I carefully removed it and transferred it to a table that Neo had cleared for me. I started to make piles: one of thumbnail sketches, one of large sheets that had many drawings and doodles on them, one of figure drawings, one of architectural drawings, one of what seemed like finished drawings. I took out the other drawers and ended up taking over 350 pictures on my cell phone of drawings that were interesting to me.

After about two hours of sorting the drawings, I felt a presence behind me. It was Neo looking over my shoulder. He asked me what I was doing. I told him I was categorizing the drawings based on certain affinities that I was seeing. He seemed skeptical. The drawings were chaotic in the drawers and they did not follow any chronological, thematic, or conceptual order. He started to pick up the piles and then began to talk about some of the drawings: “This one Rosa and I made together.” “This one has our dog Smylla in it.” “This is Mistakeman. You know, the guy that fucks everything up.”² “These are a set that need to be kept together.” “This was made during a time when I put speech bubbles in my work. I don’t do that anymore.” He then showed me a tree stump stool in the studio

² Rauch has given various iterations to this character, including “Mistakeman” and “Mr. Mistake Man.”

and said that this is sometimes the surface on which he draws in front of his paintings. I listened carefully and waited for him to say something that could tie all of these disparate works together—which of course he never did.

On my second day in the studio, Neo continued to paint and listen to music while I poured over the drawings that I had found the day before. We broke for lunch, a simple soup made by Rosa and the studio manager, and talked a bit about the upcoming American elections, the generally scary state of the world, his recent near-death experience when he was stung by hundreds of wasps as he accidentally mowed over their nest, buying castles in Germany, and collecting cars—Neo likes racing Porsches.

During lunch I asked him what “from the floor” would translate to in German. He said, “aus dem Boden,” and then explained that this phrase could be interpreted in several ways—from the soil or from under the attic (*Dachboden*). I told him I was thinking of calling the show “*Aus dem Boden / From the Floor*” and we agreed that since most of the drawings that I was looking at came from the floor of his studio—and given the ambiguity of the term in German—that this would be a good title for the exhibition.

On my third and last day in Germany, I drove to Aschersleben, a bucolic countryside town about two hours from Leipzig, where Neo grew up with his grandparents after his parents died in a train crash in 1961. In 2012, Neo opened a private foundation and museum there that houses a large collection of his drawings, prints, and large acrylics on paper. I spent the day looking at an exhibition that Neo had curated of Karl Blossfeldt’s photos of plants, leaves, and other natural phenomena juxtaposed with some of Neo’s recent drawings and prints that had details inspired by Blossfeldt’s images. The director of the museum, who kindly toured me through the exhibition, told me that many of the archetypal forms, houses, and landscapes in Neo’s work could be found in the general vicinity. After my visit, I decided to walk around the town—not so much to engage in the semiotics of his images but more to take in the general atmosphere of this important psychic geographical place for Neo.

When I got back to New York, I was very excited about my trip and what I had discovered in Neo’s studio and at his museum. I decided that I would share my research and images with some colleagues to see if anyone wanted to co-curate the show with me. I was lucky that Jeff Fleming, the Director of the Des Moines Art Center, who often has been in the vanguard of organizing the first exhibitions of painters in the United States, immediately responded and said he was interested. We made a plan to visit Neo again in Leipzig in the Fall of 2016 to continue our research and to make final selections of work. In October 2016, Jeff and I spent a day in Neo’s studio looking over the hundreds of drawings that I had carefully put back into the drawers in piles and proceeded to winnow down our selection to the 170 or so works that are now in the show. Over lunch, we both asked Neo many questions about his work, drawings, and life. Neo is more comfortable and content being an image maker rather than a talker or explainer of his work, so he generally deflected our questions with non-specific answers. One thing he was very clear about with Jeff was that he does not at all consider himself a “Socialist Realist” painter.

Since the second trip to Leipzig, I have been studying Neo’s drawings in an effort to find some kind of organizing principle and thus a way to install the show. In the end, my subjective approach to unlocking this puzzle has been to break the drawings up into six different thematically and stylistically related groupings. For me, and hopefully for the viewer, this tactic will give a clearer sense of the different modalities that Rauch uses when he draws.

The first group is a set of twelve small, cartoon-like drawings from 1995 [PLS. 1–12]. They represent an early concretization of Neo’s “absurdist” pictorial strategies by juxtaposing architecture with trees and topiary, trucks, flying machines, gas pumps, missiles, random text fragments, speech bubbles, and people doing meaningless work or labor.

The second group are drawings that primarily deal with architecture, landscapes, and man-made objects [PLS. 14–36]. Fragments of Bauhaus-like buildings float among German countryside homes, radio towers, parking structures, trees, electrical wires, and

bomber jets while futuristic cars interact with each other with and without figures. *Bombe* (1996) is a good example of these types of works in which Neo depicts an assemblage of unrelated images and then stitches them back together without regard to logic, like an ill-assembled jigsaw puzzle. They also act as a sort of index of backgrounds that could emerge later in his paintings.

The “character studies” are sketchy, quick jottings that are all about placing figures into situations and landscapes [PLS. 38–72]. Works like *Tantentäuscher* (2006), with a man sucking on a floating udder, and *Fischer and Brille* (both 2009), with men wearing strange headgear, tend to be deeply psychological and generally unflattering to their subjects. They are like tests to see if these people can stand up to these visual “humiliations” to join the pantheon of characters in his pictures.

The “scenarios” are for me the most interesting and least known drawings [PLS. 75–124]. These are generally done on large sheets of paper and are reminiscent of Da Vinci’s “deluge” drawings. They combine many different styles and modes of thinking. In particular, the series of compositional thumbnail sketches are intriguing. Neo claims that he always starts his paintings from the lower right-hand corner without any preconceived compositional strategies. However, he does from time to time need to determine where to place a house, a tree, or a mountain, and these sketches act as a kind of low-stakes drawing board that allow him to visualize possible compositional solutions while he sits in front of a painting in the studio.

The “finished drawings” occupy a different stratum of importance in Neo’s oeuvre on paper [PLS. 126–131, 133–152, 154–179]. As I mentioned before, Neo does from time to time, exhibit and sell drawings, mostly in Europe. The smaller drawings are made using specially commissioned archival felt tip pens from Faber-Castell so they will last. These works tend to resolve all of the aspects of his more experimental and free drawings that make up the other four previous groupings. There are also more direct references in these works to passages in his paintings and prints—so they are more closely tied to his concept of “picture making” than his other drawings.

The last group includes large works on paper, which are, for all intents and purposes, equal to his paintings [PLS. 13, 37, 73–74, 125, 132, 153]. These works are created vertically with the paper stapled or taped to the wall of his studio. They follow the same rules as his paintings, having been started at the bottom right-hand corner and moving toward the top left-hand corner without any under-drawing or preplanning. For the exhibition, I have decided to intersperse them chronologically between the other groupings to give a clear sense of changes in his aesthetics, color palette, and compositional ideas over the last twenty years.

My hope is that this exhibition will establish that drawing for Neo is first and foremost a personal practice. Second, it is important to recognize that although drawing is a medium about which Neo is conflicted in terms of its art historical and practical value, the medium is actually an important and foundational way for him to capture and memorialize his dreams, visions, and real-life experiences. Since his paintings are improvisational at their core, the drawings become places where things come into existence for the first time so that they can all be put back into the blender of his mind for later use.

Neo Rauch: The Mystery of Mr. Mistake Man

Jeff Fleming

I have huge respect for drawing. Far more than for painting—when you can cover things up any time. And drawing as the hour of truth, the most overt baring of artistic ability, is something that always fills laymen with respect—and all too often is the downfall of supposed experts.¹ — NEO RAUCH

A nebulous figure often populates Neo Rauch's drawings. This character inhabits artificial and melancholy dreamscapes where things appear to be in limbo or illogical actions are in play. The artist calls him "Mr. Mistake Man," and he functions in many different guises as Rauch's stand-in. Believing all men make mistakes, including him, Rauch provides the figures in his works with distinct uniforms, appearances, or situations to differentiate them from women. Not inconsequentially, Mr. Mistake Man sounds like the title of a pulp fiction magazine or novel, and similar to the stylized covers of such publications, Rauch's imagery points to mysteries and lost narratives that lure the reader inside for a deeper read or,

¹ "Interview with Wolfgang Büscher," in Wolfgang Büscher, *Neo Rauch: Schilfland / Works on Paper* (Munich/Berlin/London/New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 95.

perhaps, for answers. But in Rauch's drawings, like in all good mystery stories, the answers don't give themselves up easily, if at all.

As with many artists, it is difficult to separate Rauch's personal history from his creative output. Rauch was born and still lives in Leipzig, a city in the former German Democratic Republic (or G.D.R.). Rauch studied art at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig and later taught there. Early in his career he participated in the visual conventions that then dominated Soviet and East German art. Now, he is often referred to as the principal artist of the New Leipzig School—an approach that focuses on figuration and the technical skills of the traditional art academy. Although Rauch "came of age in the G.D.R., ...he was young enough to absorb the imagery of comic books, television, and computer graphics that shaped the stylistic tastes of his generation. He was a bridge between the older political painters of the G.D.R. and the young artists of a unified Germany."²

Rauch has stated that all of his imagery is autobiographical and comes directly from his dreams or from his unconscious, but he is tight-lipped about the meaning of his narratives. His 2007 painting *Vater* [FIG. 1], for example, comes from his *Para* exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and effectively illustrates this phenomenon. The meaning of the image is not obvious—it could connote almost anything to anyone—but it exemplifies the stream-of-consciousness working process that we see often in Rauch's drawings. He does not know what will develop in a drawing until he attacks the blank page. While Rauch claims to find this method of working very liberating and satisfying, it presents the viewer with a challenge of comprehension.

Some of Rauch's drawings are highly finished and others are simple sketches, but each records an unconscious thought. Many are in mixed media, while others use paint, felt tip pen, or marker singularly. A few even include shoe prints, the result of scattering the drawings on the studio floor and stepping on them. Several include notes from meetings with friends, collectors, or curators scribbled in the margins, complete



FIG. 1
Neo Rauch, *Vater*, 2007

² Arthur Lubow, "The New Leipzig School," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2006.

with phone numbers and/or email addresses. Most of these works are very small—easy to hold in the hand, for Rauch to produce, and for the viewer to enjoy. Rauch relishes this intimacy and spontaneity, which he believes prevent formal issues of composition from taking over his process. Drawings can pour out uncontrolled, as opposed to his larger canvases where more measured thought is required to complete them. He is adamant that the drawings are not preparatory studies for larger paintings, like *Vater*, yet he freely admits that they are part of his unprogrammed working process: “Maybe this incidental material helps open up the large pictures and makes them receptive to inclusions of a quite unexpected kind.”³ The drawings in various states of finish, in turn, open up his creative method for the viewer.

Rauch’s works are always figurative or, at least, present spaces where people typically interact, such as building interiors or streetscapes. However, the players depicted never seem to be on solid enough ground to enact their narratives with sure footing. Figures move into and out of the painterly space from multiple points of view and with little regard for spatial reality. In *Die Wegzehr* (2015) some inhabitants of Rauch’s worlds loom over smaller figures and objects [PL. 125]. Odd, disorienting colors and color combinations are frequent, as are alpine cottages, factories, and mountain views. Physical labor is often in progress. Women are rare. Pressures seem to stem from an external source; they are not usually visually articulated. The struggles in Rauch’s nebulous spaces between characters or against environmental forces suggest unresolved tensions between reality and the world of imaginings. In this regard, the drawings may be seen as fragments of a larger body of thought—a string of associations in the artist’s mind, like the individual beads that make up a necklace.

A small, curious drawing titled *Falle* (1995) exemplifies many of these recurrent tropes and also hints more directly than others at a readable narrative [PL. 13]. Written in red at the top of the drawing, the word “*Falle*” refers to a puzzling predicament. A damaged tree stands over a square hole in the ground from which pink boards protrude as if they had collapsed under the weight of a worker or

a passerby. Wires or ropes dangle from a pole nearby. Multiple scenarios come to mind. Encouraging the narrative is a thought bubble enclosing a man that rises from the pit. He has one hand on his cheek, as if in exasperation, and in his other hand he holds a pencil or a tool of some sort, seemingly to measure or evaluate the disaster below. Or perhaps the bubble indicates that the actual man is trapped in the pit contemplating the miscalculations that led to his fall. Nebulous plot line; hints of drama or disaster; muted, peculiar, or limited colors; a worksite; and the combination of the natural and the man-made—all are recurring elements in Rauch’s work.

Other than figures in exaggerated situations, Rauch seldom presents what could be perceived as humorous or happy moments. We might speculate that a few of the drawings in the current exhibition may be caricatures or social commentaries, if only we could decipher the imagery. In *Mohr* (1998) [PL. 47], for example, a seated figure with a dunce cap is dressed as a clown with a long tail suspending the head of an older man in the air; in *Tantentäuscher* (2006) [PL. 40], a seated man drinks from an enormous brown udder. But Rauch has his own concept of caricature: “It would perhaps be more accurate to talk of a comic-like element rather than caricature. ...A passing nod at the rich seam of comic culture that has always accompanied my work and from which I occasionally pluck things.”⁴ His nod to comics and graphic novels is readily apparent in the hybrid creatures found in drawings such as *Schnäbler* (1998) [PL. 38]. The bird/lion/elephant beast seen here recalls the bizarre forms in Max Ernst’s extraordinary Surrealist masterpiece: the notebooks collectively known as *Une Semaine de Bonté ou les sept éléments capitaux* (1933–34), for which Ernst cut apart and reassembled nineteenth-century wood engravings found in magazines and books and through a photo-relief process reprinted them into nightmarish figures and dreamscapes [FIG. 2].

This comic vein exists in many forms of popular culture, including comic books, advertising, and television, but its best parallel here is with pulp fiction illustration. The term “pulp fiction” derives from the cheap paper on which these books and magazines were printed. They were an extremely popular (and affordable) form of entertainment in

³ “Interview with Wolfgang Büscher,” 96.

⁴ Schilfland, 99.



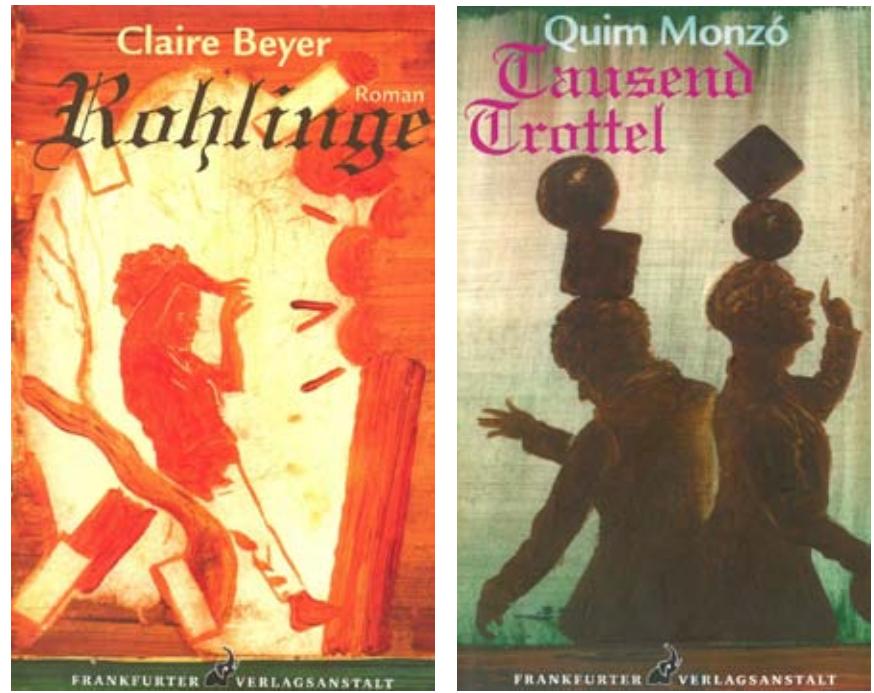
FIG. 2

Max Ernst, *La clé des chants*, 8 (The Key of Songs, 8), from the unbound printer's proof of *Une Semaine de Bonté, Cinquième Cahier* (A Week of Kindness, Fifth Volume) (recto, left), 1933–34



FIG. 3

Rudy Nappi, Illustration for cover of *Four Year Hitch*, 1961



FIGS. 4, 5
Covers of *Tausend Trottel* by Quim Monzó (left) and *Rohlinge* by Claire Beyer (right)
with illustrations by Neo Rauch

the United States and internationally from the late nineteenth century through the 1950s. Well-known authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Mark Twain, H.G. Wells, and Tennessee Williams got their start writing dime novels and pulp fiction. These publications had cover illustrations by artists such as Paul Laune and Rudy Nappi [FIG. 3], and titles like *The Shadow Man*, *The Swinging Corpse*, and *Cargo of Doom*. The mystery series featuring the Hardy Boys, such as *The Disappearing Floor* and *While the Clock Ticked*, is equally obscure. Rauch's imagery and titles suggest a similar sense of mystery. Interestingly, during his decades-long career, Rauch has also created book covers that exploit the abstruseness of his drawings: *Rohlinge* by Claire Beyer, and *Tausend Trottel* by Quim Monzó, to name but two [FIGS. 4–5].

Rauch's ambiguous visual style shares attributes with the illustrations of pulp fiction publications through their similar focus on figuration and narrative and through their capacity to appeal to the masses. Anything can happen on their stranger-than-reality stages. *Der Sohn* (1995) serves as a prime example [PL. 5]. A young man wearing a suit carries a bag that casts a shadow on the sidewalk. He looks back, perhaps longingly, at a fenced enclosure and a structure framed by two trees. Most striking, however, is the unknown, bulbous object hovering overhead. What activity is occurring here? Is the man leaving home to find his own way in life? Is he simply going to work? Is he a thief or the prodigal son? And what does that flying object represent? The viewer can only imagine.

When Rauch depicts Mr. Mistake Man, in all his many forms, he is portraying himself. This shadowy figure's adventures all come from Rauch's visions or from what he refers to as his "half-waking moments."⁵ His personal aspirations, undertakings, misfortunes, and successes are the subjects of the drawings. We, the spectators, are simply permitted to step inside his idiosyncratic world for a closer view. These intimate images provide limited glimpses into the mind of an artist who does not often allow such access. They are the "hour of truth," giving us an encounter with Rauch's working processes that his more polished works often deny. And that is their strength.

⁵ Conversation between author and Neo Rauch, November 7, 2016.

The sun lights up countless white balls of ice bouncing all around. A person runs by us, through the green grass where the ice piles up in constellations resembling spring flowers. It is also raining hard, yet the sun shines on the raindrops. Over a sign that says “*toom*” ... a vivid rainbow appears in the east ... East Germany.

Neo Rauch Interview *by* Ena Swansea

LEIPZIG: APRIL AND JUNE 2018

Neo Rauch tells Rosa Loy that he would like to take us out for dinner. It is a warm sunny day. We dress in evening clothes. As he drives us toward Leipzig, the sun lights up immense dark clouds overhead.

It begins to hail. Beating on the roof of the car, the ice spheres cancel out our conversation. The driver imperceptibly tightens his grip; it is very difficult to see the road.



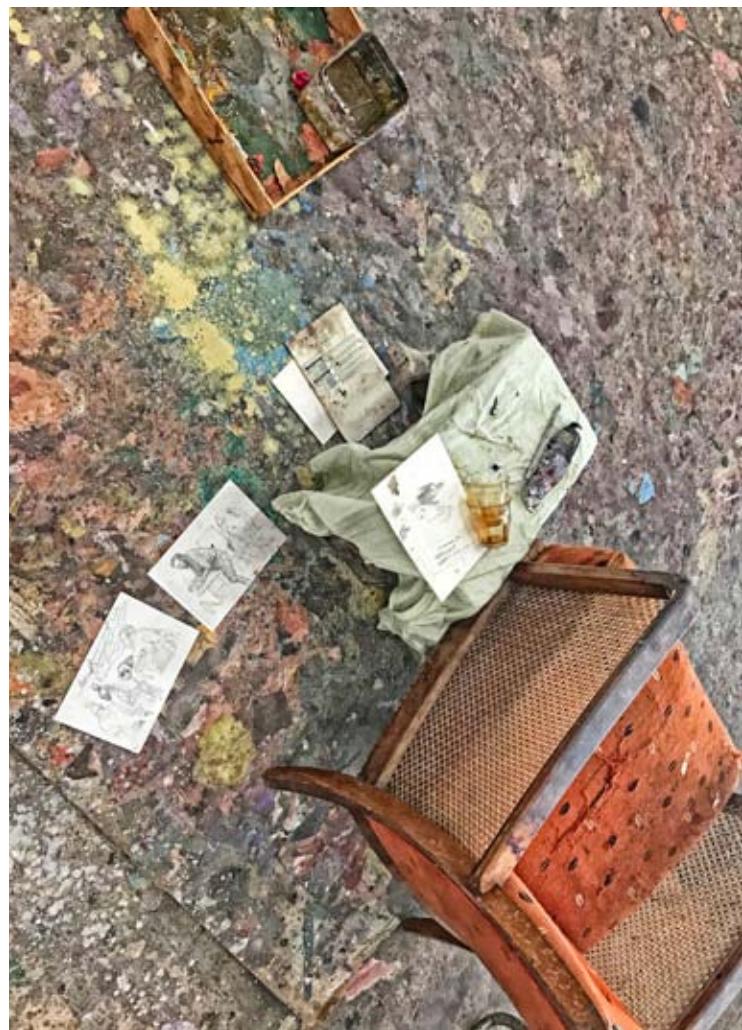
The theatricality of the weather makes the three painters in the car quiet. The rain, the hail, and the rainbow all appear only during the fifteen-minute drive. When we step out of the car, it is no longer raining.

Neo claims he has forgotten something at the studio and needs to stop there. But it is a ruse. He has been working secretly for weeks. When we arrive to pick up this “forgotten” thing, we discover about 100 well-dressed people and a rock band standing there, awaiting the arrival of the birthday girl. It is Rosa’s special birthday. The forgotten thing is actually a surprise party—and a one-night art exhibition curated by Neo. The invited artists have sent works of art that refer to the world Rosa has made in her work.

Rosa’s world exists as a mysterious pendant to another individually created world, that of Neo, the painter, who has always been drawing. He says he opens his hands and images spring out. In the studio he sits in a chair; after a while, drawings are on the floor all around it. Numerous small coffee glasses on the table imply that he

was wide awake when he made these drawings. Neo says he may not remember, but the perfume of old coffee implies otherwise.

Until now Neo's drawings have been little-known and private. They were hiding in plain sight, continually appearing and landing on the studio floor. They seem to marinate there, before going under a passing shoe, into a drawer, or being asked to reappear in a painting. They remind one of acorns; some will remain dormant while others grow, giving off a little charge of potential.



ENA SWANSEA: You are a very contained man. Is there something out of character you secretly want to do? Would you like to be a singer? Lounge, or Opera?

NEO RAUCH: I have to think about that. I think I would have liked to have been a wild guitarist. But I gave up on this dream long ago.

You have chosen Leipzig very strongly for your own private reasons. In recent years you have worked in music on a grand scale (for instance this summer, doing both sets and costumes at Bayreuth with Rosa Loy). Do you also think of the illustrious music history of the city? The time demands of one of the city's most venerable citizens, J. S. Bach, gave his job a special pressure, in which he explored a kind of regenerating and repeating loop. One could say he cannibalized his own work, confident in the structures. The concept seems very contemporary. Do you see fugue, and repetition, in your own work?

Well, I've recently realized that there are recurring motifs in my work. And the self-exploitation of my own repertory—which until recently I took as inexhaustible—apparently began years ago and now takes place with the signs of a conscious approach.

Every day you ride your bicycle for many kilometers to the studio, very fast. Then at the end of the workday you reverse this course, back to your home. What is the relationship of your physical power to your painting?

I complete the drive to the studio not as an artist but as a cyclist, who shifts from his living quarters over to his sphere of fertile activity. It is necessary to enter this place in a state of psychological and physical ventilation. I couldn't imagine an existence in stuffy air. If I had my living and working quarters under one roof, such would be the case. It is a question of physical conditioning, too, in order to expose oneself to big canvases.

You are an excellent cook, and yet you seem rather cool and distant from what you've prepared, as if the food is only a means to stay alive—does that sound right?

How did you come to this observation, dearest Ena? Do I seem so serenely ascetic to you? I'm a hedonist, a sensualist, since the last century ...

Do you think that some of the questions that you have been privately, wordlessly, exploring for all this time have never been pointed out by the many people who have written about your work?

I am mainly concerned with an image's power of seduction which should vault over the beholder, capture him completely ... to debauch him out of the directness of his daily conventions, to derail him right-angled into the sphere of the indescribable. Painting, after all, is the medium responsible for those things for which we lack words or terms. Meaning is the cage within which the tiger stripes pace up and down.

For a viewer seeking subject matter, your work is mesmerizingly unclear. When it first appeared, it was immediately seized upon as an almost magical historical necessity. Were you thinking of the past all that much? Nostalgia, the trancelike response to the tyranny of a faceless controlling state? Did you feel that these interpretations, responding to the G.D.R. and "the workers," were corny? What misinterpretations bothered you?

My process is far less a reflection than it is drawing from the sediments of my past, which occurs in an almost trance-like state. It is no reflection—there's no sparkling blade of an analytic scalpel driving into the mass of memories. It's more a semiconscious gathering of particles that gets stirred up and washed ashore by the anchor that is pulled by my barge. And there is also no selection according to hierarchical criteria, during the sighting of catch and release—to stick with this maritime picture. The selection exclusively follows aspects of formal aesthetic usability. Perhaps there is a lot of G.D.R. within my work as seen through the eyes of some beholders, which results from the process you described. However it is anything but a deliberate analytic procedure.

In your creative firmament there is an undergrowth of humor inside these figures who seem very purposeful, but often they seem to have no

fear, nor any mood nor attitude about the endless tasks you have assigned them. Perhaps they are only projecting placidity when faced with something unspeakable?

Well, I'm trying to induce a moment of inner premeditation to my creatures, which can lead to an action at any time. But it is only the seed of an action, or of an excess, that can be drawn from them. They can be experienced as being in a state of somnambulistic intuition. And it is up to the spectator to mentally continue, to execute the situation that I am offering.

How do you create a person in a painting?

You and I have talked before about the creation of physiognomy. Only when I reach the feeling that I could coexist together with the creature, in the best unanimity, while having different and critical distances but eventually still affirmative, can I then stop working on it. But only as long as I haven't got the feeling, "No, if he came into the room right now, I wouldn't approve of it." It is still about implying the possibility that by means of a one-time coin injection—in the form of attention and sensual sagacity by the viewer—a *perpetuum mobile* could be triggered.

Might there be a combination of sources helping to nourish your image-power? If so, would it be related to the duplicitous atmosphere of Eastern Germany when you were young, where social behavior could not always be straightforward? And that, perhaps, combined with the love, care, hidden fear, and hope of your mother's parents as they raised you?

These are questions that would touch on the content, which in turn touch on motivation. I believe that if I started to think about that, I would rain on my own parade. If I knew where it came from, if I pointed the focal ray of my interest on the source-area of my inspiration, I would drain it. I'm only in conversation with myself, with my subconscious.

The almost biblical and strange nature of your appearance in the world and your babyhood is something difficult we have never discussed. Do

you feel that there is something that you recollect, something that brings you some extra force that you wouldn't have if your infancy were a prosaic, simple one?

I guess it's not force, but rather a fear that I felt from my first moment of living, because I think the terrible accident that happened to my parents throws a kind of shadow over my whole childhood and it's even the case today. I'm not able to come out from under this shadow. That's why I describe myself usually as having a conservative nature because I grew up in the house of my grandparents on my mother's side. Of course, they were also very traumatized by this accident. There was an atmosphere of carefulness and fear in this house always ... So, "Take care. Be careful and don't do this because ... Don't drive too fast with your bicycle." That's why I'm a conservative person by nature because for me, it's also always very important to avoid a new situation until it's not dangerous anymore.

You go very deeply into your invented motifs, as if they ask you to return again and again. Yet you seem to be able to begin again as if you have never seen that particular subject before, which is also what Édouard Manet said about his own experience. In your work there is a continual feeling of germination and growth. Does this freedom one sees so often in your paintings come from the trust you built in yourself through so much drawing?

First of all, I am surprised and delighted to learn that you detect burgeoning new ideas in my work. One engine for my development as a painter is self-disgust. It besets me when I take from the stock that has been consulted one too many times already. Drawing, on the other hand, can serve as input of new formulations, but my graphic work is perhaps comparable to a meandering network of subsidiaries. I have to dissociate from the process of thinking. It's simply a process that runs on a pure level of sentience. And if a painting appears as too mono-dimensionally composed, then a fractioning has to take place. In this respect I see myself clearly as a child of modernity—regardless whether I like it or not. I believe that the fundamental tenet of modernity is doubt. I inevitably follow this principle, especially when an image's information solidifies too

much, and looks too certain. Then follow insertions and fractures, which can undermine or redirect the reading—like the concept of a thrust reversal.

Any art-historical precedents for this kind of process seem well behaved in comparison to the way you power through these reversals and big shifts without losing your balance. The sensitive viewer can tell that things have been moved around many times in your image before resting there.

Yeah. It doesn't take a lot of energy to destroy this balance. And otherwise, it would be boring. A stable balance is boring.

Like a de Chirico, low-energy, static quality. You never have that.

De Chirico, yes. That's a nice example. His late work.

Are there other artists you particularly admire, in a way that you feel they may help you

[Pieter] Bruegel was a phenomenal painter, of course, who kaleidoscopically remounts the constitution of western cultural certainties in the most insane ways. And in that respect he can be considered a harbinger of surrealistic access to the material of reality and dream. In that respect I feel close to him, yet of course he is unreachable. Beyond Bruegel there are my other great predecessors: Beckmann, Bacon, Tintoretto, and Velázquez. Not to forget Balthus. And Dalí must be mentioned as well.

People have often referred to your work as Surrealism. Do you agree with this? I have the sense that you don't like this description.

I am trying to avoid being in this stack, you know? But on the other hand, I cannot offer another motto or another name for what I am doing. Should I call it realism? That would be wrong. I could name it Neo-Realism. That would be a funny solution but also wrong. It's got nothing to do with realism. It's searching my inner universe, my private universe and independent of what surrounds my studio. I'm trying to keep it romantic. But the walls of my studio are not totally

romantic. They are transparent sometimes, or they have very tiny holes. The noise of the outside world comes in and the images also, but in a transformed way.

Is a structured and responsible life valuable for you, such that in the studio you can take the risks that pop into your mind?

Yes. The studio is the only venue for my “pan-demonic” excesses. And I’m dependent on this place in order to create something out of the deliveries that reach me from the unknown. The conceptual artist can comply with her or his obligations on transatlantic flights as well. They have untied from the inspirational sphere, they are cerebrally oriented and can reflect upon current affairs. It is true that I need my rituals, that I need my corset to pool my affairs and my potentials and to be able to somewhat make a stand against the tumultuous inflow of inspirational boosts. I am not in danger of becoming a conceptually acting human. Rational and determined conduct in the area of art is suspicious to me, and impossible for me.

You work a lot; how do you take a rest?

How do you release the mental room from states of stress? The weekends and the route from the studio to home seem to be an effective tool. And being an independent individual when physically decoupling from the creative sphere. That means that I notice on my way home how the plug-contacts jump out of their sockets, which connected me to my work at the studio. And I realize that my focus is completely fixed on the domestic sphere, on the garden, and on the bookshelves.

The relationship of your drawings and paintings seems fluid. Are your drawings sometimes like tiny vacations, or maybe “staycations?” Do they rest and nurture you, and in turn you occasionally allow one of them to blossom further, onto a canvas?

Well, it depends. When I decide to make a drawing that must satisfy the same requirements as an artifact, then the procedure is

as demanding as approaching a canvas. The many drawings which I create unintentionally, without thinking about their continued existence in a *passe-partout* or behind glass, these are rather relaxing exercises.

When you start a drawing, is the feeling different than when you start a painting?

Yeah, totally different. It depends on what kind of drawing I’m starting to do. Mostly, I’m not interested in making a piece of art when I’m starting to make a drawing. It’s just a kind of … making the fingers …

A drawing is like a thought without words?

Yeah. And without meaning, of course. It’s so random. I just start and I have no direction, no inner necessity, no inner picture that I want to create. Just following the lines as they flow out of my pencil or pen.

When do you feel the freest in the studio? Is it when you are drawing?

Actually, not. No. I feel most free when I’m starting a big canvas and every option is open. This is totally freedom but, on the other hand, it’s also connected with lots of risks and fear. It can go wrong. This is my first thought when I’m starting. It could go wrong, but not this time, perhaps. Probably, I will be able to jump with this painting through the wall. You know? This wall is a very disturbing element in my life, in my studio between me and the painting.

Many painters think of this process as a performance. Do you think in this way?

No. That would mean I could have audience also in this moment. A performer without audience is just a lonely guy in his studio. That’s what I am.

You embraced a certain way of living as an artist. Maybe this is what enabled you to be so original in the studio, that you came to understand the nature of risk in a very different manner than someone who grew up driving cars very fast ...

That's what I'm doing.

You're doing it in the studio?

Yeah. Or, I'm driving fast but also that's a thing I can handle but ...

You had to reform your sense of risk and your sense of the shadow in order to drive an actual Porsche very fast.

Yeah. I have to work on it. It's an effort. It's my task, so I have to risk a risky life.



PL. 1
Planer, 1995

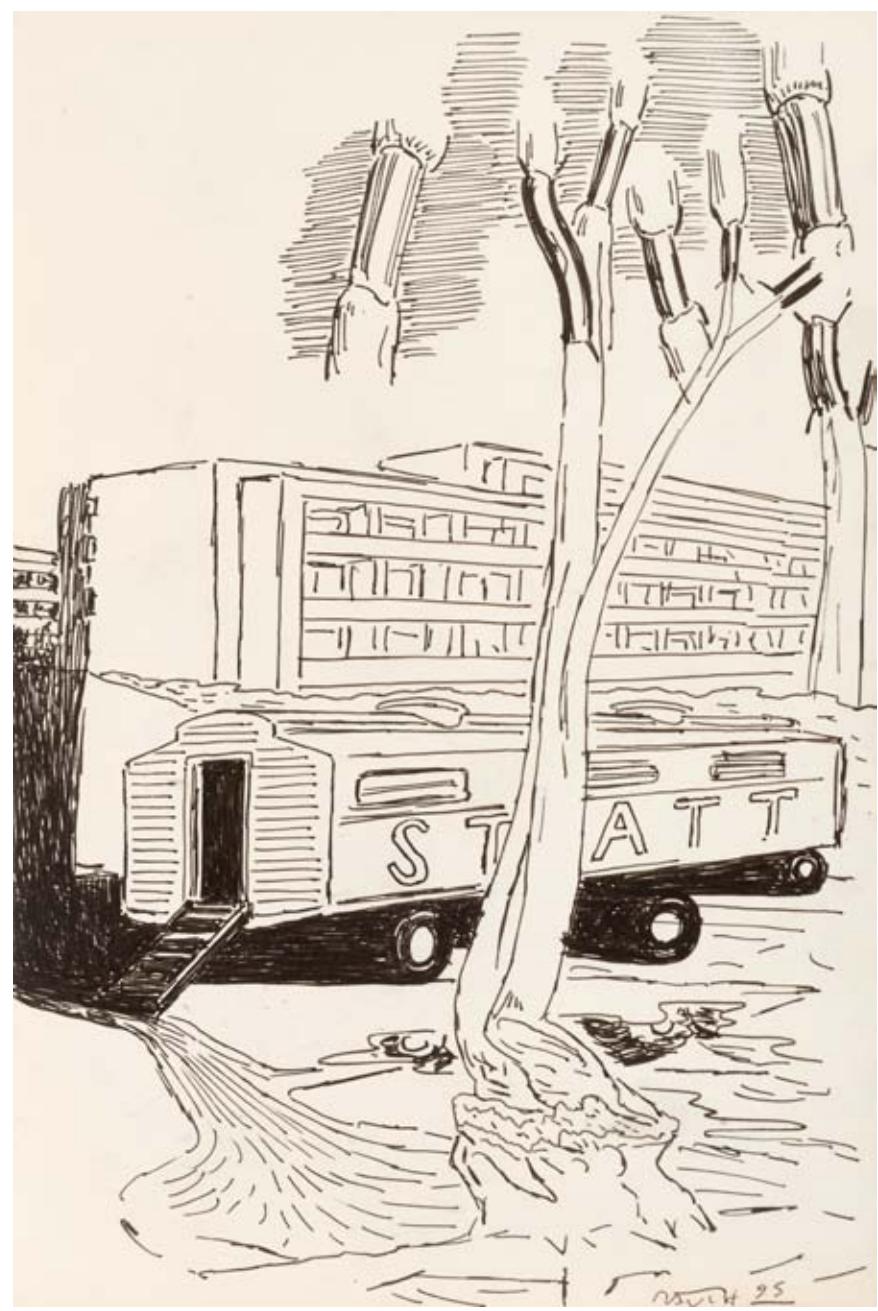
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Geologe, 1995



PL. 3
Zapfsäule, 1995



PL. 4
Aufsteiger, 1995



PL. 5
Der Sohn, 1995

PL. 6
Statt, 1995



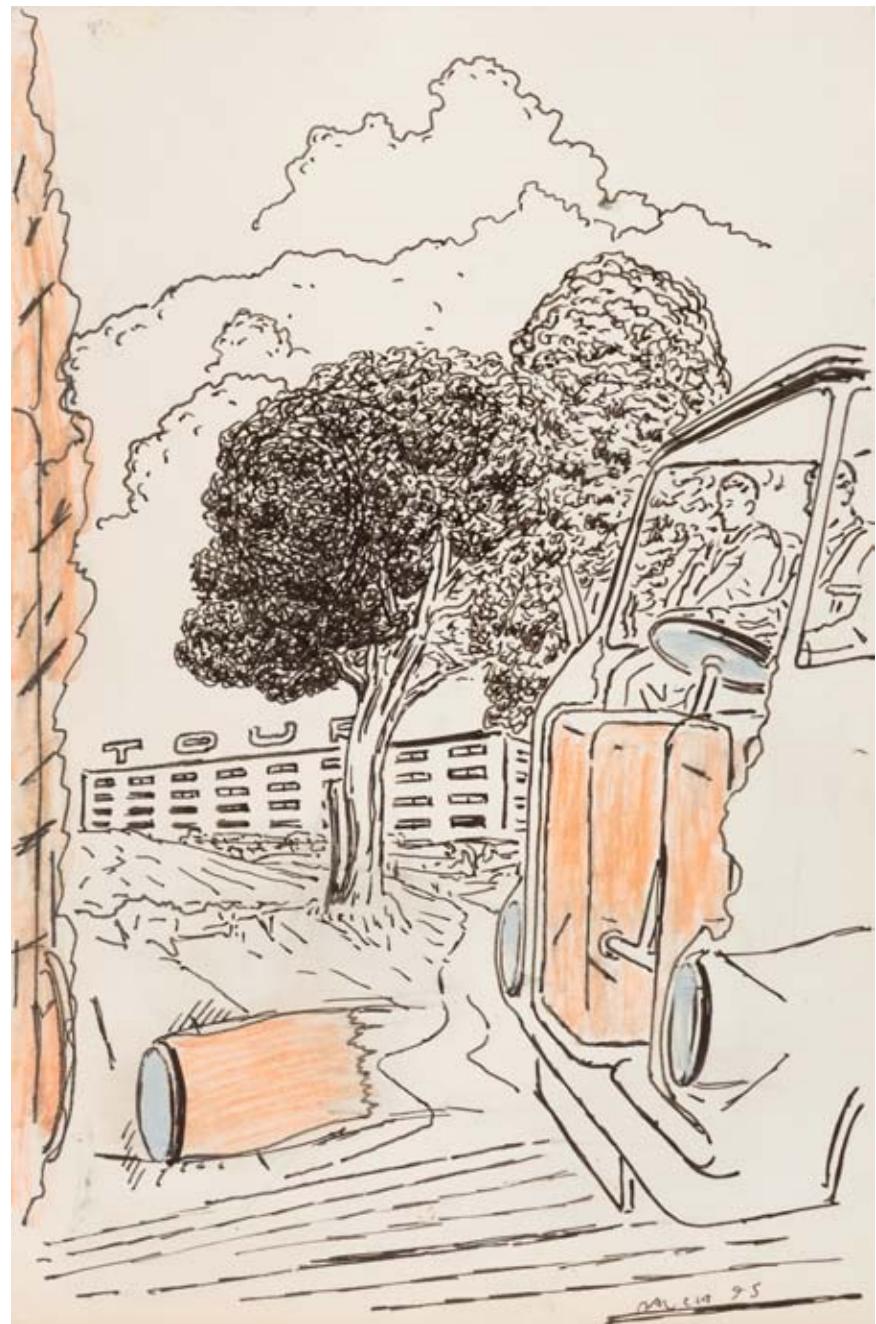
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PL. 9
Falle, 1995

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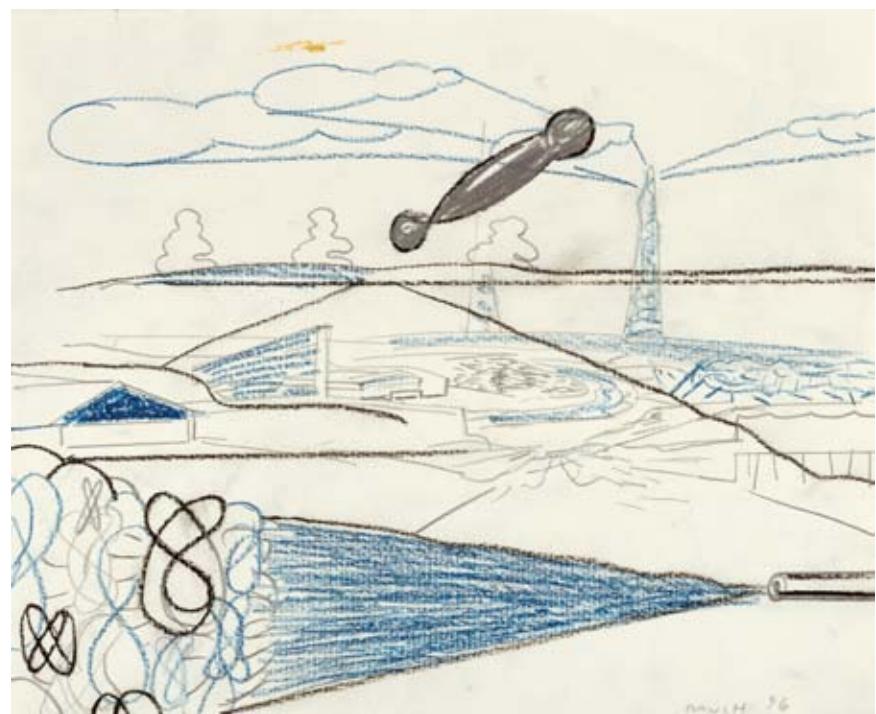


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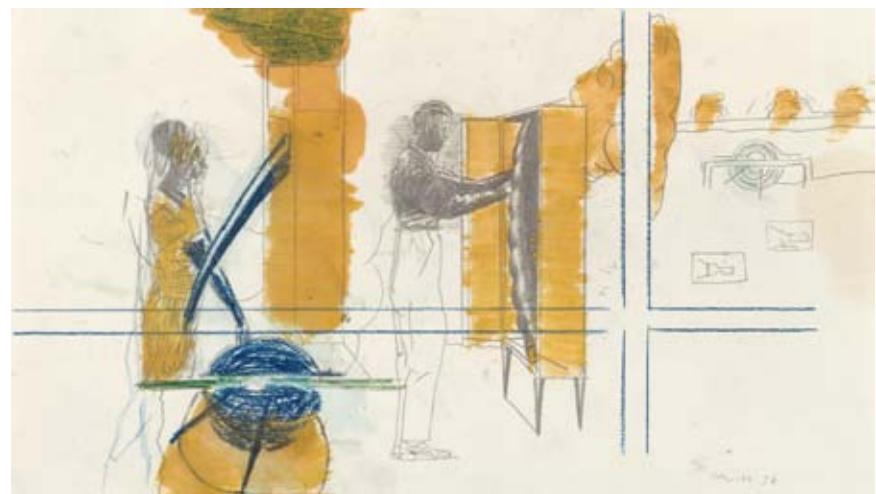
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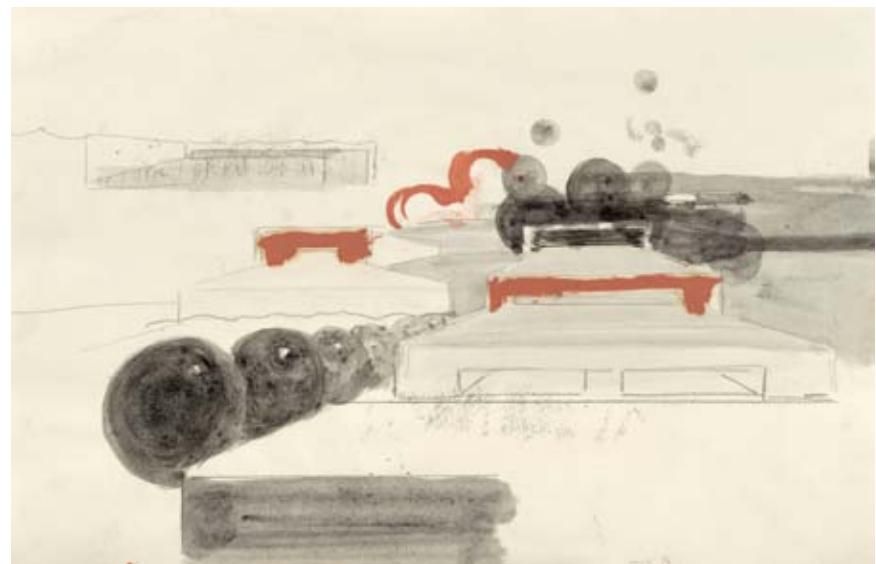
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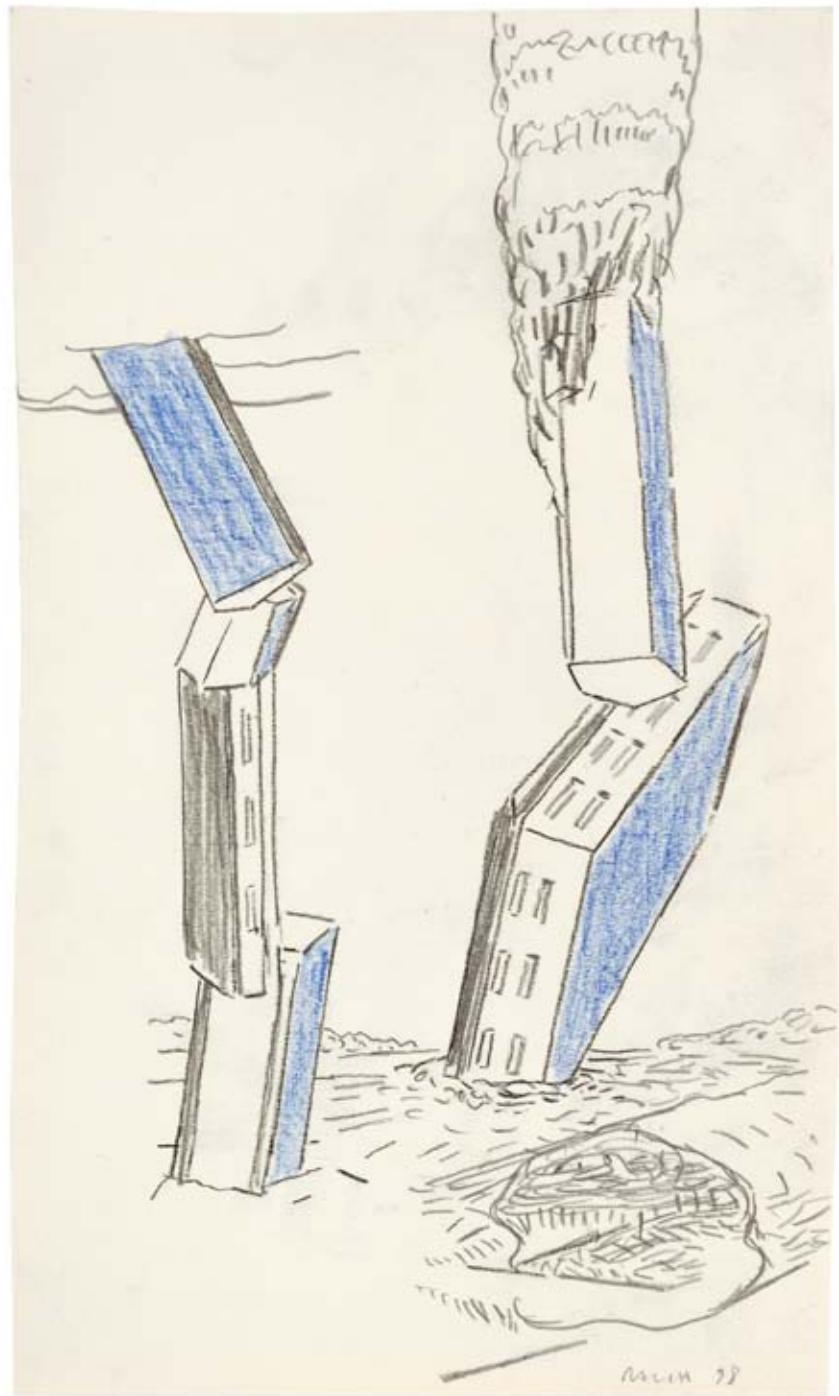
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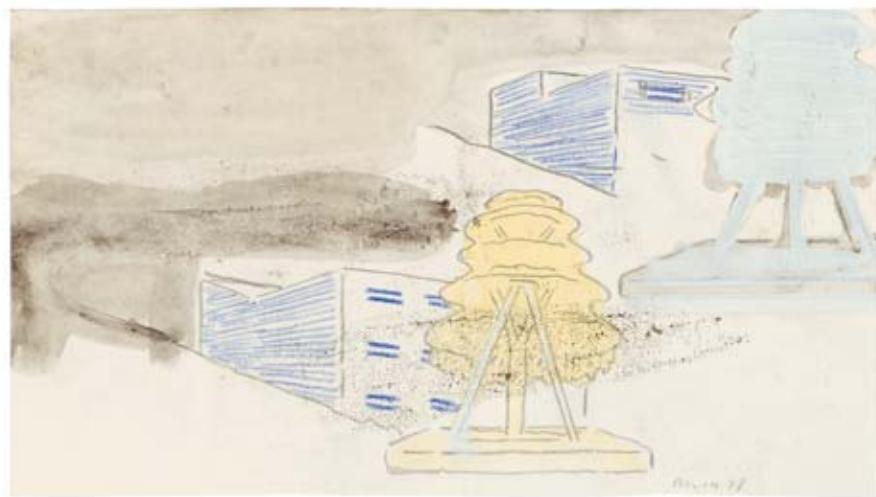
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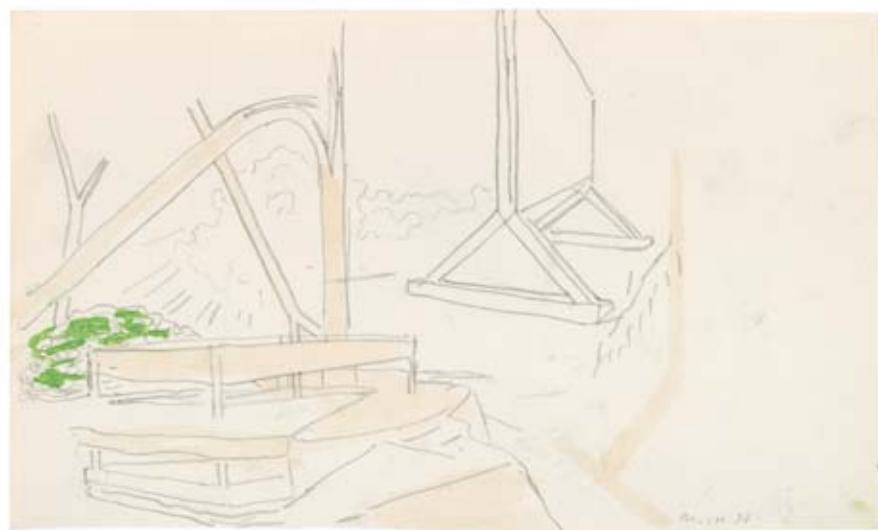
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PL. 26
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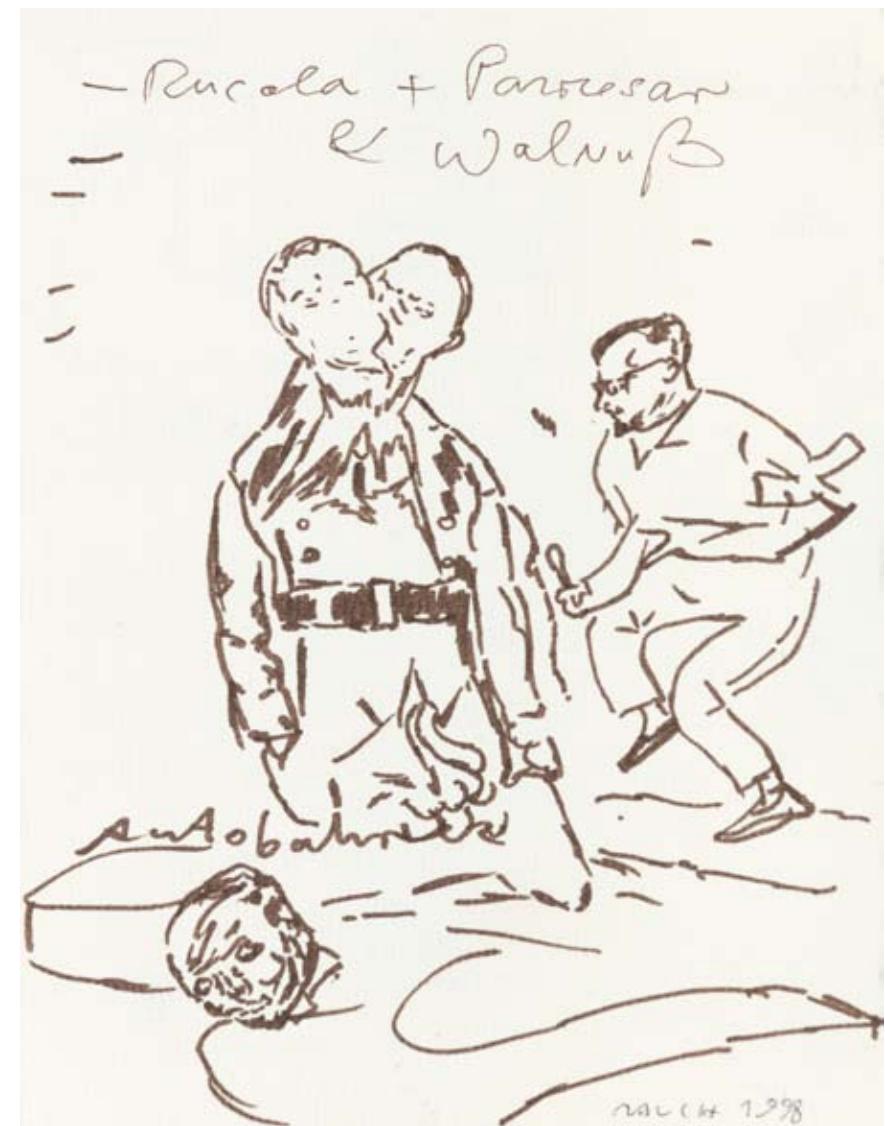
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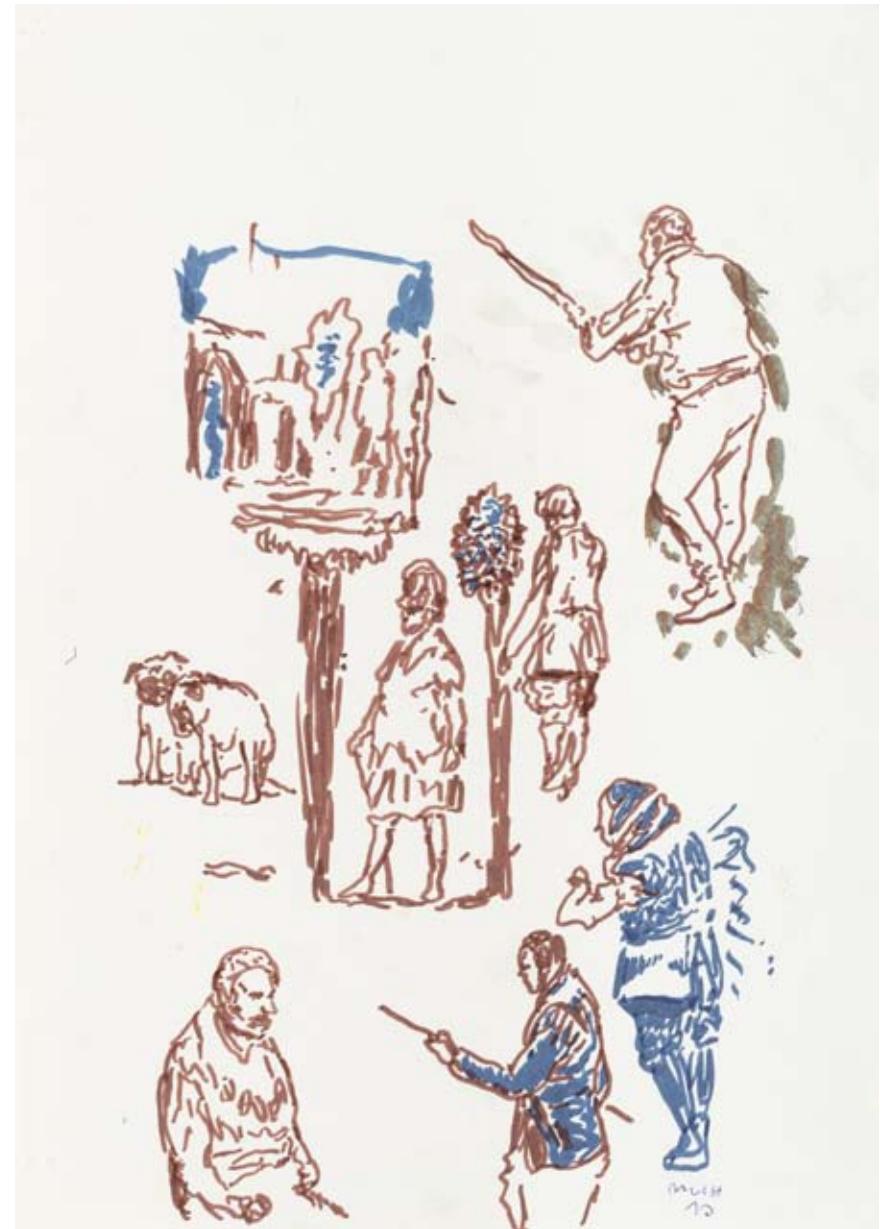
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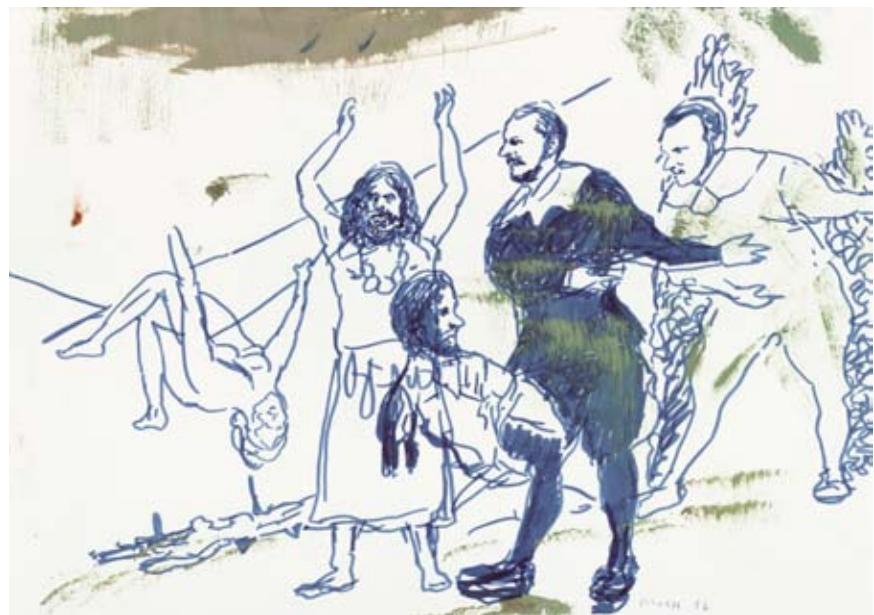
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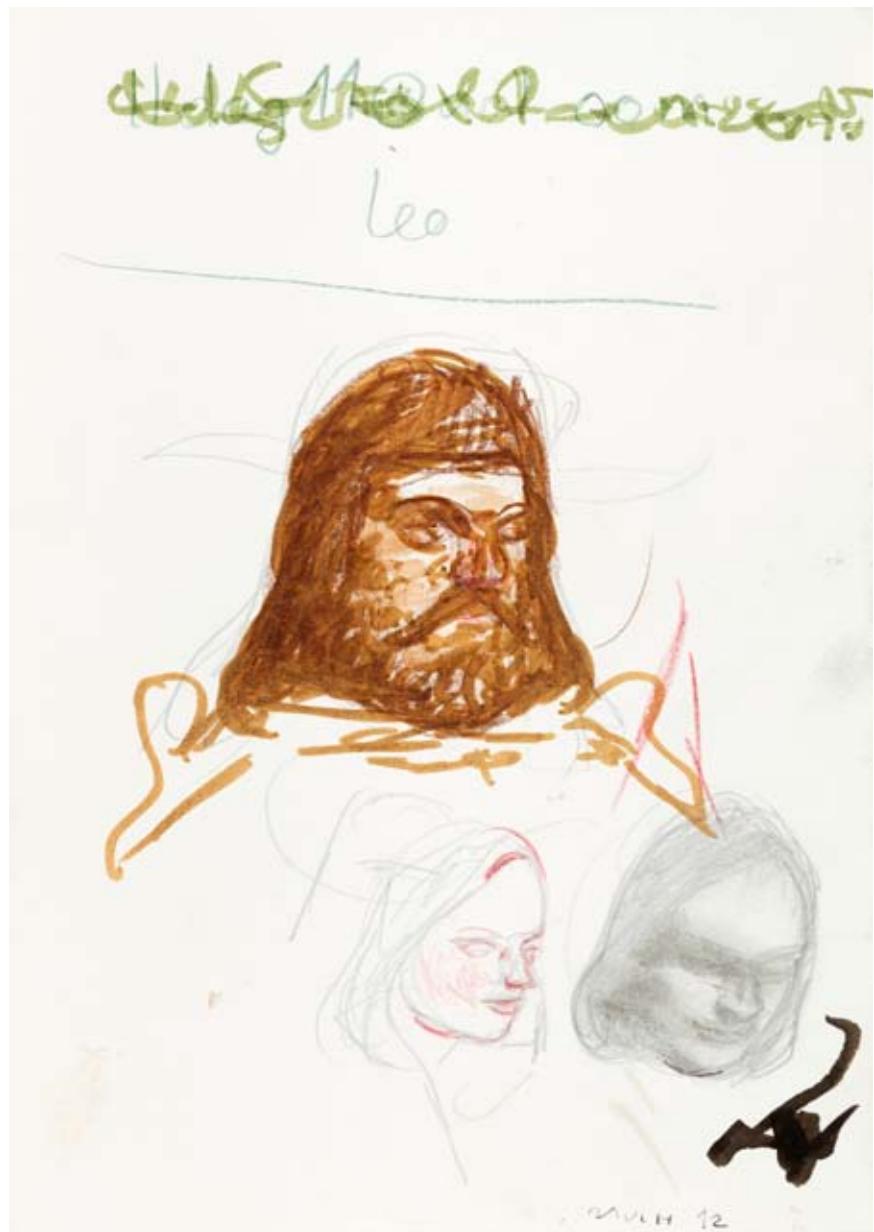
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PL. 63
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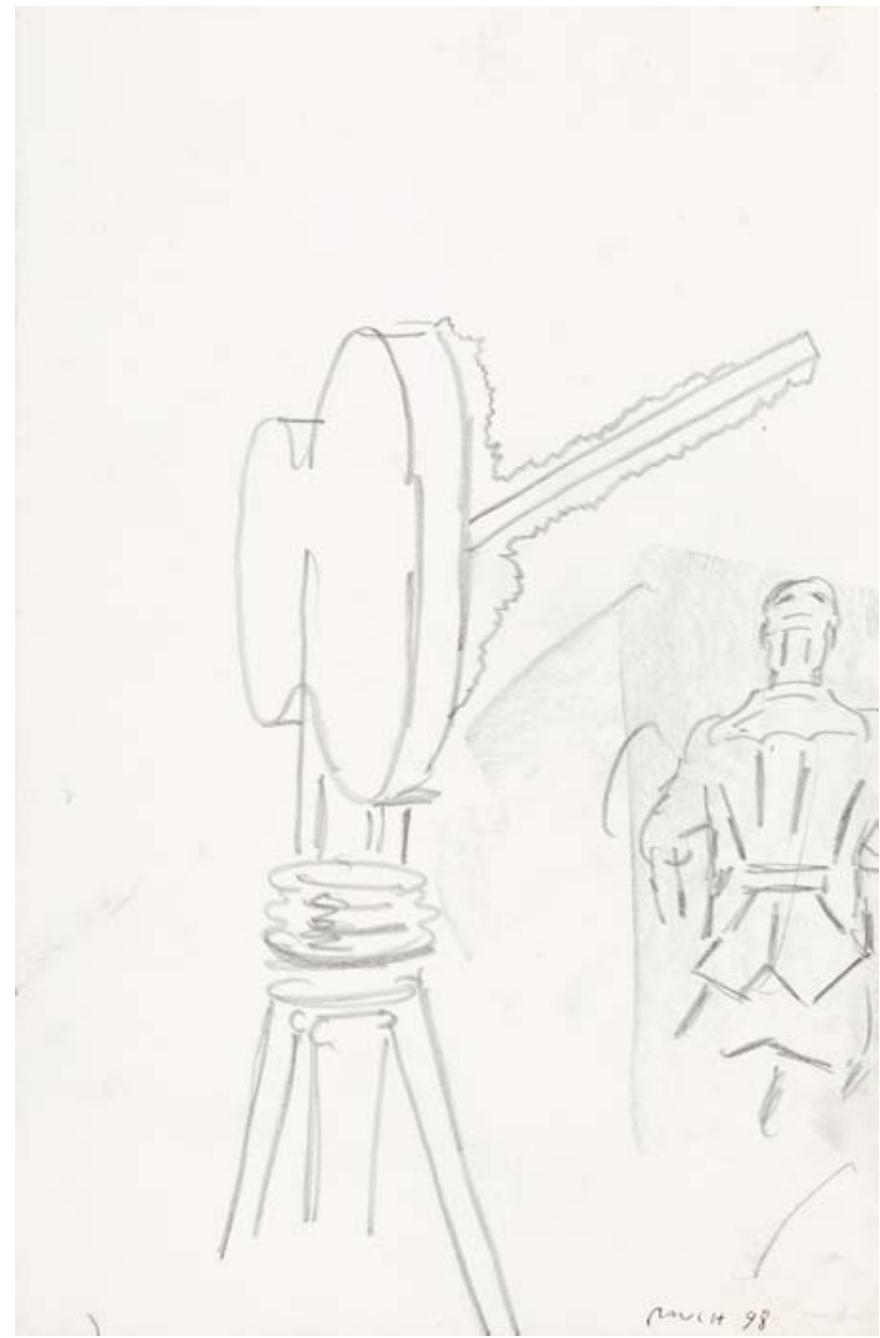
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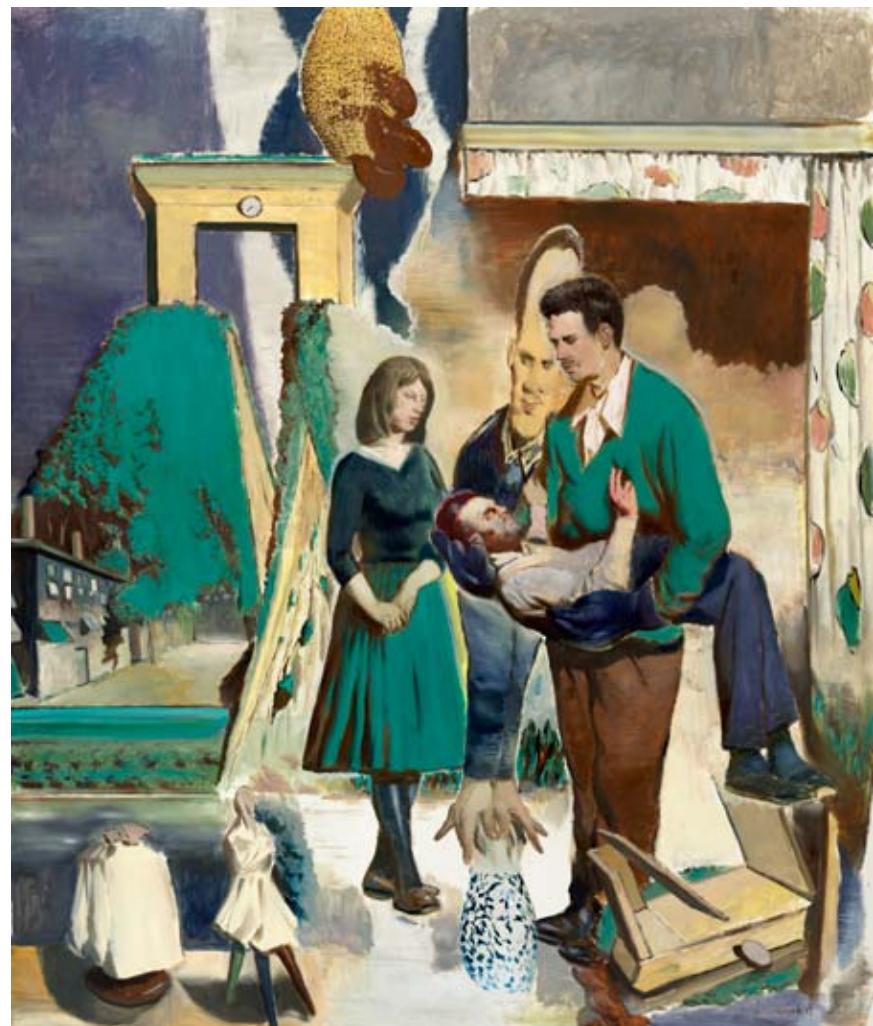
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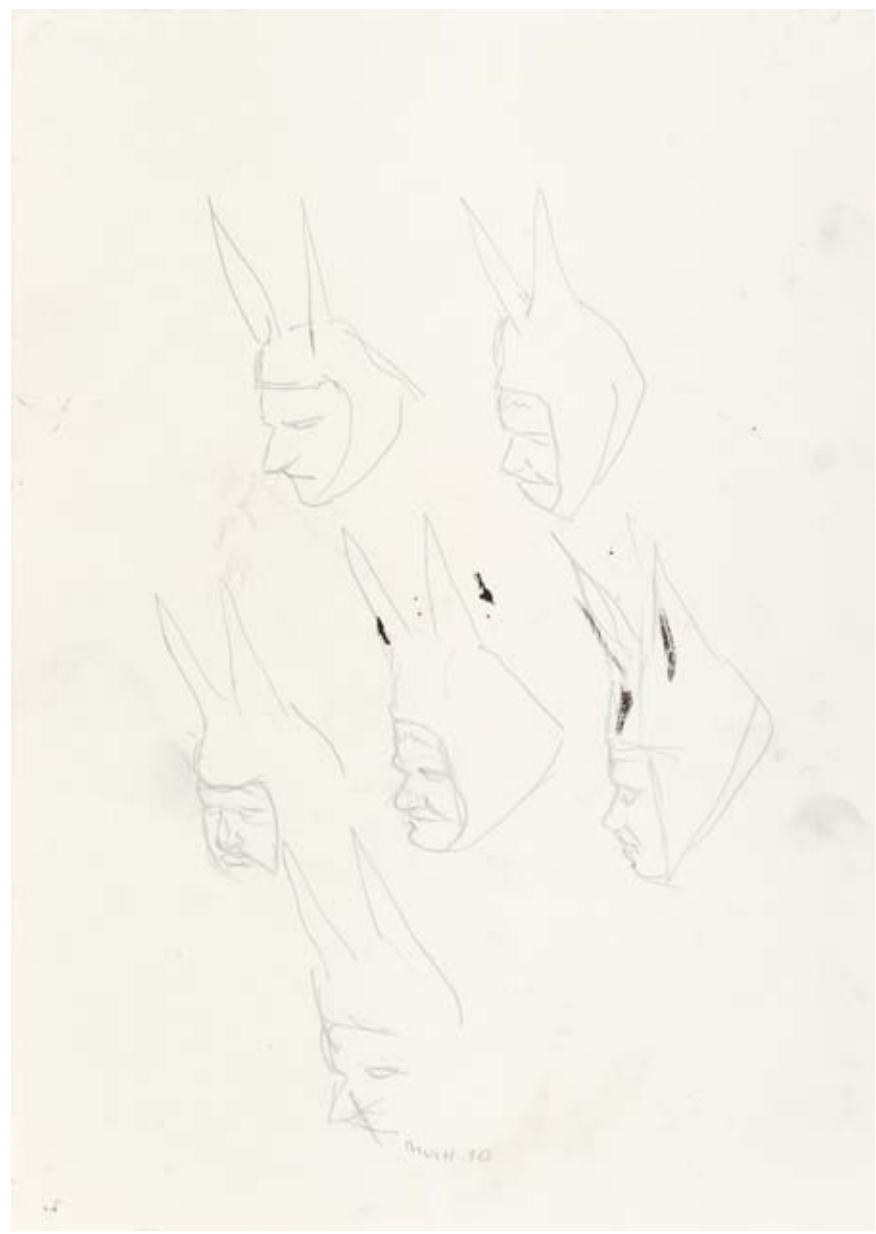
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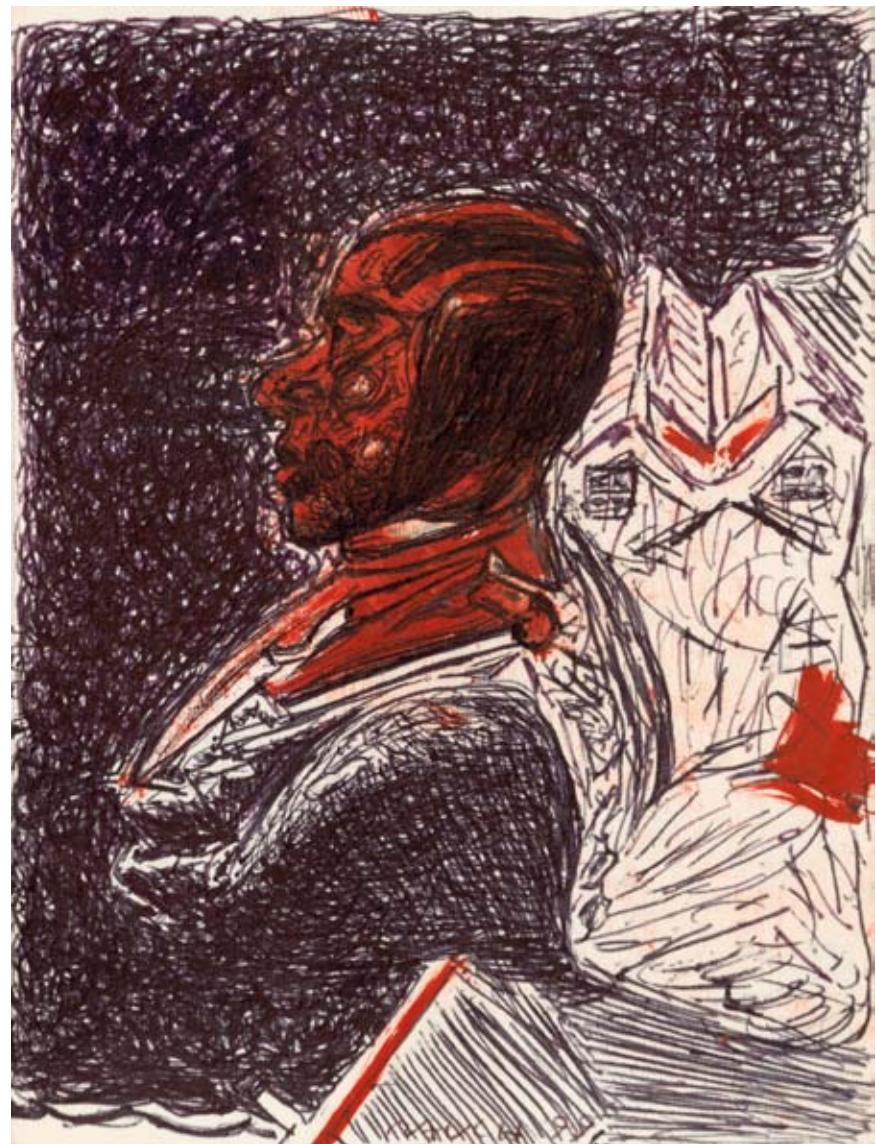
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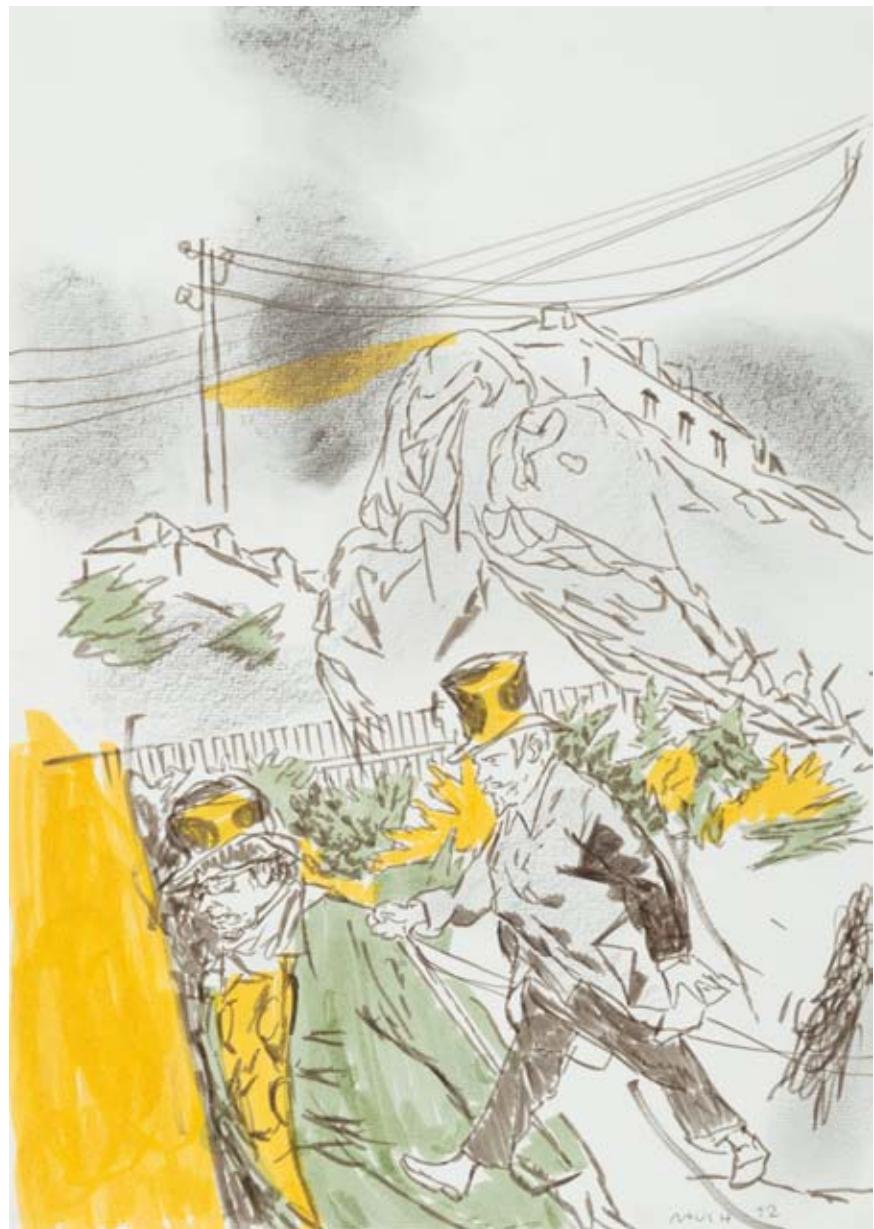
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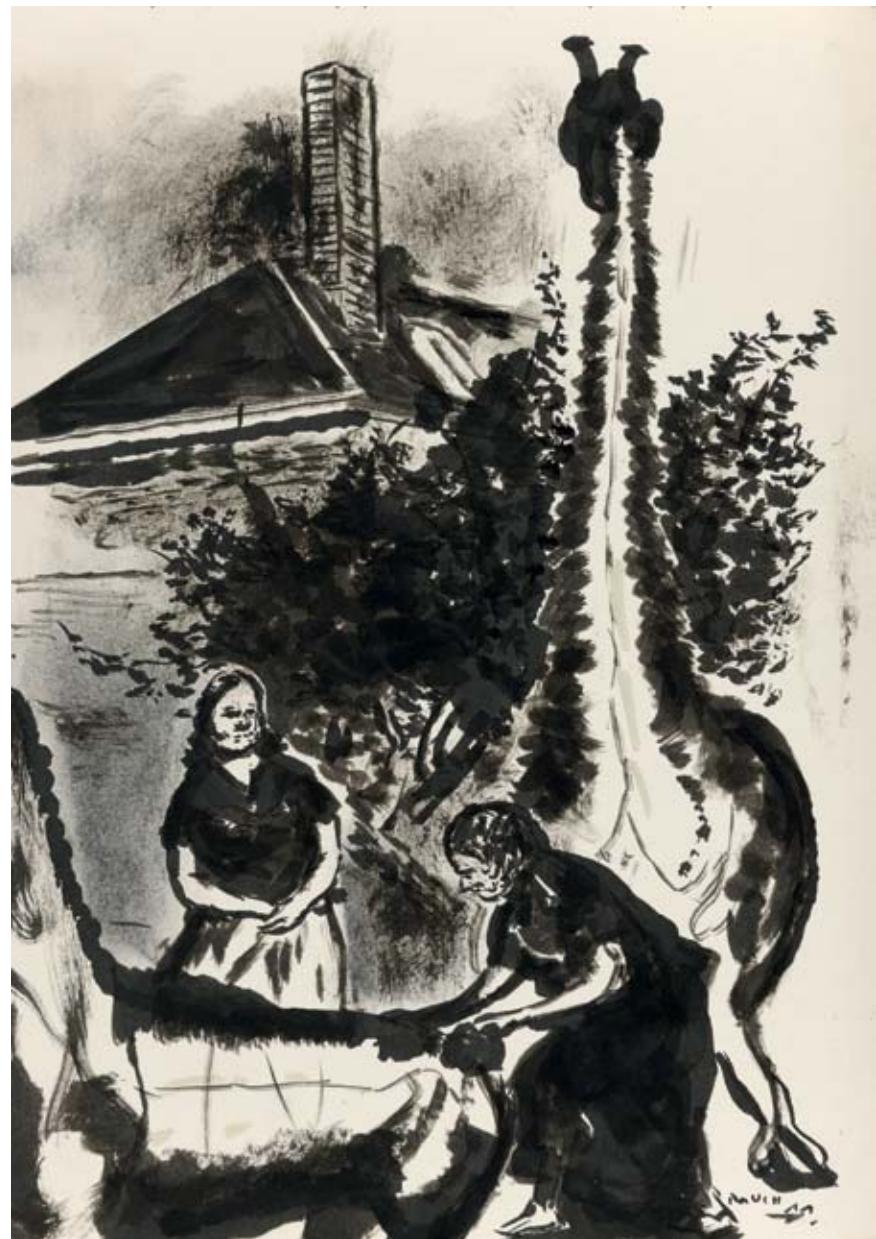
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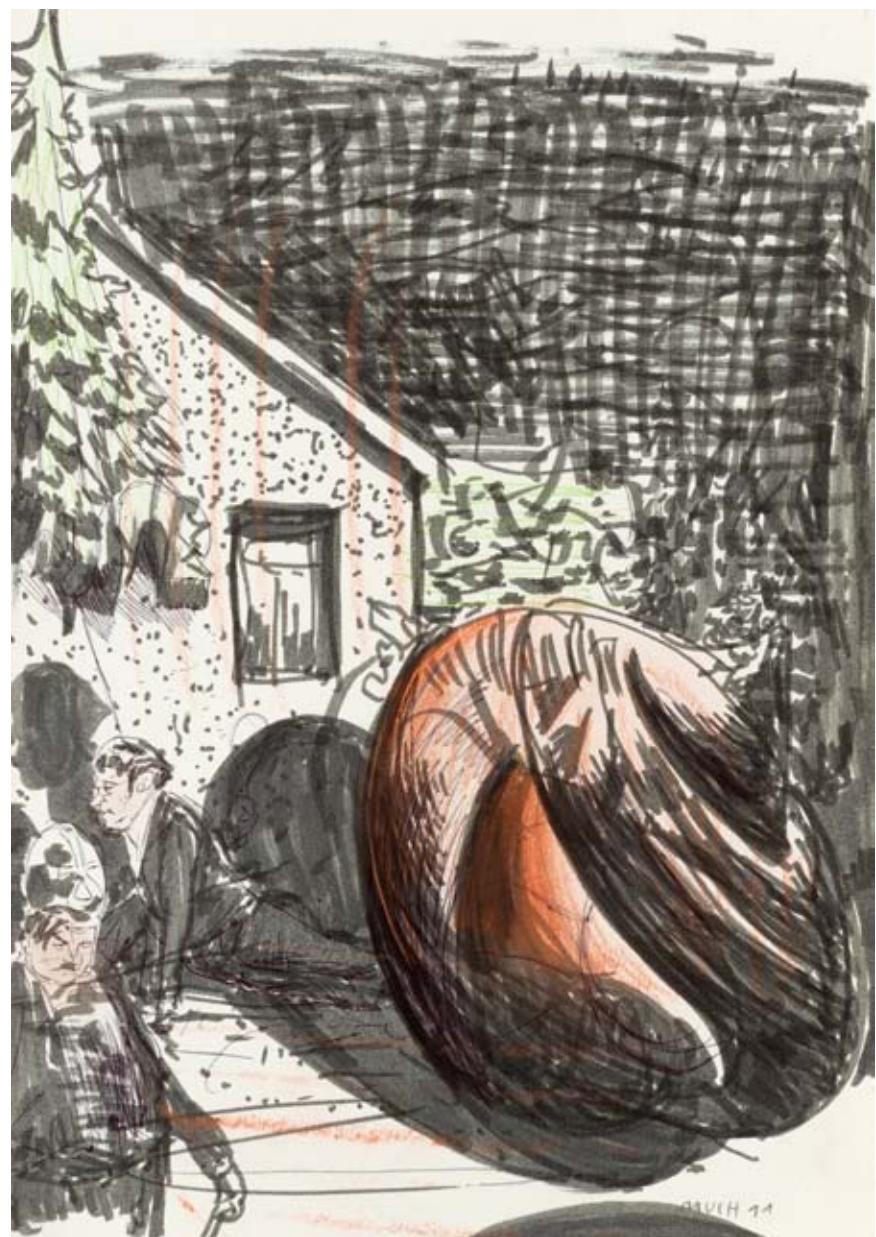
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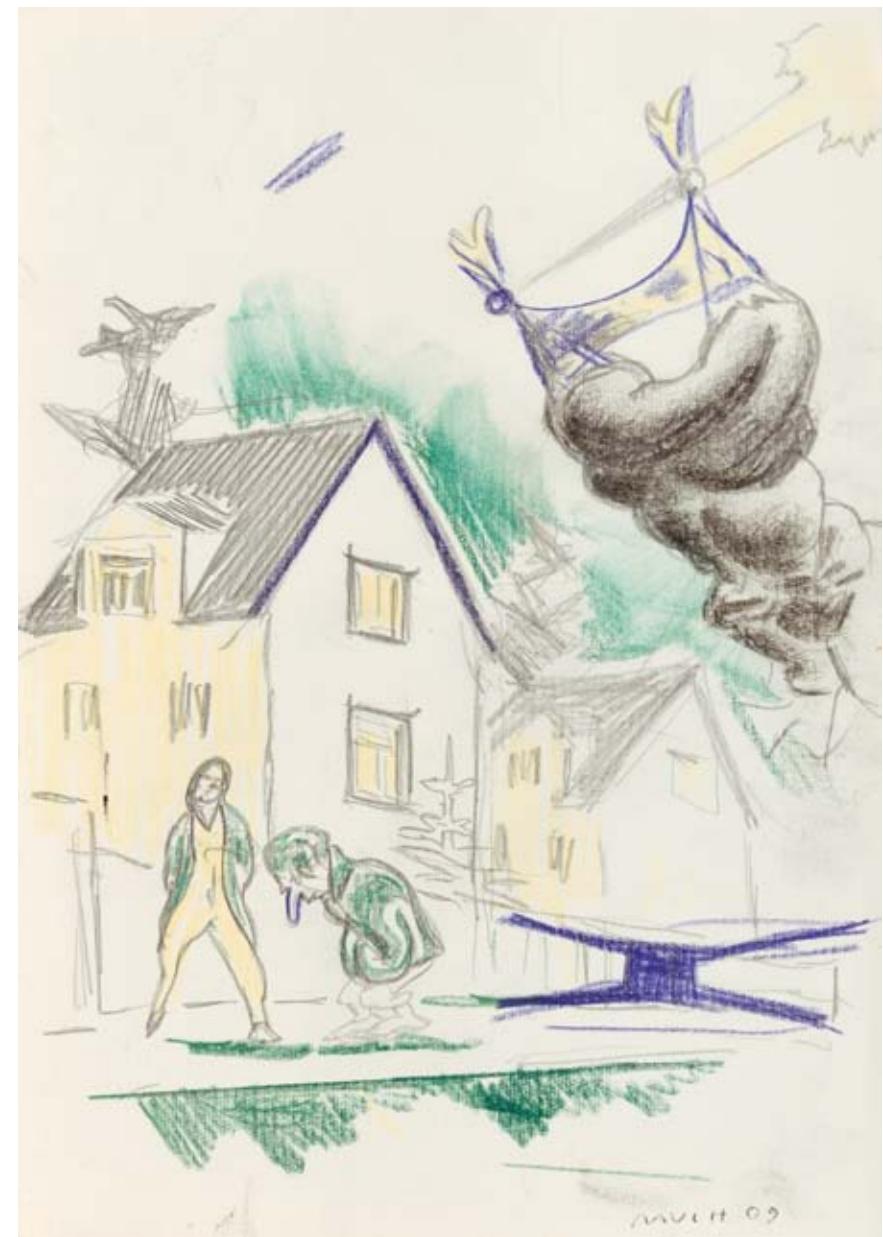
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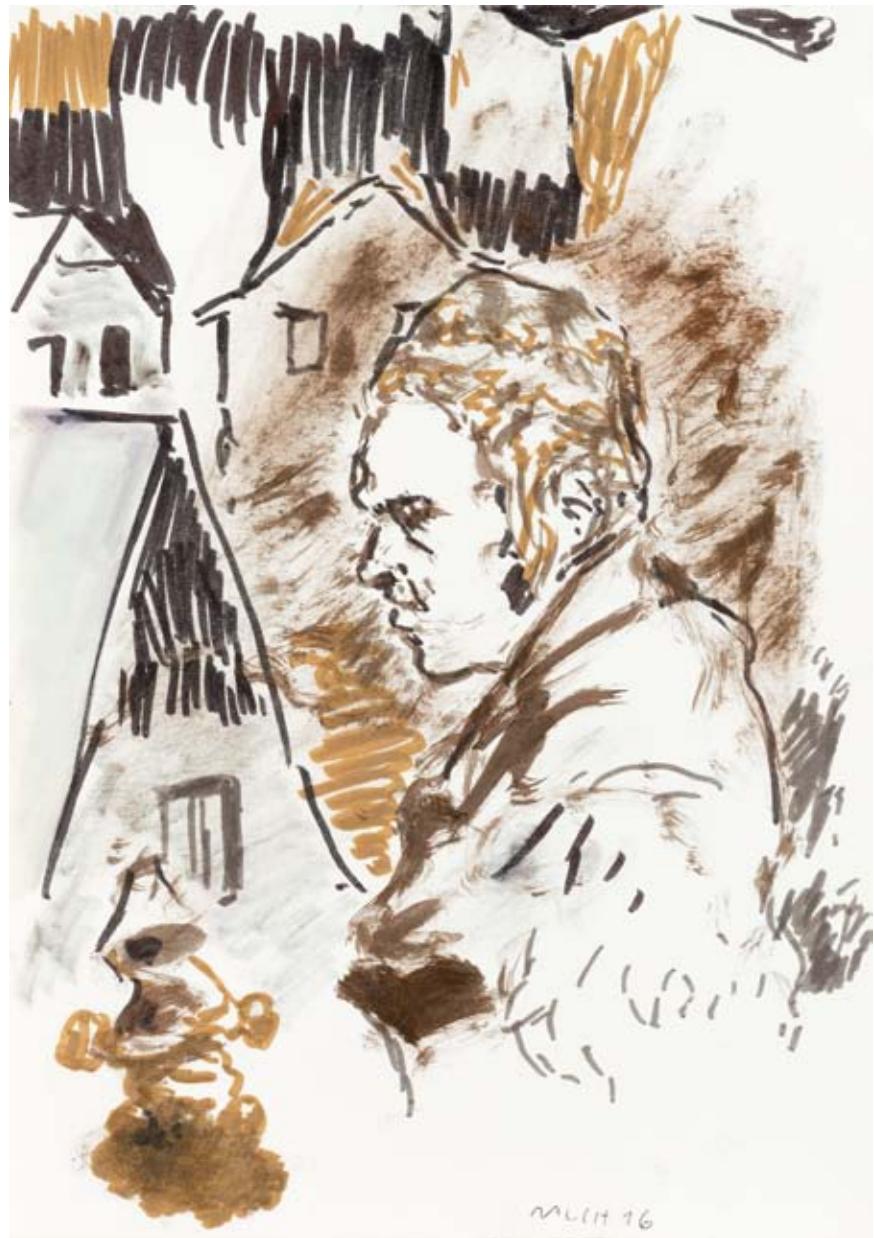
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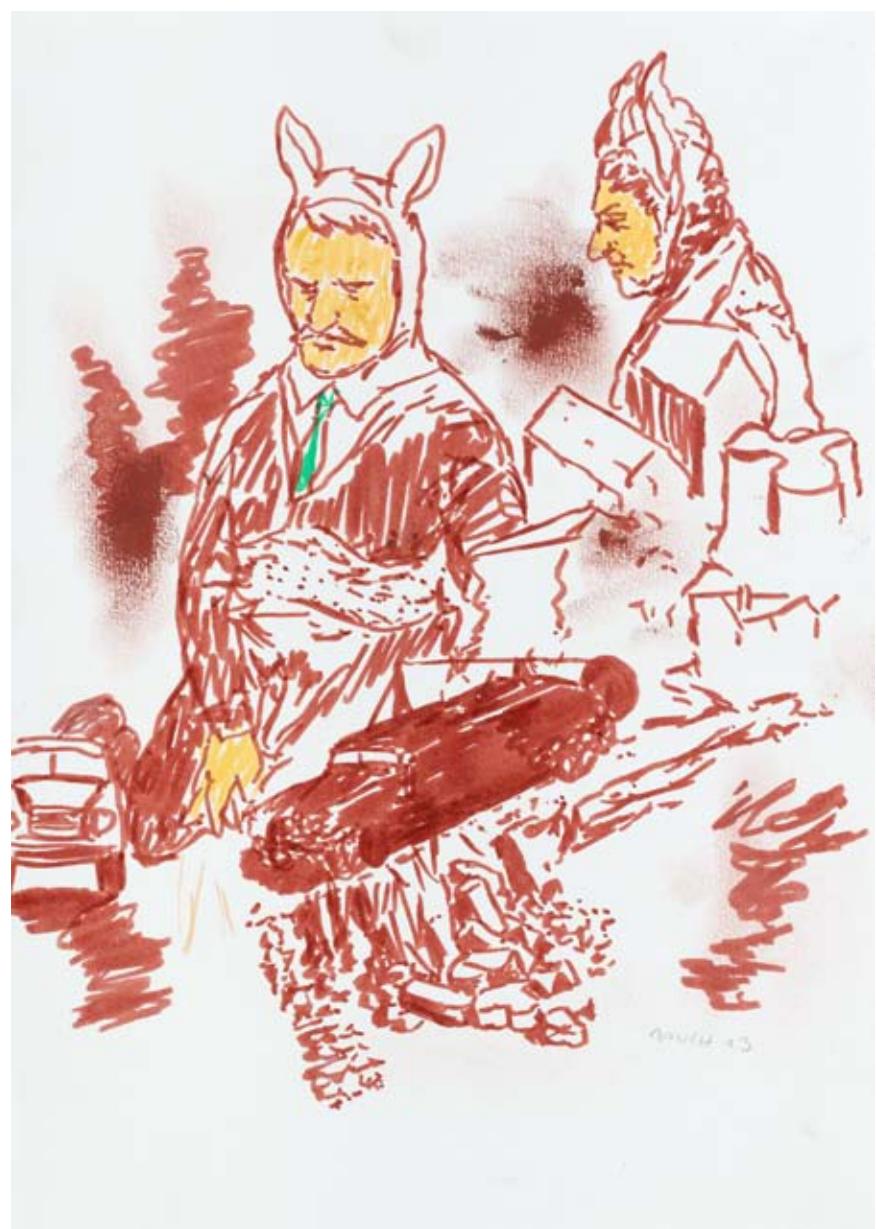
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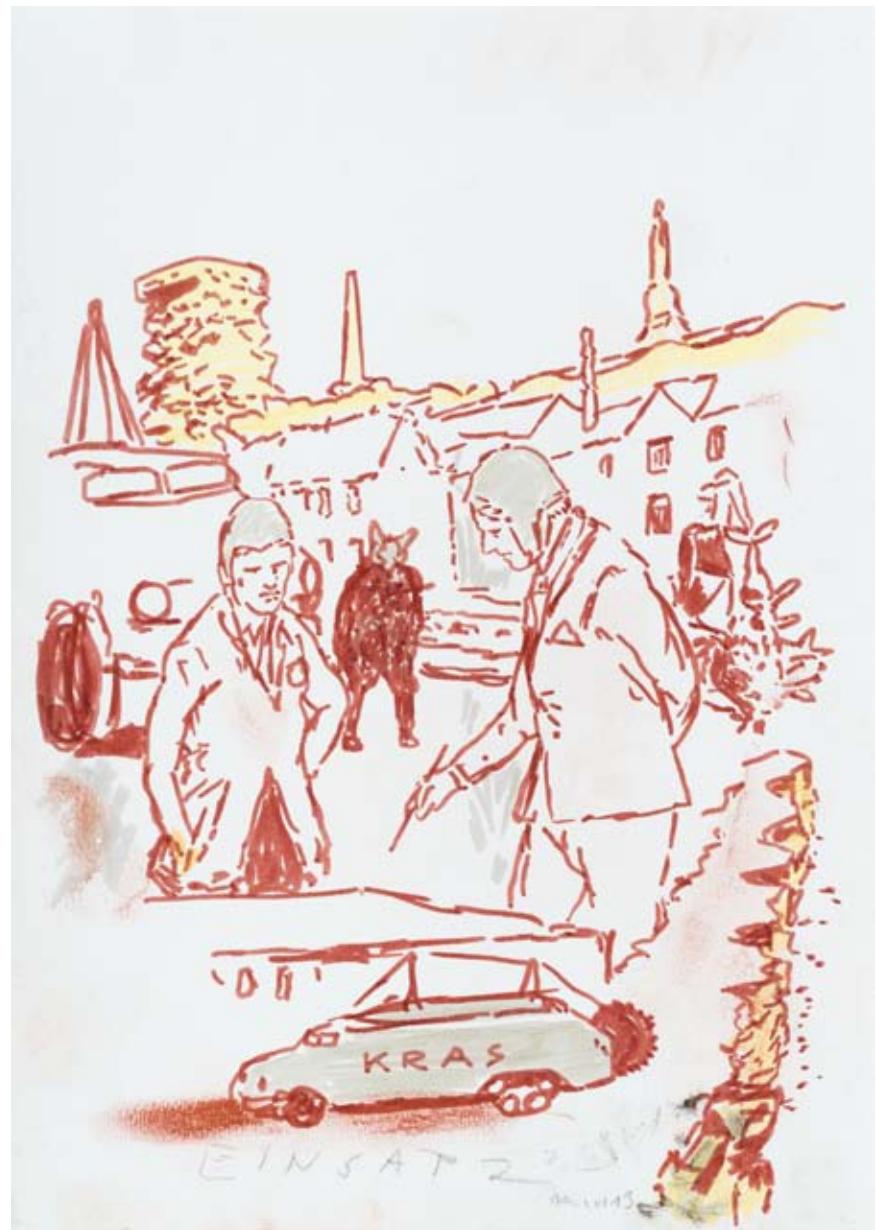
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LIST OF FIGURES

FIG. 1

Neo Rauch

Vater, 2007

Oil on canvas

78 3/4 x 59 1/8 inches (200 x 150 cm)

Location unknown

Courtesy the artist, Galerie EIGEN + ART

Leipzig/Berlin and David Zwirner

© Neo Rauch / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Photo by Uwe Walter, Berlin

FIG. 2

Max Ernst

La clé des chants, 8 (The Key of Songs, 8), from the unbound printer's proof of *Une Semaine de Bonté, Cinquième Cahier* (A Week of Kindness, Fifth Volume) (recto, left), 1933–34

Relief-printed photo-etching of collaged

19th century wood engravings on paper

Sheet: 11 x 17 5/8 inches (27.9 x 44.8 cm);

Image: 7 3/8 x 6 inches (18.6 x 15.2 cm)

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;

Purchased with funds from the Edmundson

Art Foundation; Rose F. Rosenfield; Myron and Jacqueline Blank; Julian and Irma Brody; and anonymous gift by exchange, 2009.21.6.a.

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FIG. 3

Rudy Nappi

Illustration for cover of *Four Year Hitch*, 1961

Acrylic on board

19 x 13 inches (48.3 x 33 cm)

© Rudy Nappi

FIGS. 4, 5

Covers of *Tausend Trottel* by Quim Monzó and *Rohlinge* by Claire Beyer with illustrations by Neo Rauch

INTERVIEW FIGS.

Photography courtesy of Ena Swansea

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All works listed below are by Neo Rauch, and unless otherwise noted, all works are courtesy of Galerie EIGEN + ART Leipzig/Berlin and David Zwirner. Images © Neo Rauch, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Photographs by Uwe Walter, Berlin.

PL. 1 *Planer*, 1995

Felt tip pen on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 2 *Geologe*, 1995

Felt tip pen and crayon on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 3 *Zapfsäule*, 1995

Felt tip pen on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 4 *Aufsteiger*, 1995

Felt tip pen on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 5 *Der Sohn*, 1995

Felt tip pen and crayon on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 6 *Statt*, 1995

Felt tip pen on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 7 *Motte*, 1995

Felt tip pen on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 8 *Blitz*, 1995

Felt tip pen on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 9 *Falle*, 1995

Felt tip pen and crayon on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 10 *Durchläufer*, 1995

Felt tip pen on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 11 *Kunstflug*, 1995

Felt tip pen on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 12 *Tour*, 1995

Felt tip pen and crayon on paper

8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches (21.27 x 14.29 cm)

PL. 13 *Falle*, 2001

Oil on paper

101 x 77 1/2 inches (256.54 x 196.85 cm)

The Broad Art Foundation

PL. 14 *Bombe*, 1996

Pencil, crayon, and graphite on paper

7 7/8 x 9 5/8 inches (20.00 x 24.45 cm)

PL. 15 *Container*, 1997

Graphite and crayon on paper

8 1/4 x 11 5/8 inches (20.96 x 29.53 cm)

PL. 16 *Der Leiter*, 1997

Pencil, oil, and watercolor on paper

9 5/8 x 12 3/8 inches (24.45 x 31.43 cm)

PL. 17 *Der Einrichter*, 1996

Pencil, crayon, and oil on paper

8 1/4 x 14 3/4 inches (20.96 x 37.47 cm)

PL. 18 *Hauptquartier*, 1996

Ink, pencil, and oil on paper

12 3/8 x 19 1/4 inches (31.43 x 48.90 cm)

PL. 19 *Einsturz*, 1998

Pencil, crayon, and graphite on paper

10 3/8 x 6 1/8 inches (26.35 x 15.56 cm)

PL. 20 *Kali*, 2009

Pencil on paper

5 7/8 x 11 5/8 inches (14.92 x 29.53 cm)

PL. 21 *Gelber Baum*, 1998

Pencil, crayon, ink, and oil on paper

5 7/8 x 10 1/4 inches (14.92 x 26.04 cm)

PL. 22 *Traumhaus*, 2010

Graphite on paper

11 3/4 x 9 7/8 inches (29.85 x 25.08 cm)

PL. 23 *Souterrain*, 1998

Pencil and watercolor on paper

10 1/2 x 6 1/4 inches (26.67 x 15.88 cm)

PL. 24 *Aufsteller*, 1998

Pencil, oil, and coffee on paper

6 1/8 x 10 1/8 inches (15.56 x 25.72 cm)

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Rohrer & Klingner ink and pencil on paper

11 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches (29.85 x 20.96 cm)

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