

Doctoral School of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts

**From the classic to the new Leipzig school**

**(Painting boom in Leipzig)**

Summary of the DLA dissertation

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**My dissertation focuses** on examining and analysing one particular aspect of painting in Leipzig. I attempted to shed light on those factors that made the group of artists commonly known as the New Leipzig School successful. What are the antecedents of the school, who are its members, is there continuity with previous generations of painters, earlier artistic traditions?

I attempted to examine and present those cultural and art political relations, and the changes taking place in these from the Second World War until today that shaped the Leipzig phenomenon. What constraints prevented the unfolding of artistic autonomy, how did the liberalization of control take place, how did considerations of the market appear, how did the art “market” change during the years of socialism?

I narrowed down the topic by focusing on painting from the activities of the Leipzig schools; I disregarded certain areas (for example photo art). Moreover, writing a detailed monographic study of the whole period was not my intention either. As an artist, I attempted to focus on the most salient artistic aspirations and analyse them in connection with the political and art political relations through the example of a number of typical artists.

**The methods employed in the study** entail an overview of the relevant literature, analyses of different works of art and interviews conducted with contemporary artists.

## **Thesis 1**

At the beginning of the dissertation an overview of the art political aspirations of the German Democratic Republic is provided. In the relatively free years following the Second World War, the artists strove to rely on German traditions (new objectivity, ASSO, expressionism). These aspirations were hindered under Hitler’s fascist regime which resulted in Germany lagging behind the international scene.

During the fifties parallel with the escalation of the cold war, similarly to other socialist countries, the building of the Soviet type society was on the agenda: its economic, ideological and artistic features were being copied. The institutional background and management of art were transformed. Art trade and art market were eliminated, and the party state started to control the art scene (as well). Artists themselves were primarily influenced through state commissions.

Change was initiated at the first Bitterfield Conference, where the concept of socialist realism was reinterpreted and expanded; consequently, artists were given a bit more latitude. “Isms” dismissed earlier in the formalist debate were partially rehabilitated.

An important breakthrough occurred in the dogmatic, rigid art policy when several East-German artists participated in the Documenta 6 Exhibition in Kassel (1977), which was related to the New East Policy (Neue Ostpolitik – Willy Brand) of the Federal Republic of Germany. Peter Ludwig also had a major part in the liberalization of art policy; he worked for bridging the divide between the two German cultures (and states) and popularizing East German art (purchasing works of art, lending and presenting works in the German Democratic Republic, establishing foundations).

## **Thesis 2**

When describing the foundation of the Classic Leipzig School, I provide a detailed analysis of the activities of the three most famous, most characteristic painters of the school. (Heissig, Mattauer, and Tübke) who were all teachers and directors of the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig (HGB). In connection with this I briefly outline the aspirations of the Academy, its internal relations and its relationship with the authorities. I conclude that the institute was in a privileged position from as early as the 1950s, and apart from smaller setbacks its strong political support was continuous. This was especially characteristic when Alfred Kurella, who was a powerful ideologist at the national level and a member of the Party’s Central Committee, having returned from the Soviet Union in 1954 was working in Leipzig. This was the time when Heisig’s and Tübke’s career gained momentum. In the literature HGB is regarded as the place where the official doctrine was best fulfilled. The loyalty of the Academy was rewarded by giving its teachers important state commissions and allowing them to travel to Western countries.

There were two prominent painting traditions co-existing in Leipzig at the time: the expressive, passionate painting style detectable in Bernard Heisig’s paintings, and the sober, objective view of reality characteristic of Wolfgang Mattheuer: a certain folk-art realism. Werner Tübke’ figures displaying traces of the gothic style then elements of the Italian renaissance and mannerism fit this trend as well.

Their favourite themes originate from classic Greek myths and the Bible. Therefore, Mattheuer frequently uses the biblical story of Cain and Abel as a starting point and the myth

of Sisyphus, whereas the Ikaros story is a recurrent theme for Heisig and Tübke. Their complex pictorial representations and the use of mythological stories enabled different interpretations, which were sometimes beyond the grasp of the officials of culture policy, but which were politically acceptable for the party.

Their evaluation is hindered by the fact all of them created several “works of art” which were clearly the illustrations of socialist ideology.

The way the school’s activity is judged is very extreme: depreciating as well as praising evaluations can be found in the literature. I believe that although achieving full artistic autonomy was not possible for them, the opposite, that they had none, is not true either.

### **Thesis 3**

In my dissertation the analysis of the classic Leipzig school is followed by the discussion of the role of Arno Rink and Neo Rauch. Both of them are “transitory” artists; they provide the link between the New Leipzig School and the classic one. Arno Rink was the last president of the Academy before the transition and the first president of the Academy after the reunification of Germany.

Today Neo Rauch can be regarded as one of the most famous contemporary painters internationally and most certainly in the USA and in Europe. In my analysis – with the help of the interview I conducted with him – I attempt to find evidence for his links with the classic Leipzig school, at the same time portraying his career in his new role, uniqueness.

### **Thesis 4**

In connection with the New Leipzig school I draw the conclusion that its members were brought up after the transition; some of them arrived from former Western parts of Germany. Moreover, all of them graduated from HGB, and the majority attended Arno Rink’s class. Their first steps and successes are connected to the LIGA Gallery, which was a so-called Produzentengalerie. I provide an analysis of this gallery type with the help of several interviews. I interviewed Christian Ehrentraut an art dealer from LIGA gallery and two artists: Tilo Baumgartel and Martin Kobe.

The works of this painter generation who started their career at the end of the 90s can be characterised by strong attraction to the narrative and the dominance of illustrative signs.

(They are sometimes regarded as the heirs of socialist realism because of this, but they object to this classification.) Artists of the New Leipzig School do not address social problems, they tend to be apolitical. Their characteristic themes involve simple phenomena from everyday life. Weischer paints interiors, Schnell landscapes, Kobe virtual/cyber spaces; Ruckhäberle sometimes seems to make socio-critical remarks through his paintings.

Painters of the New Leipzig School all have different styles and they all deal with different themes, but their common denominator is their high level of technical skills, the devotion to figurative painting and a melancholic choice of topics. They acquired their high level of craftsmanship at the Academy in Leipzig; however, the atmosphere of the themes chosen by them is clearly influenced by the city of Leipzig.

## **Thesis 5**

I use an analogy from sociology to explain the “secret” of the Leipzig phenomenon. I believe that the “success” of the New Leipzig School is a result of the accidental interplay of a number of synergic factors. These are the following: the place (the open and vigorous Leipzig), the time (the attention generated by the reunification of the two German states), the tradition (HGB), the inspirational role of expectations, and the expanding market opportunities (museums, galleries, the “American caravan”, etc.).

### **The author’s publications in connection with this topic:**

(Co-author: Keresztszeghy Fruzsina) „Artists employ me, not the other way around” Interview with Christian Ehrentraut in Berlin about producenten galleries [„A művészek adják az én munkámat, és nem fordítva”] Beszélgetés Berlinben Christian Ehentrauttal, a producentengalériáról, *Balkon*, 2010, issue 5, pp. 18-21.

GDR Mannerism – works of Werner Tübke [DDR Manierismus – Werner Tübke munkássága], *Artmagazin*, 2009, vol VII., issue 5, pp. 42-47.

"Painting must remain an adventure" Adam Albert's interview with Neo Rauch [„A festészetnek kalandnak kell maradnia“-Albert Ádám interjúja Neo Rauch képzőművésszel], *Balkon*, 2008 issue 5, pp. 20-22.

Cathedral of irrationality - Neo Rauchs painting's [Értelmetlenségből katedrális – Neo Rauch festészete], *Artmagazin*, 2007, vol. V., issue 6, pp. 74-79.

(Co-author: Keresztszeghy Fruzsina) A new centre of painting: Leipzig – From the classic school to the New Leipzig School, [Új festészeti központ: Lipcse – A klasszikustól az új Lipcsei Iskoláig], *Új Művészet*, October, 2006, vol. XVII., issue 10, pp. 22-26.