

In Focus: Autonomy of Art Criticism and its future

Conclusion Panel

**INTRODUCTION
DANIÈLE PERRIER**

**WOLFGANG ULLRICH IN
CONVERSATION WITH
KOLJA REICHERT**

Danièle Perrier

In their sharp-witted closing statements, the duos Graw/Buchmann and Stahl/Pelta Feldmann postulated the crisis of an art criticism that – through disregard or simply oversight – had long disregarded art by women, as well as by ethnic minorities. They questioned the autonomy of art and even accused it of being an instrument of discrimination. The congress concluded with a discussion between Wolfgang Ullrich and Kolja Reichert regarding art criticism, which has recently been vehemently challenged, as it was, for example, by the Leipzig-based painter Neo Rauch, of all people, who pilloried our guest Wolfgang Ullrich in the media.

Wolfgang Ullrich, who studied Philosophy and Art History and submitted a dissertation on the late work of Martin Heidegger, taught at various universities before becoming a freelance author and critic. His numerous books and essays always deal with topics on the history and critique of the concept of art, art-sociological issues, contemporary visual worlds, and consumer theory with an eye to current relevance. After Ullrich presented a bleak prognosis regarding the role of art criticism in his book *Siegerkunst* (Art of the Vanquisher), he followed up with »Selfies«, in which he addresses the democratised image culture that has spread worldwide; on the one hand, the self-important judgment of art magnates; on the other, the Beuysian utopia that everyone is an artist. Between these two poles, Ullrich repeatedly raises the question of the role of art criticism and how it can assert itself, since criticism is indispensable for the recognition of art. How does the critic Ullrich feel about the freedom of art and the autonomy of art criticism when he calls his blog IDEENFREIHEIT (Freedom of ideas)? Is ›nomen‹ also ›omen‹ and the crossed-out middle of the word symbolic?

Kolja Reichert also studied Philosophy, as well as Modern German Literature. His master's thesis *Viewer Spaces in Human Zoos of the Nineteenth Century and in Humanitarian Photography of the Present* testifies early on to his interest in the creation of a space by means of the lens and the subjectivity of the photographer. People, objects, and conditions are related to each other, contextualised, indexed, hierarchised. The question is who dominates the space. The photograph imperceptibly directs the viewer's gaze. Precisely because Reichert is interested in what happens between image and viewer, between art criticism and art, he is particularly suited to probe the delicate question of the autonomy of art and to engage in this *disputatio* with Ullrich.

Wolfgang Ullrich in Conversation with Kolja Reichert

Kolja Reichert

I am very pleased that Danièle Perrier has invited Wolfgang Ullrich to make the closing statement for this conference, and I am also very pleased that Wolfgang Ullrich has invited me to have a conversation with him instead of making a closing statement on his own. In the summer, we experienced the exceptional case of a famous painter making a critic his subject. As I said yesterday in my lecture, I am not quite sure what we see. Perhaps, Wolfgang Ullrich, you could tell us briefly how this painting came about.

Wolfgang Ullrich

I don't know, of course, how Neo Rauch came up with the idea to paint this picture. But the starting point for this was an article of mine that appeared in May of this year in the newspaper *Die Zeit* and in which I considered whether we are currently experiencing a kind of shift to the right with regard to the concept of artistic autonomy – that is to say, whether a concept which, throughout the entire avant-garde and the age of modernism, was clearly defined as being on the left and emancipatory, is now changing political sides.

For me, there were two initial observations. One of these was the previously mentioned text by Julia Pelta Feldman – which was also published a good year earlier in *Die Zeit* – in which autonomy was described as a myth, and in which – something I am also quite willing to endorse – autonomy was criticised as a concept, to which only the privileged are entitled, who, precisely because they are privileged, do not possess certain abilities. Perhaps privilege is a shortcoming in terms of sensitivity and the perception of injustices and inequalities. Therefore, especially if you come from a left-wing, emancipatory standpoint, you must be critical of the concept of autonomy – much more critical than before.

The second observation is more art/sociological. If you look at the globalised art market, you will see that many protagonists are no longer socialised at all with a Western concept of art, in which there is a clear distinction between fine and applied art for example, or even the idea of artistic autonomy. Rather, many come from other cultures and, although they are interested in the same things that people in the West are interested in, it is for other reasons. But what we have observed for the art market can also be said for large parts of the art industry in general – for curators for instance – namely that a pluralisation has taken place here and thus a relativisation of the Western understanding of art. In this respect as well, the Western concept of autonomy is thus on the defensive.

These two developments could also be described in such a way that, on the one hand, autonomy suddenly appears as an idea of 'old *white* men', and, on the other hand, as something like a victim of globalisation. If you bring these two points together and ask who could be interested in autonomy precisely because of this finding, then these are right-wing protagonists who wish to defend the achievements of the 'old *white* men' and who generally have a problem with globalisation. That was my starting point. Then I looked to see if there were already hints of a right-wing adaptation or adoption of the concept of autonomy, and there I found something on various levels. For example, in the programme of Götz Kubitschek's publishing house Antaios Verlag. There one finds works by

someone like Frank Lisson, who has written several books with a very martial concept of culture. For him, artistic autonomy means, for example, feeling a resistance to the mainstream, being challenged to self-assertion, to dissidence. This is a martial understanding of autonomy, which has always been a defence against globalisation, against feminism, against many contemporary trends. And there is a male-glorifying idea of culture being propagated – that is to say, that all great culture can only be masculine because it is created in resistance.

But similar things can also be found in the field of art, not least of all in interviews with Neo Rauch. In his work as well, one finds a self-heroisation as a dissident who feels like a victim of »political commissioners« – this is also his synonym for curators – or of feminist tendencies. The removal of the poem by Eugen Gomringer was for him an act on the same level as the destructions by the Taliban. There are a number of statements that fit precisely into this image of a right-wing understanding of autonomy, which is interpreted as a male-dissident act against a 'politically correct' mainstream.

In my article, I then brought Neo Rauch together with other examples from the artworld, ultimately with the intention of triggering a discussion, especially among left-wing critics of the concept of autonomy. Do we want to go so far as to completely abandon the concept of autonomy? Should we leave it to the right wing? Or do we perhaps want to once again discuss what different concepts of autonomy could be? In accordance with his self-image as a heroic dissident against the mainstream, however, I was now perceived by Rauch as a denunciator and attacked with this picture, which he himself described in an interview as a »well-deserved slap in the face«. I myself, by the way, am just as unsure of what we are actually seeing in the painting: whether it is the critic or indeed the painter who purportedly presents himself here in a kind of lachrymose self-portrait.

Kolja Reichert

Or the painter who cannot imagine the critic any other way than as a revenant of himself. The circumstances are completely unclear.

Wolfgang Ullrich

The circumstances are unclear. This is also typical of Neo Rauch and his preference for the ambiguous. What is clear is that, here, an individual is depicted in a very cramped space. One might be reminded of the topos of the artist in the attic – this is also a topos of the autonomous artist – who finds himself at the margins of society – a popular motif from Carl Spitzweg to Anselm Kiefer.

But you can also think of the space as a kind of corridor – and this fits in with the fact that both Neo Rauch and Uwe Tellkamp and many others today talk about how we live in a 'corridor of opinion', that you can only say very little. In East Germany, there is the popular narrative that we live in a 'GDR 2.0', in a new unfree, controlled society, and perhaps Rauch wants to show this 'corridor of opinion' in which we are all now trapped, both the artist and the critic. In this respect, the two come together again, and perhaps this figure has three legs fatally linked together because it wants to be the union of the critic and the artist. The critic is the representative of the mainstream who only looks at where

someone says bad things, and the painter now gives it back to him and paints exactly what is expected of him anyway. A cynical act of self-assertion, which is staged as such.

Kolja Reichert

In this painting I see the consequence of a climate of discourse in which it no longer seems possible to refer to common objects with questions that one would understand among one another in the first place. It seems to me to be a symptom of the general trend towards personalisation, which I have missed as a piece of the puzzle in the genuinely great panel discussion we just witnessed. It seems to me that every possibility to relate to an object together has been lost. It is unclear what is to be seen in this painting, and above all, there appears to be no interest in or respect for criticism whatsoever on the part of the artist. This makes this picture significant for all of us as critics, especially since your attempt to introduce analytical incisiveness with your essay; to develop questions, criteria, to test the concept of autonomy – this kind of classical criticism has indeed completely disappeared – in a truly exciting constellation of an artist asserting his pictorial power, with a newspaper that first published your essay and then illustrated this painting.

But what urgently needs to become part of this is the process that followed. Each year, Neo Rauch donates a painting for a charity event in Leipzig. This painting was auctioned off for the benefit of a children's hospice, and the property owner, Christoph Gröner, who plays a very important role in the real estate market in Leipzig in particular (Neo Rauch is a Leipzig-based painter, Wolfgang Ullrich is a Leipzig-based art critic), was disappointed that he could not find a fellow bidder at 550,000 euros and so added another 200,000 euros. We are dealing here with a classic case of what you call ›champion art‹; that is to say, the exploitation of artistic achievement for an assertion of power in the cultural space by non-artists, and with a kind of right-wing populist logic to boot. For Christoph Gröner not only bought this painting at auction and, without having to actually say it, took the artist's side – and thus, so the suggestion goes, also the side of artistic freedom; he has also announced another cultural achievement himself, namely the founding of an ›Association for Common Sense‹, in whose foyer this painting will hang in the future, and which will provide ›objective‹ data on the topics of migration, CO2 and climate change. He has left open how this forthcoming ›objective‹ data will relate to the scientific data that already exists. One can imagine in which direction it will go. By not naming it, but only demonstrating his power to co-create reality by announcing ›objective‹ data, legitimised by an artistic, idiosyncratic invention, he has further expanded his power.

Wolfgang Ullrich

Yes, thank you for presenting this in such detail. I actually think that a clear distinction should be made here between the painting as a performative act by the artist – reacting to a text that annoyed him – and this second stage, that this was obviously not enough for the artist. Although, I think it was also clear from the beginning that it would not stop at this. The picture measures 1.2 x 1.5 metres. This format would not have been necessary if you only wanted to have a painted ›letter to the editor‹ printed in the newspaper.

Kolja Reichert

It was described in *Die Zeit* as a caricature and was generally regarded as such.

Wolfgang Ullrich

Which I don't think it is. But the other thing is what happened as a result of the auction. The artist apparently did not yet trust his own gesture to have enough power; he thus, as an artist, also distrusted himself to a certain extent and thought that he needed a second purpose for the painting. It now had to become charity. The painting still needed the authority of a fat price, 750,000 euros, but at the same time he risked having an individual owner purchase it, who would set his own purpose. So, if the painting attempts to depict a critic as a ›denunciator‹ or a ›parasite‹, this is further enhanced by Gröner's gesture, because ›common sense‹ is used as a conflictual term by all right-wing and populist movements. It is often used against intellectuals, against the features sections of newspapers, even against science. The [right-wing political party] AfD has ›common sense‹ written in its party programme and, in its name, argues time and again against various groups that are not well-disposed towards the party. It sees itself in possession of it, just as Gröner sees himself in possession of ›common sense‹ when he wishes to establish this eponymous association. This has, of course, also been received in this way, especially in right-wing, far-right extremist blogs.

After the auction, Michael Klonovsky – who is also the personal advisor of the head of the AfD, Alexander Gauland – wrote that a dear dinner guest had passed on an alleged remark by Rauch at the charity event: »In this way, a text by Mr Ullrich had, for the first time and probably only once, provided some benefit. If the painter did not say this himself, I will gladly take responsibility for this observation myself.« With this, it was once again clearly stated, critics actually do nothing useful; they are actually worthless existences, and now an artist has to come and do something charitable – only then have they finally done something worthwhile.

And perhaps another thing that I found symptomatic. The painting was also praised in the magazine *Sezession*, published by Götz Kubitschek's Antaios Verlag: »To portray these guys« – that is to say, the critics, the ›denunciators‹ – »as what they are is the least one can do, and I hope that we will see the painting by Neo Rauch more often in the future, whenever someone has taken the comfort of a longer session to spit out his rubbish against us in the features section. On such occasions, we shall bring it out and hold it up like a shield.«¹

Kolja Reichert

A monstrence.

Wolfgang Ullrich

Yes, like a monstrence. And, here, I am actually only meant to represent an entire

1 Till-Lucas Wessels, »Sonntagsheld (112) – Neuer Rauch aus alter Asche«, in: *Sezession*, 3 June 2019, URL: <https://sezession.de/61347/sonntagsheld-112-neuer-rauch-aus-alter-asche> [last visit on 18 November 2020] [translated].

profession. Neo Rauch has often made pictures directed against critics and let his fantasies run wild. He has, for example, taken the story of Apollo and Marsyas as his motif. The god Apollo is challenged, provoked by Marsyas, whom he then punishes for this sacrilege, and in this picture Neo Rauch thus equates Marsyas with the critic. What is at stake here is a certain understanding of art criticism which is outrageous but at the same time has a great tradition. And that is why we must almost be grateful to Neo Rauch again for having made use of this iconography, because it makes it perfectly clear that we are also dealing here with the scolding of intellectuals, with the scolding of critics, as was already typical in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is suddenly returning now, after decades of being far from conceivable.

Kolja Reichert

Albeit in a changed media environment, which is, of course, related to the increased moral debate that developed with the advent of the newspaper. One can see a parallel – as Gustav Seibt recently did in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* – that we are now also experiencing a media transformation that creates new relationships between subject, society, work, and image. I find three things exciting, which are basically interconnected: First, the critic is the ›loser‹ from the outset, because he or she doesn't produce anything...

Wolfgang Ullrich

Or only shit.

Kolja Reichert

Exactly. This implies a logic of enhancement, in which only that which creates something is valid, not that which counts out, compares, sorts.

Then, connected to this, criticism is responded to with pictures. One could be happy about the fact that there is such a lively discussion, if it were indeed a discussion and not just a transference. Your gesture of criticism, which is open to response; which is an invitation to reflect and negotiate and to counter-position; is answered in a different kind of manifestation, namely in the form of a painting with visual power. We see, in an exemplary way, what we experience everywhere. The argument is replaced by the strong suggestion, the strong image, the counter-assertion – as the American president does.

The third thing that is also connected with this: What is the location? These two questions interest us today. What is the location of the artwork, and what roles does autonomy play? The work of art here really seems to be nothing more than a ›token‹, a certain gaming piece in a continuum of processes in which Gröner is just as much an author as Neo Rauch. It seems to me as if a new medium has pushed itself in front of art, a kind of arena in which the struggle for assertion and visual power is fought, and in which the work of art itself and its qualities no longer play a major role. I now beg your indulgence when I compare the case of Dana Schutz to this, which is completely different in terms of its preconditions and context. It reminds me of this however, in that there was also a debate there which did not revolve around what artistic decisions were made beyond the choice of subject.

Wolfgang Ullrich

Yes, well, we can gladly make this comparison. In fact, I have a similar problem with Dana Schutz as with Neo Rauch. I found it very interesting how Schutz reacted to Hannah Black's letter. She very quickly, and also a bit superficially, referred to an attribution of her identity as a mother. At this point, I would have actually expected her to justify why she took this particular photo of Emmett Till as her starting point, and not another one where he is seen as a smiling young man looking forward to the life ahead of him. If it's about pity, that would probably have been a better starting point. She might also have had to ask herself why she has often been interested in subjects in her work that deal with destroyed faces. When, in 2006, the Ukrainian politician Viktor Yushchenko was the victim of an assassination attempt involving a toxic substance, she also painted his destroyed face. In this respect, *Open Casket* is also part of a tradition within her work, which further intensifies the problem and makes the questions more justified as to why she painted this picture in the first place.

Was she perhaps ultimately interested in something quite different from what she said afterwards? Of course, you have to look at this painting closely, but above all you have to consider the context. But then I must actually say that I would have preferred that this picture had never been painted.

Kolja Reichert

I do in fact think that the mistake already lay in the choice of motif. There is a detailed portrait of Dana Schutz in *The New Yorker* by Calvin Tomkins,² who accompanied her for half a year during the creation of this painting. The starting point was her dismay at the police violence against Black citizens. The question for me is then why, of all things, she has to essentialise Black suffering in this way by choosing this central motif of the Black civil rights movement. But if this image is so important to her, I ask myself why she has to stage this virtuoso painting theatre, which protrudes three-dimensionally into the space and recreates the destruction of the face; and why she is trapped in her painting, in her being a painter. If she had wanted to recall this motif, she could have hung a copy of the original photograph on the wall, even against the background of her painting practice.

I am grateful for Antje Stahl's comment that, in the criticism of the painting, it was about consciously omitting how it was actually made. But I would be interested to know what one achieves by doing this, when one distinguishes between the subjects with their respective histories, their privileges, their experience of historical continuities, when one completely omits from this continuum the respective formulation within the work, and it is only a question of who may refer to what. It seems to me that this leads to a production of positions between which the corridor is missing, in which a common view, a common question could emerge.

2 Calvin Tomkins, »Why Dana Schutz painted Emmett Till«, in: *The New Yorker*, 10 April 2017 (placed online on 3 April 2017), URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/10/why-dana-schutz-painted-emmett-till> [last visit on 18 November 2020].

Wolfgang Ullrich

We seem to agree relatively well with regard to the ›how‹. The ›how‹ was unsuccessful. But I would go even further and ask the ›that‹ question, whether someone like Dana Schutz, with her position in today's art world, could have managed to find a form which would not create the problem Hannah Black addresses in the letter; namely that the painting would once again become part of a ›happy few‹ lifestyle. One cannot prevent this picture from perhaps being placed into contexts that are extremely insensitive to what its subject actually is. In this respect, it is a kind of politeness whether one does this as an artist or not; as if she had no other subject with which she could articulate her artistic position in the same way!

We had a similar case in recent German art history when Gerhard Richter painted his *Birkenau* cycle in 2014. One can ask: Is it really a wise decision for an artist in his position to address this theme? Isn't there also the danger that the paintings might end up in collections where such a theme is in very bad hands? Richter had already protected himself in advance by inviting Georges Didi-Huberman to his studio, who had already reflected on the original photographs and the pictorial-ethical questions at a high level in a book. And Richter protected himself all the more by finding an abstract solution, so that certain forms of abuse are no longer possible. In doing so, he has perhaps also prevented a reaction similar to that which Dana Schutz experienced. Nevertheless, I find the attitude equally problematic and would go so far as to say: if an artist plays a role in a particular sector of the art industry then it is no longer appropriate nowadays to make use of certain themes, because things that are difficult to reconcile simply collide there. This creates a dissonance that is very difficult for me to bear.

Kolja Reichert

Since when has this been the case, and why was it not the case before?

Wolfgang Ullrich

This has to do with the fact that, today, when you see a picture by Gerhard Richter, you always know how expensive it is, in which settings such pictures appear, who can afford them, what the people who afford them are doing with them for other purposes. Perhaps the works suddenly have a function that is incompatible with certain themes, even against the will of the artists. If Dana Schutz really wants to repent she can also donate money to an appropriate organisation or do something completely different to fight injustice. I don't think she can do this with such a painting.

Kolja Reichert

This would be an answer to the question: »How can an artist react to the increasing feudalism?« How can one find a morally secure place within feudalism? But wouldn't it be desirable that artists – since they produce both the most general and the most private thing there is, namely works of art; and since they are protagonists in that branch of the global economic system that most clearly represents the concentration of mercantile power in fewer and fewer hands; wouldn't it be better to talk about money, about the

distribution of wealth? Wouldn't it be truly indispensable to finally also link aesthetic and moral discourses to economics, and not only to the question of how to behave? But rather: how does economic distribution relate to our sensitivities and our feelings of power or powerlessness?

Wolfgang Ullrich

Yes, of course, but you don't have to become a great critic of capitalism, you can stay in a narrow field and simply realise that certain works are so strongly branded by a high price that this is stronger than the subject itself or the intention of the artist. This is perhaps a ›Midas problem‹ that some artists today may face, that everything they do turns to gold but is no longer useful for other things. This is a development of the art market boom of the last decades, and that's why I find it all the more regrettable – also all the more sad – that an artist like Neo Rauch, who would have had the chance to free this painting from the categories of possession and money in the first place, should have once again branded it with a large price and thus simultaneously made a kind of plutocratic populism possible.

Kolja Reichert

Before we move on to the joint final discussion, I would like to return briefly to your essay and your understanding of autonomy. Was your diagnosis that art largely abandons the idea of autonomy combined with a kind of feeling of loss; or was it a sober description? In principle, you did not counter the narrowness you described; the narrowness of the autonomy of art and the artist with the autonomy of the self-assertive, defensive citizen who is not bound to any higher power (except his common sense!). What would be the concept of autonomy you would set against this?

Wolfgang Ullrich

Yes, I am ambivalent about that myself. I am also of the opinion that the concept of autonomy has often been thought too one-sidedly, too martially, not only by today's right-wingers but already in the avant-gardes. But I would make the fundamental difference as to whether autonomy, as in the case of someone like Neo Rauch, is understood as self-assertion – whereby a discourse of sacrifice is also immediately involved – or whether it is understood more as self-determination. That is to say, one tries to find a place where one can develop something as independently as possible from external ascriptions, which is then exposed to a public sphere.

At the beginning we briefly showed the painting by Jörg Immendorff: *Wo stehst du mit deiner Kunst, Kollege?* (Where Do You Stand With Your Art, Colleague?, 1973), in which the concept of autonomy is also problematised, but perhaps a constructive or optimistic answer is given in contrast to the answer given by Neo Rauch. Here, we see an artist sitting in his studio and thinking about how he could contribute to the history of art. At the same time however, there are political circumstances that make this effort seem ivory-tower-like. He is called out onto the street where his creative talent is needed – and he is torn between the two sides. On the one hand, the painting is a plea to dispense with autonomy and instead place oneself as an artist in the service of a better cause. On

the other hand, it is itself again a picture painted by an autonomous artist, who perhaps means that he has the right or privilege to be able to do something in a self-determined way. In this respect however, he is perhaps also a role model for others. What he does is present the appearance of a better world in which autonomy is no longer merely an ideal that very few have to some extent realised, but has become universal. And in this respect, it is the idea of autonomy as self-determination – as in the long tradition from Friedrich Schiller to Theodor W. Adorno – and not just as self-assertion. That is a fundamental difference that I would like to make.

Kolja Reichert

I believe it is truly crucial to make a further distinction between the various concepts of autonomy that are in circulation. Doesn't Adorno's concept of autonomy offer the possibility of finding a way out of this personalisation and isolation into individual positions which are condemned to close themselves off further and further in automatic multiplication logics; in which the same forms of discourse are presented over and over again? I think that Adorno's concept of autonomy could really be made strong again, insisting that the artist is not a private subject, as represented in Rauch's painting. This is a corridor in which one can break out; aesthetic practice, not only making, but also viewing, criticism, the precise description of the picture, the complete continuum; not the description of one social constellation on one side of the work and then the other on the other side of the work, but the complete description of the constellation, in which every single brushstroke is connected with the social economic political world around it. That would be my plea following our conversation.

Wolfgang Ullrich

Yes, I can only agree that, in the case of the tradition of the concept of autonomy, which should be at least partially rehabilitated, there is a strongly utopian moment – and precisely the idea that what is at the moment perhaps only possible on an insular level should, in a better world, be given general validity. And this utopian moment, this positive concept of freedom, is something I cannot see at all in a painting like *Anbräuner*.

Kolja Reichert

Ladies and gentlemen, we would now like to hear from you. Thank you for letting us talk for so long.

Sabeth Buchmann

Thank you for the very interesting discussion. What strikes me right away with this painting by Immendorff – and I was inspired by the dialogue about it – is this: Where does the figure of the critic appear in the history of modern iconography? For we have, on the one hand with Immendorff and on the other hand with Courbet, who includes Charles Baudelaire in his studio picture, the advocate and protagonist of the modern concept of autonomy, a dialectic of autonomy and partisanship. Courbet also takes sides in the leftist struggle. Here, we have autonomy or partisanship –and one could say, to put it bluntly, this is what Neo Rauch does in his otherwise relatively trite picture (trite because it is

freed from allegory), the partisanship for an iridescence into the right-wing milieu. In this respect, he stands in such a tradition of realism. There is an iconographic history to this.

What came to my mind in parallel was the debate in the early 1990s around Martin Kippenberger, Werner Büttner and Co., Albert Oehlen, where there was a critical revision by Helmut Draxler at the Kunstverein in Munich regarding the provocative or provocative potential of Kippenberger's *Ich kann beim besten Willen kein Hakenkreuz entdecken* (I Can't for the Life of Me Discover a Swastika, 1984). Draxler stated: »What was perhaps still interesting in the 1980s as a provocation against a social democratic consensus is – at the latest since Rostock, Hoyerswerda, Solingen – an affirmation of a right-wing form of occupying the cultural hegemony.« I wonder whether, in this context, Neo Rauch is yet another form of aggravation.

Wolfgang Ullrich

But not in the sense of an »ironic gesture« or an »artistic playing with symbols«. Jonathan Meese has already been mentioned earlier, an artist who also tried to bring the most heavily burdened symbol – the Nazi salute – back into the field of art and thus give it back its polyvalence. I would also evaluate artists in the early 1990s in this sense – Kippenberger, Oehlen, Büttner – who wanted to set a counterweight with, one could justifiably say, a very arrogant self-image as artists. But I cannot see such a playful or even ironic moment with Neo Rauch; he genuinely sees himself as oppressed, in the »opinion corridor«, in the »GDR 2.0«, and surrounded by informers and people who are not well-disposed towards him. Neo Rauch thus also assumes, for example, that the label »New Leipzig School« was only introduced to denounce the Leipzig painters. If one now puts this into a political context and sees that Neo Rauch is not alone here, it takes on a different connotation and also a different explosive power. In my article, I also mentioned other artists, and if you live in Leipzig you can also notice one or two other things. I really do find it exciting to describe this difference again, which is also overturned in the self-image of the artists. Certainly, Kippenberger and Oehlen were similarly androcentric like Rauch, but it still had a different connotation.

Kolja Reichert

Yes, their practice represented a certain opening. One can always ask of course, »opening to whom?«, but I think there was an opening in the sense that one could enter into this discourse. One could enter into this performance of freedom of movement and polyvalence, and it was not a matter of defining and asserting positions, although the economic aspect always works against this of course. In this interesting line of tradition that you have opened up, Sabeth, you can also see Courbet's painting *The Studio* as an anticipation of today's economy of attention, in which it is a matter of reinforcement and in which one depicts one's own network, absolutely; but in Rauch's work, I think the sad thing about this picture, this impression of a lack of freedom and narrowness that I feel comes from the fact that it is ultimately not just partisanship for the right spectrum of opinion but partisanship for itself; for me, it is a symptom of this sense of being trapped in one's own position. This is, I think, regardless of the political positioning, a certain portrait of the

subject formation that is dominant today, the profile that has to constantly strengthen and defend itself against attacks.

Sabine Maria Schmidt

I wanted to ask again about a thought that I actually found most fascinating. It is, of course, pleasant for us to reawaken art historical traditions or to think again about a painterly style in detail and about criteria of quality with regard to painting, but to be honest, I don't think that makes much sense and is actually almost naïve, because the main picture is the auction picture, which for me is like a triumphal picture – you have your trophy that you present. More than anything else, you can distribute this picture in a completely different way. As long as this iconoclastic controversy took place in the features section, I found it super interesting. There's a painter and a critic, and that's somehow a cultivated or more or less uncultivated dialogue. But it's now continuing further, it's now in other forums, and it's actually about a completely different political issue. You made an important point; the whole thing is actually an attack on an entire professional field or on intellectuals, and I think it would be more exciting if we were to think about what is next. Let's wait until the picture is pulled out again, or until the next one appears. I'd rather talk about that again.

Kolja Reichert

I would like to reiterate my point. I believe that we can no longer recoup this image of the real estate entrepreneur who purchased this painting at auction. But we can continue to look at it, and we can continue to look at the original picture or the reproductions that are available to us. I feel more empowered when I describe this picture than when I say that this political positioning of Neo Rauch is highly problematic. It is, but I have learned other things, and I am paid for other things, fortunately. I have the rare privilege of having a lot of space for my thoughts in a big newspaper, and I feel the obligation to use this space to analyse pictures as well. I think it is crucial to look at how the picture was painted. I think it is absolutely important to show what is bad about it. It is important to take it apart, to take apart the whole constellation, the networks behind it, of course, but also the painting itself. If we give up on demonstrating to our readers the tools of the trade – also demonstrating the joy of these processes, how to describe a picture and how it falls apart through the description or through the confrontation with other pictures; exposes itself through comparisons with other pictures, until every single decision has really become transparent and the picture loses its power – if we give up on that just because we are also in this shaky logic of forced positioning then we lose our own freedom, and then we also lose our power to provide for freedom.

Wolfgang Ullrich

When I, as an art sociologist, analyse what Rauch did with the painting, with the auction, how he now deals with the reproduction rights; and when I look at the whole context, it is much easier for me, as a critic, to come to a clear position than if I had to decide whether it is a good or a bad painting. That's why, for me, art criticism is primarily art sociology, and after a case like this, even more so. I see it as my task as an art critic to bring

art sociological categories to bear. This does not mean that one should not look closely at how something is painted or in what iconographic traditions it stands.

Kolja Reichert

When Banksy's *Girl with a Balloon* was auctioned at Sotheby's, I didn't feel responsible at all to report on it; better not show it at all. That is the big question today, *cancel* or criticise, *de-platform* or criticise. After half a year, when the picture suddenly appeared in the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart hanging next to a Rembrandt, and I felt how great the malaise among artists in Stuttgart was, I understood it is my damned duty to explain what is uninteresting about this work of art and this action, and to lower the journalistic value – that had accumulated massively by simply reproducing the same story over and over again – by contemplating and analysing. Why is it uninteresting; why is the hanging daft; why is the combination with Rembrandt absurd; why is the discursive framing by the Staatsgalerie dishonest? This is just one anecdote, but many are thankful that someone did it. Of course, this only happens when we make our presumptions, when we make our subjective view of art available. Only then is it possible to make a reversal in this multiplication logic. This is not a plea against art sociology, but I do think that both are important.

Wolfgang Ullrich

For me as a sociologist of art, it was not only a question when it appeared in the Staatsgalerie, but rather already when it appeared at Sotheby's, at the auction, and even before this shredding story took place. The fact alone that such a work of art is given a prominent place as the last lot at such an auction in such a place is an interesting finding from the point of view of art sociology, and reveals how something has changed, since a globalised art market has no problem with someone like Banksy, unlike someone who still has a rather conservative, classical concept of artistic autonomy.

Jamie Keesling

I would like to ask a question about autonomy within emancipated politics. Adorno's concept of aesthetic autonomy refers more to art as such than to the artist. The emancipatory potential of art lies in its ability to exist both inside and outside society. The ability of criticism to acknowledge this possibility of freedom associated with art is dependent on emancipatory or left-wing politics, historically seen from Adorno's perspective.

I wonder if or how you think about the limits of our ability to speak about art from a standpoint of autonomy, to criticise it. If we are faced today with a complete lack of coherent or effective emancipatory politics – there is no international left-wing network today – to what extent does this leave us with criticism as a way of talking about the autonomy of art, or art in general? There is no left wing today, there are no emancipatory politics, so how can we think about the autonomy of art, which is substantial for the freedom of art, if these are not given? Is this a factor, the ability to criticise, to speak about art?

Wolfgang Ullrich

I see my modest task as, at the most, trying once again to recall the tradition

of the concept of autonomy, and also to recall the complexity that has always lay in this concept of autonomy, in order then to see which strands of the history of ideas one would like to make stronger again, which one would rather criticise and adopt.

Kolja Reichert

My answer would be: on the one hand, I think our freedom is quite enormous, the freedom to find forms, to express and describe things, to change perceptions; and that, I believe, is our central task as critics. And then it is also important to keep the categories clearly distinct from one another. I have the impression that, since the 1990s, we have experienced a mixing of categories between artistic and political vocabulary, and sometimes it seems to me that both art and politics are weakened in the process. One cannot of course assume that every work of art is equally political. I think that the intrinsic value of the aesthetic – and I now sound as if I was born a hundred years ago – but the intrinsic value of the aesthetic is, I think, so important today. I am now re-reading Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* because I have the feeling that, in a time in which everything is so thoroughly aestheticised, and so much politics and commerce is done with aesthetics, we must rediscover the freedom that lies in the aesthetic, a freedom also to step out of our enclosures and once again allow and demand polyvalence. This takes place nowhere better than in the field of art – except perhaps online in memes, where it also works.

Wolfgang Ullrich

I would disagree somewhat. I believe the aesthetic and the political have never been so clearly separated. One has often wished for this, so here we are again dealing with an ideal that has always existed, to understand autonomy in such a way that everything beyond the aesthetic plays no role at first. But especially someone like Schiller, and almost all the great thinkers of the concept of autonomy, were highly political figures.

Kolja Reichert

But the precision and persistence with which he attempts to set politics and aesthetics in relation to one another is something I do not see today.

Wolfgang Ullrich

That's true; but we have, of course, a dangerous mix today, especially if we stick to the right spectrum. Perhaps one more example in this context: Another artist I mention in my article in *Die Zeit* is a painter from Dresden, Sebastian Hennig, who is less interesting as a painter than as someone who is very strongly networked in the right-wing scene, and who last year wrote a book together with Björn Höcke titled *Nie zweimal in denselben Fluss* (Never Twice in the Same River). There is a key passage in the book when Höcke enthuses about Caspar David Friedrich, identifies with his *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, and describes his role as a politician in aesthetic categories of German Romanticism. The politician thus sees himself in the role of an artist – and here one can see how an understanding of autonomy that circulates in the political right in particular is given a completely different urgency.

Thomas Sterna

I would also like to come back to the fact that, under the conditions of attention capitalism, where attention is the main commodity – as Reckwitz presented this quite eloquently – this purely aesthetic view is always a bit problematic for me. When you look at who was present at this celebrity event where the painting was auctioned off, and who accompanied it without commentary, whether it was Christian Lindner [leader of the liberal Free Democratic Party of Germany] or some starlet from the cultural sector, then the question arises for me: What does it actually mean for a society when such an event goes smoothly, and at the end someone can stand there and say that he has the trophy and is now founding this ›Association for Common Sense‹? You really have to take into account what that means in total.

Wolfgang Ullrich

I totally agree. We have talked a lot about this event and the charity. Maybe just one more thought about it. A charity event where so much money flows is, of course, also a kind of protection for the artist. If you compare how Uwe Tellkamp was criticised in public discourse when he spoke out against the refugee policy during his speech in Dresden in 2018, and his own publishing house immediately distanced itself from him, then that is a big difference to what is happening with Neo Rauch. Too many people have too much to lose and therefore do a lot to make sure that someone like that never falls into discredit. Someone from another field has a much harder time.

Sebastian Baden

I would like to bring the concept of political iconography into the discussion. I worked together with Wolfgang Ullrich with students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe, and now that I work for a museum I believe the opportunity for us art critics, mediators and curators is to strengthen the analysis of this picture. That is why I can only support the idea of Kolja Reichert, who tries to describe what the picture Rauch painted is actually about and how badly it is painted – just as Aby Warburg and Michael Diers and Erwin Panofsky taught us to describe a picture.

It is just as important to disclose this to our readers and to talk about how propaganda and so-called right or left connoted images express themselves. Neo Rauch enters into this discourse; fortunately he has painted a picture, and since it is our profession to describe what he does, we should not only use this ability of ours to discuss this among ourselves in this room here, because I think we are all professional enough to know what kind of picture Rauch has painted. It is more relevant to bring the discussion to a wider audience. As Wolfgang Ullrich mentioned, his forum as a journalist is a very important organ and I would like to ask you why we do not strengthen this reading of political iconography – in the sense of Warburg – much more in the public. It may seem like old classroom wisdom but it is obviously once again relevant in times of ›alternative‹ politics.

Kolja Reichert

That is my opinion as well. I also do not wish to secure my position forever and keep it uncontaminated from problematic and right-wing contents. I wish for a certain

projection of the general, which, of course, always remains fictional but which allows me to say: in this society everyone has the right to be discussed and criticised and analysed, but above all every aesthetic production. In this respect, I would never have a problem with giving the art of someone from a different political camp the honour of art criticism. On the contrary, I think you have to look into the eyes of all these cowardly, hypocritical liars who claim that you can no longer say certain things – as if you had been allowed to say them without any problems in the past – and these strange rabbits jumping back and forth, who throw out ideas about certain things and then say they didn't mean it; these discourse shifters; you really have to look them in the eye and say: I'm not talking from my position alone, but let's adopt together a position of the general, the imaginary, and from which we can talk about your statements and your pictures. Your painting is bad for this and that reason, and if you don't join in the discussion and fraternise instead with yourself, then you lay no claim to this position of the general. But then you are also not entitled to the privileged role of a victim in a dictatorship of opinion.