GROSSBERG'S REALISM

ART, INDUSTRY, AND THE NEW PROCESSES OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The German artist Carl Grossberg produced pictures of machinery and architecture from the 1910s until his death in 1940. Precise, realist, yet often dreamlike, his pictures – associated with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* – are presented here as dynamic responses not only to recent artistic developments but also to key questions about manual and intellectual labor in an environment increasingly given to technological rationalization. Because Grossberg's detailed pictures rarely portray humans, his work has been said to affirm the prerogatives of Weimar-era capital and to simply catalogue its dehumanizing effects. But he instead reveals the inadequacy of such critical analytics, crafting a realism based on an unstable synthesis of old and new techniques, of human and technological capacities.

KEYWORDS

Carl Grossberg; Neue Sachlichkeit; Realism; Objectivity; Weimar; Rationalization.

It was in Germany, said Alfred North Whitehead, that one could first apprehend "the boundless possibilities of technological advance".[1] The year of Whitehead's statement, 1925, was the year of *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, a watershed exhibition mapping a recent wave of German figurative painting that many observers viewed as a response to the subjective excess of Expressionism. Curated by Gustav F. Hartlaub, the exhibition opened that June in Mannheim, "a city of work and art", in the words of its soon-to-be mayor Hermann Heimerich.[2] Mannheim would have proven exemplary for Whitehead: its rapid growth during the Weimar period depended on the continuous expansion of its machine and electrical industries. At first, the expansion left the city's "cultural traditions [...] relatively sparse", Hartlaub observed. He aimed, in turn, to establish "a cultural tradition oriented toward the future with fresh daring".[3] *Neue Sachlichkeit* represented one pillar of this cultural foundation; its dynamic pictures of urban personnel (by artists such as George Grosz) alongside demure genre scenes (à la Georg Schrimpf) together broadcast the diverse social content and painterly approaches of the day.

Another pillar would have been the functionalist art and design on display in *Typen neuer Baukunst* at the Kunsthalle later that year, which communicated narrowing formal and material gaps between artworks and commodities. To apprehend the gaps, Hartlaub suggested, was a task of not just local but also national importance, with not just economic but also existential stakes. Due to "advanced industrialization", he wrote in the second exhibition's booklet, Germany was now "deeply coerced into the new, monstrous processes of life".[4] One after the other, *Neue Sachlichkeit* and *Typen neuer Baukunst* outlined cultural traditions at once invested in and distinct from these processes, accepting new (even if monstrous) conditions while conserving vital aspects of the "old". Hartlaub had concluded *Neue Sachlichkeit*'s catalogue by lamenting the ongoing chaos of the period; in the wake of mechanized war, revolutions, and inflation, fine art, he claimed, proved at once timely and timeless. It could confirm "what is most immediate, certain, and durable: truth and

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Alfred North Whitehead, *Science in the Modern World*, New York 1925, 96.

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Quoted and translated in Ulrike Lorenz, "Constructing the World" in the "City of Work and Art", in: *Constructing the World. Art and Economy 1919–1939* (exh. cat. Mannheim, Kunsthalle Mannheim), ed. by ead. and Eckhart J. Gillen, Mannheim 2018, 13–17, here 15.

3
Quoted and translated in ibid., 15.

4
Ibid., 16. Translation altered; see G. F. Hartlaub, Die Aufgabe, in: *Ausstellung Typen neuer Baukunst*, Mannheim 1925, 2–6, here 3.

craft".[5] This paper asks how Hartlaub's temporal contradiction – art as both tradition- and future-oriented, as engaged with both persisting processes of craft and nascent processes of rationalization – animated the work of artists affiliated with the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, above all Carl Grossberg.[6] In content and form, Grossberg incorporated recent developments in art and technology into his work while retaining signs of the vitality that those same developments threatened to sap.

Based mostly outside of Würzburg, Grossberg is often framed as the preeminent *Neue Sachlichkeit* painter of machinery and the built environment. From around 1923 until his death in 1940, he produced paintings, drawings, and prints showcasing machines, factory interiors, and other human-made things with hard-edged precision: a stark mimesis defined by attention to outline and surface detail, though not always naturalistic color or shading. Few Grossberg works feature human figures; in those that do, they are mostly small and non-descript. Although he portrayed spaces of contemporary labor, his images do not seem motivated by the social commentaries of earlier French and German Realists, like Gustave Courbet and Wilhelm Leibl; of contemporary Socialist Realists such as Otto Griebel and Otto Nagel, whose pictures honored the subjectivities of blue-collar workers (and whose activities included political organizing); or of erstwhile Dadaists such as Grosz and Georg Scholz, who satirized industrial bigwigs and the German middle classes. Critics of the time, in turn, may have argued that Grossberg's Realism presents a naïve or cynical view of social relations as always already reified – an objective reality that forecloses subjective expression. At times, Grossberg's attitude toward technology indeed sounded affirmative, even utopian. In a 1934 letter, for example, he rebuffed the "people who transfer their fundamental aversion to any kind of technology to my painting" and found that "the tremendous wealth of new forms in the world of technology has also fundamentally changed the themes of art".[7]

Responsive to technology, his statements nonetheless insert a separation between it and his work. As his commitment to the slow process of painterly representation – as opposed to the functionalism on view in *Typen neuer Baukunst*, more commensurate with the conventional forms and temporalities of modernity – might suggest, technological development, to Grossberg, did not represent an unequivocal good. In 1932 he expressed some doubt about its

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G. F. Hartlaub, Zum Geleit, in: *Ausstellung "Neue Sachlichkeit"*. Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus, Mannheim 1925, n.p.

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Grossberg was not in the Mannheim exhibition but became associated with the tendency quickly through shows like *Neue Sachlichkeit* at Karl Nierendorf's Berlin gallery in 1927.

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Quoted in Hans-Werner Schmidt, Carl Grossberg. Bilder eines "ganz modernen Menschen", 1920–1935, in: *Carl Grossberg. Retrospektive zum 100. Geburtstag* (exh. cat. Wuppertal, Von der Heydt Museum), ed. by Sabine Fehlemann, Cologne 1994, 65–79, here 76.

spread. "I've always been interested in technology's advances," he told a collector, "but I have felt that we have lost some important things in this progress."[8] Just as the rationalizing environment gave him a subject, it conditioned his work as an artist and his sense of what shaped reality in the years preceding that statement. This paper considers how it did, what it meant for the Realism that Grossberg elaborated, and what "important things" may have been lost in the process.

I. The Head, the Heart, and the Hand

Midsize cities like Mannheim owed their mid-1920s development to intersecting factors. World War I had driven factories to expand and diversify their outputs and workforces; the Republic supported lavish spending and cartelization; in 1924, the Dawes Plan alleviated Germany's reparation payments and helped to fortify US influence on German culture and business, including processes of rationalization. While the meaning of rationalization remains debated, and although the extent of its institution is often overstated in art-historical literature on the period, it proved significant, in theory and practice, in industrial settings as well as in cultural discourse. Drawing on precepts from Frederick W. Taylor, Henry Ford, and Wilhelmine industry, rationalization emboldened the intellectual capacities of the few (management, engineers) and threatened to denigrate the intellectual and physical capacities of the many.[9] German workers of the period thus fought for legal, technical, and symbolic protections against perceived and actual losses in jobs, rights, and skills.[10] To modernist observers, varied art forms provided analogues to workplace rationalization: functionalism, photography, the readymade – anything that seemed to stem more from ideas or technological apparatuses than old and slow techniques like painting and drawing. The temporality of the factory was uniform, that of the studio disjointed.

A concern of workers and artists, rationalization became an issue, too, for critics on the left and the right who saw it as a figure for capital's scientistic disregard for humanity. With rationalization, wrote Georg Lukács in 1923, "a man's own activity, his own labor becomes something objective and independent of him". What follows is the "progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and

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Quoted and translated in Melissa Venator, Technology's World of Forms. Carl Grossberg's Industrial Art, in: *Carl Grossberg. Works in the Merrill C. Berman Collection*, Cambridge, MA 2018, 12–34, here 14.

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For key summaries of the rationalization discourse, see Joan Campbell, *Joy in Work, German Work. The National Debate, 1800–1945*, Princeton, NJ 1989, and Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity. American Business and the Modernization of Germany*, New York 1994.

10
On deskilling in the period, see Anson Rabinbach, *The Eclipse of the Utopias of Labor*, New York 2018, 12–20.

individual attributes of the worker".[11] In Weimar factories, scientific management transformed labor into an "abstract, rational, specialized" practice. Workers lacked the relations to and the knowledge of the finished product they would have possessed in earlier stages of development. For Lukács, this dynamic heralded both objective and subjective effects: objective, insofar as a new "world of objects and relations between things springs into being (the world of commodities and their movements on the market)"; and subjective, because the worker's separation from and dependence upon "non-human objectivity" (the entrenched social forces that shape a consumer economy) started to condition their "psychological attributes".[12] With their skills, social relations, even personalities transformed practically and symbolically into quantities, the worker in the age of rationalization, in effect, became a thing: no longer a human as such. Lukács's account of this phenomenon – what he termed reification – proved decisive in period discourse. Béla Balázs extrapolated the analysis as a critique of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which he derided as "the aesthetic of the production line". To produce art that followed the scientific precept of "objectivity" was to present as real a bourgeois illusion. "Facts", Balázs claimed, "do not amount to the truth."[13]

For left-wing modernists like Balázs, the arts still had the ability, even the prerogative, to reveal truth. But artists could not merely depict contemporary social phenomena, objects, and modes of production, as did many affiliated with the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Rather, they should engage these conditions on critical and material registers. Balázs posited film as the most truthful medium due to its collaborative nature. Film "excludes the possibility of absolute individualism", he argued, whereas "[w]riting, painting or composing music are all solitary pursuits".[14] His disavowal of painting pointed not just to structural and ideological concerns but technological and temporal ones as well. Just as some socialists hoped that machine-powered rationalization might liberate rather than alienate the worker, making their jobs easier and securing them more leisure time, proponents of the avant-garde advocated for the use of new media in art to help its producers and consumers keep pace with modern life. "The visual image has been expanded and even the modern lens is no longer tied to the narrow limits of our eye", wrote László Moholy-Nagy, then teaching at the Bauhaus; "no manual means of representation (pencil, brush, etc.) is capable of

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Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* [1923], transl. by Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, MA 1971, 87–88.

12
Ibid.

13
Béla Balázs, Ideological Remarks [1924], in: Erica Carter (ed.), *Early Film Theory. Visible Man and the Spirit of Film*, New York 2011, 211–230, here 222–223.

14
Ibid., 212.

arresting fragments of the world seen like this".[15] Moholy suggests a belief that new technologies, in altering the visual environment, have reconstituted human perceptual capacities, and that art should support this "new vision".

Yet new technologies and processes rarely altered human life and labor to the degree that Moholy suggested.[16] Transformation of the human via technology, in the early-to-mid 1920s, presented more a theoretical than a material problem; either way, its possible solutions filtered through the vibrant critical and historical discourses of modern art. In 1925 the socialist critic Lu Märten posited that artists and intellectuals could aid the proletarian's cause by helping to "restore to labor the content that has been stripped from it by the machines". To Märten, this meant not the abandonment of mental labor or technology but reconfiguring human relationships to the latter: "by recognizing machines as the given means of production, by retaining dictatorial control over them, and by acknowledging their specific truth to materials, an aspect they share with earlier craftsmanship".[17] If improving the worker's material conditions, Märten concluded, was more important "than understanding [what] a picture is", art provided a heuristic structure for evaluating work writ large. In 1903 she had already drawn on John Ruskin, who, after the first industrial revolution, analyzed labor in formal terms and venerated the undivided work of the artist-craftsperson. Märten echoes what Ruskin "hoped for all work", she writes: "that it be of the head, the heart, and the hand".[18] Märten did not harbor a romantic view of a world without machines; instead, she imagined a system where labor might exist in reciprocity with technology, helping humans to shape their environment as it shaped them. Art served her as a model for humanized labor, for its objects register the subjects who made them, their skills, their identities. Theorized in the Wilhelmine era, this analytic gained perceived necessity during Germany's so-called "rationalization boom" of the mid-1920s, when machines increased in prominence.[19]

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László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film* [1925], transl. by Janet Seligman, London 1967, 7.

16
On the uneven development of rationalization, see Moritz Föllmer, Which Crisis? Which Modernity? New Perspectives on Weimar Germany, in: Jochen Hung, Godela Weiss-Sussex, and Geoff Wilkes (eds.), *Beyond Glitter and Doom. The Contingency of the Weimar Republic*, Munich, 2012, 19–30.

17
Lu Märten, Kunst und Proletariat, in: *Die Aktion* 15/12, 1925, 663–668, repub. as Art and Proletariat, in: *October* 178, 2021, 20–26, here 21.

18
Id., Die künstlerischen Momente der Arbeit in alter und neuer Zeit, in: *Die Zeit* 51, 1903, 800–804, repub. as Artistic Aspects of Labor in Old and New Times, in: *October* 178, 2021, 15–19, here 17.

19
The phrase "rationalization boom" is credited to Otto Bauer; see Nolan, Visions of Modernity, 132.

Märten felt that avant-garde art best advanced her argument, yet the relation of form to left politics remained central to debates of the postwar years. Communist critic Gertrud Alexander, by contrast, posited naturalism as a proper vessel for working-class consciousness despite its traditional bourgeois base, while the Cologne artist and unaffiliated leftist Franz W. Seiwert split the difference, advocating for a simplified, quasi-pictographic figuration that, he thought, could communicate itself as unalienated labor through facture – a legible index of the hand's work.[20] Grosz, when justifying his 1921 turn to more straightforward figuration, foreshadowed Seiwert's argument, positing painting as "manual labor, no different from any other".[21] His paintings from those years, like *Untitled* (1920), in the collection of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, portray object-like figures as if to literalize the felt phenomena of reification. Whereas Grosz framed his vocation as subject to the stultifying conditions of the working class, Grossberg's images of rationalized spaces indicate instead that art secures for its producer some distinction. Not unlike for Märten or Seiwert, for Grossberg painting heralded symbolic liberation as an activity based upon manual and mental dexterity, as a matrix of outmoded and emergent skills that rationalization could abet but not replace. Rather than show labor as content, he addresses his pictures to its material frameworks, discursive fields, and structures of feeling. In other words, if he does not straightforwardly uplift work, he does not merely aestheticize it either, as did some of his contemporaries. In the catalogue for *Kunst und Technik* – a 1928 exhibition in Essen that included Grossberg – the curator Kurt Wilhelm-Kästner perceived a transfer between works of art, engineering, and manual labor, arguing that the "gap between working and artistic creation is thus bridged".[22] More than Wilhelm-Kästner's "unified artistic form of expression", Grossberg presents art in a lineage at once humanist and entwined with, but distinct from, the materialities and the temporalities of contemporary factory labor.

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For Märten's debate with Alexander, see Manfred Brauneck (ed.), *Die Rote Fahne. Kritik, Theorie, Feuilleton 1918–1933*, Munich 1973, 121–128; see also Martin I. Gaughan, *The German Left and Aesthetic Politics. Cultural Politics between the Second and Third Internationals*, Leiden 2022. On Seiwert, see Lynette Roth, *Painting as a Weapon. Progressive Cologne 1920–1933. Seiwert–Hoerle–Arntz*, Cologne 2008.

21
George Grosz, Meine neuen Bilder, in: *Das Kunstblatt* 5/1, 1921, repub. as My New Pictures, in: Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, Malden, MA 1992, 270–271, here 271.

22
Kurt Wilhelm-Kästner, Vorwort, in: *Kunst und Technik. Ausstellung anläßlich der Tagung des Vereins Deutscher Ingenieure* (exh. cat. Essen, Museum Folkwang), Essen 1928, 8–12, here 12.

II. The Exactitude of a Modern Ball Bearing

Grossberg was born Georg Carl Wilhelm Grandmontagne in 1894, in Elberfeld, a town known for its fabric industry and suspension railway.[23] (His father, a Catholic civil servant of French-Huguenot descent, Germanized the family name in 1914.) After two semesters at the Technischen Hochschule in Aachen, where he studied painting with the impressionist August von Brandis, Grossberg transferred to the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt, in 1914, for a more expansive educational program, with courses in the sciences, architecture, and art history (the last of these, with the nationalist art historian Wilhelm Pinder). It was then and there, according to Dietlinde Hamburger, whose dissertation research forms the basis of my account, that Grossberg first engaged deeply with the techniques and iconography of the old masters. While he had come to Darmstadt to train as an architect, Grossberg's focus turned to fine art.[24] Yet, as in Aachen, his time in Darmstadt was brief, cut short by his service in World War I. Uncertain of his future after combat, he moved in late 1918 to Weimar, where he hoped to study at the local Hochschule für bildende Kunst. "I intend to devote myself to painting", Grossberg wrote in his application.[25]

The status of painting, in practice as in politics, fell into flux after the war (if it had not already). In April 1919, the school of fine art (*bildende Kunst*), where Grossberg had begun his program, merged with the local school of arts and crafts to form the Staatliches Bauhaus. While minimal evidence remains of Grossberg's time at the school, where he studied until 1921 under the tutelage of Lyonel Feininger, its practical lessons and theoretical precepts conditioned his production thereafter. In 1919 the Bauhaus published its first official "program", with text by Walter Gropius and a woodcut of a Gothic cathedral by Feininger. Gropius begins by diagnosing decline: "Today the arts exist in isolation."[26] The problem owed in large part to specialization and stratification in art's education, production, and circulation. Invoking a pre-capitalist Catholic past in his text, as Feininger does in his print, Gropius posits that different art practices "must be merged once more with the workshop". Such holistic, undivided modes of production would cultivate not

23
On Grossberg's upbringing, see Dietlinde Hamburger, *Carl Grossberg. Industrie und Imagination in der Malerei der Neuen Sachlichkeit*, PhD dissertation, Kassel 1990, and Eva Grossberg, Was bleibt, ist sein Werk, in: Fehlemann, Carl Grossberg, 8–31. On his life and work into the 1930s, see also a forthcoming catalogue: Adrian Sudhalter (ed.), *Carl Grossberg. New Forms in the World of Technology*, Munich 2025.

24
See Victor Dirksen, *Carl Grossberg. Sein Malschaffen 1920 bis 1940*, Dortmund 1942.

25
Quoted in Hamburger, Carl Grossberg, 28.

26
Walter Gropius, *Programm des Staatlichen Bauhauses*, Weimar 1919, repub. as Program of the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar, in: Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (eds.), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, Berkeley, CA 1994, 435–438, here 435.

just each artist's "skill" but their "joy in artistic creation" as well.[27] If Märten hoped this joy might be accessed by workers in the factories, Gropius retains a special place for the arts. While they deploy "craft", they are "not a 'profession'", he writes, and they are thus incompatible with modern approaches to instruction and organization. Gropius's pamphlet offered a preliminary program of topics that would cover "all practical and scientific areas of creative work".[28] And if instructors like Feininger deployed abstract forms in their own art, early lessons at the school gave credence to traditional methods of depiction by observation and copying (in drawing, more than painting). Students performed both semi-progressive drawing exercises ("free-hand sketching from memory and imagination") and traditional academic ones ("heads, live models, and animals [...] landscapes, figures, plants, and still lifes").[29]

Like his teacher Feininger, Grossberg produced semi-abstract woodcuts at the Bauhaus. To the modernist critic Paul Westheim, the medium offered a privileged means for German artists of the period to "return to a primitive style and to a manual craftsmanship" – a form of outmoded national handcraft that could nevertheless acknowledge the demands of mechanical (re)production.[30] Formally, Grossberg's pictures from these years adapt Feininger's take on cubism; a drawing, *Oberweimar* (1919) [Fig. 1], depicts fracturing architectural and geometric structures mapped by internally shaded grids. The younger artist elaborated this formal idiom in painting, in works like *Häuser, Turm und Gebirge* (1919–1920) [Fig. 2], where he casts an empty mountain town in vibrant, non-naturalistic light and color. More traditional in his painterly methods than Feininger was, Grossberg employed a version of Renaissance technique, layering resin and linseed oil on the surface of canvases to better grade the color.[31] Already, he seemed attached to the idea and practice of artisanal skill as applied to, and legible through, painting while also

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Gropius's equation of "skill" and "joy" was common among reformist theorists of the period and, for better or worse, seems appealing to Grossberg as well; see Campbell, Joy in Work, 137–148.

28
Gropius, Program, 436. On the meaning of craft (*Handwerk*) to the early Bauhaus and its imbrication with liberal and reactionary politics dating to the mid-1800s, see John V. Maciuika, *Before the Bauhaus. Architecture, Politics, and the German State, 1890–1920*, New York 2005.

29
Gropius removed life drawing from the school's new plan of 1921, perhaps not coincidentally the year Grossberg left; see Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects. Making Artists in the American University*, Berkeley, CA 1999, 82.

30
Quoted and translated in Charles W. Haxthausen, Walter Gropius and Lyonel Feininger. Bauhaus Manifesto, 1919, in: *Bauhaus 1919-1933. Workshops for Modernity* (exh. cat. New York, The Museum of Modern Art), ed. by Barry Bergdoll, Leah Dickerman, and David Frankel, New York 2009, 64–67, here 64.

31
Hamburger, Carl Grossberg, 68. For Otto Dix, who used this process in the mid-to-late 1920s, it "was fastidious, if not tedious". Bruce F. Miller, Otto Dix and His Oil-Tempera Technique, in: *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74, 1987, 332–355, here 332.

[Fig. 1]
Carl Grossberg, *Oberweimar*, 1920, pencil on paper, 33 × 29 cm, Rye, New York, the Merrill C. Berman Collection.

[Fig. 2]
Carl Grossberg, *Häuser, Turm und Gebirge*, 1919–1920, oil on canvas, 75.5 × 55 cm, location unknown, collection unknown.

commensurate with new developments in artistic (and non-artistic) production. So, too, did his peers associated with the term *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Westheim suggested in 1931, for example, that painters like Grosz and Otto Dix produced art "with a precise technique of drawing that in its line has something of the exactitude of a modern ball bearing".[32] From the Bauhaus onward, Grossberg mobilized this equivalence (the precision variously required of academic art and rationalized machinery) and, just the same, deferred its implications (that the one might be subsumed by the other).

III. The *Würzburger Sachliche*

In 1921 Grossberg left the Bauhaus, met the violinist Tilde Schwarz, and settled with her in Sommerhausen, a small town outside Würzburg. He would remain in occasional touch with Feininger and Gropius while cultivating an expanded art-world network that included the German-American precisionist Stefan Hirsch, the gallerist Karl Nierendorf, and the art historian Justus Bier, who lived in nearby Nuremberg.[33] Bier and Grossberg wrote to and visited each other often; together, they formed part of the Franconian "avant-garde" centered in Würzburg. The city had lacked a vibrant art scene before World War I. Without an arts academy, its "artistically ambitious people first learned a trade (e.g., stonemason, lime washer, lithographer)", writes Bettina Keß.[34] Some established artists maintained small workshops or operated private painting and drawing schools, but it was not until the early 1920s that local artists took training seriously. Artist associations soon formed (motivated more by social and professional opportunities than the revolutionary politics of some Berlin counterparts), and modern art appeared in venues such as the Neues Graphisches Kabinett. The city's new artistic culture represented "forward-thrusting youth" to the "old age" of what had prevailed, in the words of painter Heiner Dikreiter: "fresh air" to extant "mustiness".[35] In 1928, Dikreiter christened Grossberg and two Realist colleagues, Hans Otto Baumann and Fritz Mertens,

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Quoted and translated in James A. van Dyke, *Franz Radziwill and the Contradictions of German Art History, 1919–45*, Ann Arbor, MI 2011, 22.

33
On Grossberg, Hirsch, and Bier, see Andrew Hemingway, *The Mysticism of Money. Precisionist Painting and Machine Age America*, London 2013, 84–95.

34
Bettina Keß, Konservative "Bildlesmalerei" gegen neue Ausdruckskunst. Kunstleben im Würzburg der Weimarer Republik, in: ead. and Beate Reese (eds.), *Tradition und Aufbruch. Würzburg und die Kunst der 1920er Jahre*, Würzburg 2003, 9–23, here 9–10.

35
Quoted in ibid., 9.

as the *Würzburger Sachliche*, a testament to the regional diffusion of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.[36]

In paintings of 1922 and 1923, Grossberg simplified his post-cubist style, rendering architectural objects as assembled geometric forms, their identities or functions indicated through basic details, like windows. At the same time, he had started to craft more rigorous drawings and prints of the built environment, leading to a series of drawings of the Würzburg printing press plant Koenig & Bauer in 1924. A pioneer in the production of steam-powered presses, Koenig & Bauer had grown consistently since its founding a century earlier; like many firms in the 1920s, it hired local artists to document its facilities.[37] Grossberg depicts its factory with fastidious outline and selective depth. In an image of the exterior, shadows cast a heavy mark across the building; there is formal variation absent from his Bauhaus-era work, like fluting at the top of the smokestack and modeled windows that position the architecture as material, not just surface [Fig. 3]. Inside the factory, Grossberg showcases various production technologies. Often, a machine occupies the center, with the background faded or left untouched. In *Maschinenhalle* (1924) [Fig. 4], he positions a large turbine in a corner. The back wall is faint, as if Grossberg's pencil barely touched the paper. Carefully shaded, thrust forward by steep perspective, and textured by its surrounding accoutrements, the picture functions as what the architectural historian Daniela Lamberini might call (in a Renaissance context) not a technical drawing but a "portrait", one that naturalizes, empowers, and abstracts its referent.[38] Viewing it, one could not build the machine but rather appreciate its look and imagine its power. As much as *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Grossberg evokes Franz Roh's concurrent term for a similar body of painting, "magical realism". In such art, Roh perceived magic, like a sort of subjectivity, emanating from real objects, reenchanting the rationalized world.[39]

Grossberg, too, signals what Westheim called the "machine romanticism" that guided aesthetic and technological thought of the 1920s and beyond.[40] Ernst Jünger, a reactionary modernist, claimed in 1929: "Ours is the first generation to begin to reconcile itself

36
Beate Reese, Die "Würzburger Sachlichen". Carl Grossberg, Hans Otto Baumann, Fritz Mertens, in: Keß and Reese, Tradition und Aufbruch, 75–99, here 75.

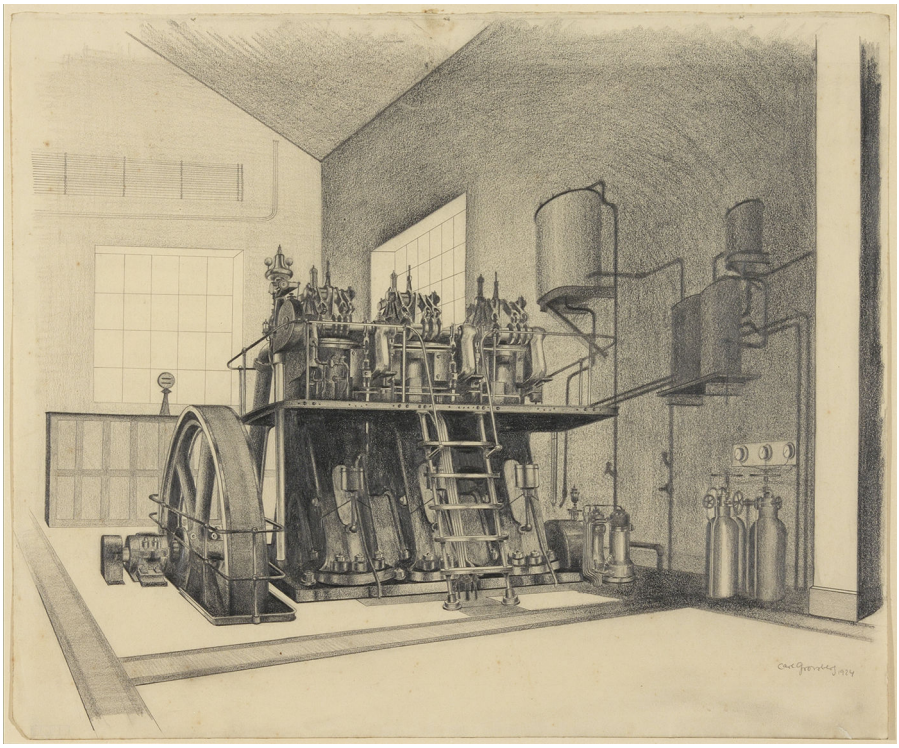
37
On Koenig & Bauer, see Hamburger, Carl Grossberg, 178, and the company website (December 28, 2022).

38
Daniela Lamberini, Machines in Perspective. Technical Drawings in Unpublished Treatises and Notebooks of the Italian Renaissance, in: *Studies in the History of Art* 59, 2003, 212–233, here 218–220.

39
Franz Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus – Magischer Realismus. Probleme der neuester Europäischen Malerei*, Leipzig 1925.

40
Paul Westheim, Maschinenromantik, in: *Das Kunstblatt* 1, 1923, 33–40.

[Fig. 3]
Carl Grossberg, *Industrieanlage mit Schornstein (Koenig & Bauer, Würzburg)*, 1924, graphite on paper, 49 × 40.8 cm, Munich, Galerie Michael Hasenclever.



[Fig. 4]
Carl Grossberg, *Maschinenhalle (Koenig & Bauer, Würzburg)*, 1924, graphite on paper, 48.6 × 63.5 cm, Rye, New York, the Merrill C. Berman Collection.

with the machine, and see in it not only the useful but the beautiful as well."[41] The liberal critic Fritz Stahl (the pen name of Siegfried Lilienthal) understood the machine and its industrial setting as not beautiful, per se, but *sachlich*, a term which had come to suggest a certain refinement – the absence, as Stahl writes, of "whim or randomness".[42] If Jünger's beauty dovetails with Roh's pulsating magic, for Stahl the machinic *Sachlichkeit* means that "[t]he realm of the fantastic is invisible, or at least no longer visible". Hidden from the surface, any trace of magic "lies in the work done, of which site photographs and drawings during construction give some idea".[43] The *Neue Sachlichkeit* pictures by artists involved with worker movements often portray labor not as fantastic but social and material; sympathetic modernists often translated economic and practical abstraction in the factory as artistic abstraction, as if illustrating the processes of mystification that underwrite industrial production. But Grossberg glances his subject from another angle. His machines are beautiful and abstract, lively but devoid of life. One never sees a worker, yet one still gets a sense, as Stahl thought, of "the work done" – only it is Grossberg's own work, in evidence through compositional choice and sometimes inconsistent draftsmanship. If, for Rudolf Hilferding, "Marxist method requires that in dealing with all social phenomena we should dissolve the fetishism of appearance by an analysis of reality", Grossberg may not dissolve but reconstitute the machine's fetishistic allure as integral to its real presentation.[44] He draws machines as he is drawn to them and they to him. While Balázs may have castigated Grossberg's approach, the two have similar aims in the end: to showcase that the artist "forms part of factual reality", a reality that includes "fantasies and dreams".[45]

In one of the first English-language accounts of Grossberg's work, Peter Selz wrote that the artist "accepted the technological world without criticism" and that this position would have perturbed critics on the left like Bertolt Brecht.[46] Although Grossberg

41
Quoted and translated in Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism. Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge 1986, 70.

42
Fritz Stahl, *Das Großkraftwerk Klingenberg*, Berlin 1928, 5–12, repub. as The Klingenberg Power Station at Berlin-Rummelsburg, in: Iain Boyd Whyte and David Frisby (eds.), *Metropolis Berlin 1880–1940*, Berkeley, CA 2012, 421–424, here 421.

43
Stahl, The Klingenberg Power Station, 424.

44
Rudolf Hilferding, Die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie in der Republik, in: *Rede auf dem Parteitag der SPD zu Kiel*, Berlin 1927, repub. as The Organized Economy, in: Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 68–72, here 71.

45
Balázs, Ideological Remarks, 223.

46
Peter Selz, The Artist as Social Critic, in: Louise Lincoln (ed.), *German Realism of the Twenties. The Artist as Social Critic*, Minneapolis 1980, 29–40, here 40.

did not come under this sort of scrutiny during his life (at least in print), Brecht's critique of art that took industry as its subject resonates. "[T]he simple 'reproduction of reality' says less than ever about that reality", he argued. "A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions."[47] The images that Brecht had in mind acknowledge the impact of technological rationalization on human production, but rather than challenge perceived reification, they naturalize it. ("Reality as such," he added, "has slipped into the domain of the functional.") While Brecht did not specify an offender, his ire implicates photographers like Albert Renger-Patzsch, who produced pictures of industrial spaces and products *sans* laborers from the mid-1920s onwards. Walter Benjamin invoked the title of Renger-Patzsch's 1928 book, *Die Welt ist schön*, when adding metaphysical texture to Brecht's critique. A photograph "can endow any soup can with cosmic significance", wrote Benjamin, "but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists".[48]

Precisely, for Renger-Patzsch, photography tokened universal access to technology. It was a "most reliable tool to render the impressions we experience" of not just nature but also the period's complex devices.[49] The critic Walter Petry adopted a similar position, arguing that the "purely objective element" of photography – its mediation of human agency – better established the quality of *Sachlichkeit* than painting did.[50] Painting, like any "art", "subjectivizes the object", Petry wrote, "and the limits of the respective subjectivity become the limits of the artistic depiction". Photography, of course, does not preclude the photographer's subjective decisions; it is not purely objective; it reveals materiality through its own kind of facture.[51] But many critics and practitioners in the 1920s thought otherwise, finding it suited to depicting the newest technology because it, itself, was a machinic process, seemingly automatic. In their shared attention to technological (and rarely to human)

47
Bertolt Brecht, *Der Dreigroschenprozess*, Berlin 1932, repub. as Threepenny Lawsuit, in: *Brecht on Film and Radio*, transl. by Marc Silberman, London 2000, 147–199, here 164.

48
Walter Benjamin, Kleine Geschichte der Photographie, in: *Die literarische Welt*, September/October 1931, repub. as Little History of Photography, in: Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (eds.), *Selected Writings*, 2 vols., Cambridge, MA 1999, vol. 2, 507–530, here 526. Megan Luke has recently issued an important corrective: "In order to see Renger's images as willing servants to the commodity fetish, Benjamin had to disavow the photographer's own labor in creating them", in: The Ghost and the Rock. Albert Renger-Patzsch and the Shape of Time, in: *Art History* 46, 2023, 125–153, here 133.

49
Albert Renger-Patzsch, Ziele, in: *Das Deutsche Lichtbild* 1, 1927, xviii, repub. as Aims, in: *The Absolute Realist. Collected Writings of Albert Renger-Patzsch*, ed. by Daniel H. Magilow, Los Angeles 2022, 104–106, here 104.

50
Quoted and translated in Sergiusz Michalski, *New Objectivity*, Cologne 1994, 182.

51
On photography's facture, see Ernö Kallai, Malerei und Fotografie, in: *i10* 1/4, 1927, 148–157, repub. as Painting and Photography, in: Christopher Phillips (ed.), *Photography in the Modern Era. European Documents and Critical Writings*, 1913–1940, New York 1989, 94–103.

forms, Grossberg and Renger-Patzsch may only reproduce photography's apparent affirmations. The artists' industrialized spaces appear as the determining forces that they were for Lukács: the physical "immediacy of [the worker's] existence", Lukács wrote, make it impossible for one to be "the subject of his own life".[52]

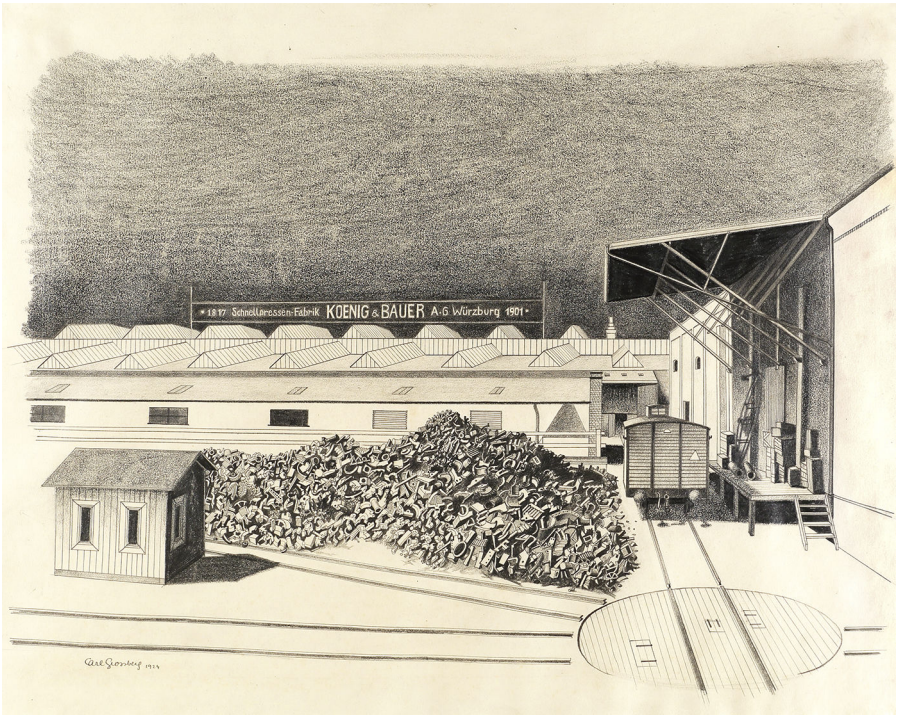
Still, Grossberg sets himself apart, if slightly, from Renger-Patzsch through the slower process of drawing and painting. The result is less veracity than a sort of abstraction entangled with naturalism and technical drawing. Grossberg renders details in sometimes selective and sometimes uniform focus in a way that the camera could not, and for all his precision, he leaves sections of drawings in bare outline – as if under construction – or cast in flat shading, as if out of time. Presenting the temporality of his craft in a manner more legible to period viewers than could Renger-Patzsch, Grossberg likewise implies a prevailing distinction, in scientific as well as artistic contexts, between drawing and photography: that the former suggested human interpretation and the latter, mere transcription. Drawing was widely understood, in the late nineteenth century, to supply excess material, that is, as a form of idealization, counter to the goals of Realist art and evidence-based science alike. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have shown, though, by the 1920s German scientists broadly found artistic renderings, in fact, to be more believable than photographs, for they captured surface appearances while also generating an effect of human-powered "arealism" that broadcast a higher sort of accuracy.[53] Linking process to theme, Grossberg attends in multiple Koenig & Bauer drawings to excess material – unconstructed or cast-off objects in and around the factory (metal fragments, paper pulp) – as if testifying to the distended temporalities of artistic and industrial production and the human organization and interpretation that each still required. In a drawing of the plant's assembly hall, Grossberg shows a mound of parts, detailing many of them individually [Fig. 5]. As the pile nears the factory, however, each part fades into shadow, as if to suggest the building's capacity to flatten each product's (and producer's) individuality. The windows accordingly look two-dimensional and opaque, obscuring what takes place inside.

In form and in practice, then, Grossberg's drawings of Koenig & Bauer support Petry's claim for art's subjectivity as excess.[54] They broadcast the work as conditioned, limited, by its producer's faculties and material conditions: the artist's capacity, like the worker's,

52
Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 166.

53
Peter Galison, Judgment against Objectivity, in: Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (eds.), *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, London 1998, 327–359, here 332. See also Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, New York 2007, 164.

54
Henri Focillon soon argued that artists separate themselves from machines through their capacity to apprehend and reproduce error, in: *The Life of Forms in Art* [1942], transl. by George Kubler, New York 1992, 182.



[Fig. 5]
Carl Grossberg, *Montagehalle mit Schrotthaufen (Koenig & Bauer, Würzburg)*, ca. 1924, pencil on paper, 38.5 × 48.3 cm, Rye, New York, the Merrill C. Berman Collection.

to organize and shape raw material more than merely register its existence. It is here that his images may surpass their function as documentation or the "type of reportage" that, Grossberg suggested in a letter of 1933, had preoccupied German depictions of technology. Earlier technical images, explains the curator Melissa Venator, displayed machines "without exploring their aesthetic or theoretical dimensions".[55] If Brecht concluded that art still had a vital role – so long as it was not merely "derived from experience" – Grossberg produces a Realism which, as it approximates industry's surface appearance, comments on one's incapacity to experience or describe advanced technologies and totalizing systems.[56] His "objectivity" is a sign of not so much unmediated observation as fluctuating registration.

IV. Not Only White, but Also Cold

In his painting of the mid-to-late 1920s, Grossberg in many ways developed the project that he had initiated with Koenig & Bauer, to foreground his mental faculties as an artist – design and measurement, artistic choice, and abstraction – in service of articulating his manual skill. Here he invokes but mostly evades the new principles of his former school, with whose director, Walter Gropius, Grossberg corresponded in 1923, a decisive year for the Bauhaus.[57] Craft would no longer serve as its theoretical bulwark against art's integration with capital; rather, learned skills would supply artists with the tools to work in a rationalized system. "Mechanized work is lifeless, proper only to the lifeless machine", Gropius wrote in a new program.[58] Not disavowing machine processes (or attendant economies), he posited technology as able to provide a "means of freeing the intellect from the burden of mechanical labor". As elsewhere, he placed the onus on the worker: it was the "individual's attitude toward his work" that guided the machine's integration with mental life – a matter "of decisive importance for new creative work". Grossberg, for his part, sought a tight correspondence between the individual and their work. But he sought, too, alternative methods of integration.

His most productive stretch as a freelance painter came during and just after a 1925 trip to Amsterdam that he took with the artist Gustav Decker. In this brief span, Grossberg refined his surfaces,

55
Venator, Technology's World of Forms, 12.

56
Brecht, Threepenny Lawsuit, 164.

57
Bauhaus Archiv, Berlin, BHA Gropius Papers II, folder 355, #1–2.

58
Walter Gropius, Idee und Aufbau des Staatlichen Bauhauses Weimar, Weimar 1923, repub. as The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus, in: Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius (eds.), *Bauhaus, 1919–1928*, New York 1938, 22–31, here 22.

broadened his color palette, and began to consider more deeply the possibilities and limitations of painting.[59] His work of that year recalls some Dutch golden-age art in form (panel paintings with smooth surfaces and linear figuration) and in spirit, valorizing the independent artisan and the everyday scene. If vaguely redolent of this older model, Grossberg's art moved in 1925 toward something "new", the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Justus Bier duly described the Amsterdam pictures in terms that variously summon 1925's key texts on figurative painting, namely Hartlaub's exhibition and Roh's book. Hartlaub defined painting of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* by its orientation to "positive palpable reality", and he and Roh, in different ways, believed that close attention to the surfaces of things could transmit truth between viewer and object.[60] For Bier, Grossberg's paintings show Dutch structures in a manner that is "architectonic and austere". Their sobriety allows the pictures to "confront" viewers "in a plastically clear way".[61]

Published in 1926, Bier's article – the only substantive one of the 1920s dedicated to Grossberg's painting – appraises the artist's recent work primarily as an exercise in the formal or spatial dynamics of the medium. Grossberg paints "old cities", Bier argues, "but completely unromantic".[62] Unromantic because objective, as it were: Grossberg's scenes of Amsterdam portray the city's neighborhoods and architecture in fine detail and with appropriate bursts of color. At the same time, "the task that preoccupies [Grossberg] the most", writes Bier, is less informational than formal: "to arrange bodies in space". In *Brouwersgracht* (1925), a line of buildings – nearly uniform in height – presses against the picture plane. While the bottom shows a sidewalk and water in front of the buildings, Grossberg does not model the foreground. It looks more or less coextensive with what is "behind" it, as if the whole picture were carved in shallow relief. The open windows of the red building increase one's sense of flatness; it is not altogether clear if they are opening in or out. In *Singelgracht* (1925) [Fig. 6], by contrast, Grossberg dramatizes the depth of the local architecture and planning. A curved bridge in the foreground siphons one's gaze into the street, where it is met with sloping perspective. Although Grossberg forms the window banks with proper modeling, the modeling indicates – like the blank sky – a skewed relationship to observed reality.

59
On links between Dutch golden-age painting, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and capitalism, see Andrew Hemingway, Introduction. Realism Then and Now, in: Malcolm Baker and Andrew Hemingway (eds.), *Art as Worldmaking. Critical Essays on Realism and Naturalism*, Manchester 2018, 1–19, here 3, 13.

60
Quoted and translated in Fritz Schmalenbach, The Term *Neue Sachlichkeit*, in: *The Art Bulletin* 22/3, 1940, 161–165, here 161.

61
Justus Bier, Carl Großberg, in: *Der Cicerone*, 18/17, 1926, 561–565, here 565.

62
Ibid., 561.

[Fig. 6]
Carl Grossberg, *Amsterdam, Singelgracht*, 1925, oil on canvas, 71 × 61 cm, Sommerhausen, Germany, estate of the artist.

Shadows progress into the distance, yet a strange clarity follows. As details move further back, they remain in focus: crisp and colorful.

If Bier identified a quality of atmospheric or spatial indeterminacy in Grossberg, the art historian Alfred Neumeyer saw it in the *Neue Sachlichkeit* writ large a year later: an "over-clarity", he called it.[63] Neumeyer – who, like Bier and Roh, was a student of Heinrich Wölfflin – perceived in *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting not a stylistic coherence but a shared spatial orientation. Artists rendered each individual detail as if in "microscopic close-up and then assembled and presented at a normal viewing distance".[64] The effect was "confusing" and "extra-real". Rather than a realistic or measurable distance, depth in *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting is "an optical phenomenon", Neumeyer offered, a matter of "atmosphere".[65] The attention Bier and Neumeyer paid to the work's optical elements gives a sense of the images as abstract in a way, based more in the conventions of art than the contingencies of life. Roh, to this end, understood the new painting to mobilize forms and techniques from the past in a way that granted "magical insight into a piece of 'reality' (produced artificially)".[66] He viewed painting not as a material substrate so much as a vehicle for illusion and, in turn, perceived magical realism's smooth surfaces as signifying the "eradication" of the "work process".[67] Grossberg does not construct the scene in virtual tandem with the manual laborers on the ground, then, so much as he builds up an artificial reality, a second nature, forged among conflicting strata of time, space, and personnel.

For Lukács, second nature is "incomprehensible, unknowable in its real substance".[68] (Alfred Sohn-Rethel later articulated it as at once "the abstract time and space of capital", of exchange and not production, and yet a distinct "reality".)[69] In Grossberg's *Rokin* (1925) [Fig. 7], the buildings, made by man and formed by sharp outline, cast little to no shadow despite the wash of sun that lights the scene, separating them from the real world of human affairs.

63
Alfred Neumeyer, Zur Raumpsychologie der "neuen Sachlichkeit", in: *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* 61, 1927/28, 66–72, repub. in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Klaus Lankheit, Munich 1977, 295–302, here 300.

64
Ibid.

65
Ibid., 296.

66
Roh, Nach-Expressionismus, 30.

67
Ibid., 119.

68
Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* [1916], transl. by Anna Bostock, Cambridge 1971, 62.

69
Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Die Formcharaktere der zweiten Nature, in: Christoph Bezzel (ed.), *Das Unvermögen der Realität. Beiträge zu einer anderen materialistischen Ästhetik*, Berlin 1974, 185–207, repub. as The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature, transl. by Daniel Spaulding, in: *Selva*, July 20, 2019 (January 8, 2023).

[Fig. 7]
Carl Grossberg, *Amsterdam, Rokin*, 1925, tempera on canvas adhered to laminate wood structure, 50.5 × 60.5 cm, Rye, New York, the Merrill C. Berman Collection.

Shadow appears underneath the bridge and behind a chimney, figures that pale in dynamism compared to the barren tree left of center. It is the picture's central remnant of first nature, and it leaves a motile mark on the architecture that would otherwise threaten its existence (or at least continue to force its contortions). The basic flatness of the scene and the uniformity of its construction – consider the cool-colored piping that connects building to building – turns the reality that Grossberg has captured, or constructed, into a sort of stage set, a metaphor that Lukács deployed to characterize the modern world ("nature [...] becomes a background, a piece of scenery").[70] As sets, these pictures invite projection: of modern viewer into "old city" and, more to the point, of imagined space into a contained material setting.

Yet perhaps because, as Hamburger notes, Grossberg's paintings lack the compositional drama of contemporaneous cityscapes by artists like Franz Radziwill, they portray a somewhat evasive relationship to the viewer more than an inviting one, let alone the confrontation that Bier perceived.[71] Discounting the thrust of Bier's article, Stefan Hirsch wrote to Grossberg that his pictures emphasize not the form of their referents but their sensuous complexity. "The snow is not only white but also cold", Hirsch argued. "A person, an animal not only has this and that form, he also does something, lives, and is complicated."[72] It is this complexity that Grossberg seems to believe art could access, even produce, at a time when its processes were increasingly outsourced to, and flattened by, mental or mechanical faculties (and not both). His work thus invokes head, heart, and hand, texturing a measured precision with acknowledgment of the intellect's debt to the manual (and the spiritual). Hirsch uses examples from nature (snow, human, animal), but, in the end, Grossberg presents second nature with a proximate affect, constructing a reality that, if, or because, elusive, offers a sort of alienated recognition, a fugitive apprehension of the sense-receiving and -producing qualities of the things that humans create.[73]

70
Lukács, The Theory of the Novel, 63.

71
Hamburger, Carl Grossberg, 109.

72
Quoted and translated in Hemingway, The Mysticism of Money, 87.

73
It is with this analytic in mind that I adapt my title from Michael Fried, who sees Adolph Menzel's corporeal art as "evoking aspects of his subject matter that could not strictly or directly be seen but could only be intuited, inferred, or otherwise imagined", in: *Menzel's Realism. Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin*, New Haven, CT 2002, 3. Märten prizes painting's "sensory affects" over its content, in: Art and Proletariat, 23.

V. A Sense of the Negative

In 1948 Siegfried Giedion "designate[d] the period between the two World Wars as the time of full mechanization".[74] Around 1920, mechanization "implanted itself more deeply" in the world of the human, argued Giedion (a student of both Wölfflin and the Bauhaus). "It impinged upon the very center of the human psyche, through all the senses." The effect stemmed from mechanization's entrance into not just the factory but also the "domestic sphere", naturalizing itself in both settings. The process of rationalization, Giedion wrote, turned the factory into a "synchronous organism".[75] But to impute the objects and processes with life might reinforce reification, denying life and sociality to the human worker whose subjectivity is fragmented, but not eliminated, by the divisions of the assembly line that animates the factory. Lukács perceives reification as the "subjugation of men's consciousness". "Rational mechanization", he adds, "extends right into the worker's 'soul'." Scientific management turns the soul into an object; "even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality", Lukács writes, "and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialized rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts".[76]

Grossberg produced a series of what he called *Traumbilder* in the mid-to-late 1920s (and sparingly into the 1930s). Here he seems not only to foreground his artistic subjectivity, indeed the inner workings of his mind, but also to share the basic concerns underwriting Giedion and Lukács, if in different ways: the relations between mechanical processes and human interiority, and the constitution of the latter through skills and social life. Each shares compositional and thematic elements with Grossberg's other paintings of the 1920s: buildings and machines, rendered with precision but also abstraction, set within dramatic if disjointed perspectival space. The dream (*Traum*) signifiers take shape most often as animals that populate what, in his "lucid" pictures, would be spaces devoid of organic life. Grossberg copied the animals from nineteenth-century compendia such as *Naturgeschichte der Säugetiere* by Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert.[77] Flat, cartoonish, and mostly species foreign to Germany, though sometimes native to its former colonies, Grossberg's animals look unnatural, as if pasted into each picture. The unexpected juxtapositions of disparate species – in and of

74
Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command. A Contribution to Anonymous History*, New York 1948, 41.

75
Ibid., 5.

76
Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 88.

77
Schmidt, Carl Grossberg, 69.

themselves and with emblems of second nature, that is, buildings and machines – may endear the *Traumbilder* to surrealism, which developed around the same time. Bier avoided such comparisons, though, in his article, which reproduces one of the *Traumbilder*, *Maschinensaal II* (1925). Something, he writes, tethers these pictures closer to the "plastic". Grossberg's dreams are not immediate but halted, mediated through the learned signs and structures of waking life. This supports Grossberg's artistic goal, so far as he articulated it. In entering what he called the "spiritually distinct and abstract world of painting", he once wrote, artists could better see concrete reality.[78] More than surrealism, his comportment thus aligns with Roh, whose magical realism derived from concrete referents, or otherwise with Gropius's aim after 1923 to realize an "immaterial space" "in the material world, a realization which is accomplished by the brain and the hands".[79]

In *Maschinensaal I* (1925) [Fig. 8], a gorilla sits on a foreshortened printing press with a scroll of paper running through it. The ape is small, comparable to a medieval Madonna statue that rests a short distance behind it. A black-and-white globe hovers to the right. Upside-down with respect to the Earth's typical orientation, the globe is incomplete, missing the areas where Africa and Oceania should be. To Hamburger, the absence of Africa – the equatorial region of which, says Schubert's book, is where the gorilla was discovered in 1847[80] – does not indicate geographical chauvinism, nor does it suggest that "Grossberg is criticizing science's incomplete explanation of the world".[81] Instead, she writes, its missing elements mirror the absent materials elsewhere: in the sparsely populated workshop, at the back of the printing press, in the landscape viewable outside the window (a Franconian setting along the Main river).[82] Still, the missing African continent brings to mind Germany's failed colonial project and the forced redistribution, after World War I, of its territories in east and southwest Africa. The gorilla, an index of that project, looks strange in a German workshop, a disconnect that can read as critical, xenophobic, or

78
Quoted and translated in Venator, Technology's World of Forms, 13.

79
Gropius, Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus, 24. "In a work of art," he adds, "the laws of the physical world, the intellectual world, and the world of the spirit function and are expressed simultaneously."

80
G. H. von Schubert, *Naturgeschichte der Säugetiere*, Eßlingen 1886, 4.

81
Hamburger, Carl Grossberg, 188–189.

82
Ibid., 197.

[Fig. 8]
Carl Grossberg, *Maschinensaal I*, 1925, oil on canvas, 70 × 60 cm, Wuppertal, Von der Heydt Museum.

both, or a counter to the colonial revisionism that occupied mainstream German discourse in the 1920s.[83]

Contra Hamburger, Grossberg also addresses science's inability to describe the world, to map its physical complexity. The extreme linear composition of the room does not cohere with the perspective outside, instituting a disjunction between the subjective inner space and objective outer space of the picture. Grossberg emphasizes the split's temporality in addition to its spatial qualities. The manual press, the Madonna, and workshop environment place the room in some past epoch, while the railway outside brings the scene closer, at least, to the present. Together, the items, each at once simultaneous and attached to a particular moment of production, attest to what Wilhelm Pinder in 1926 called history's "multilayered reality".[84]

In suggesting the two spaces' separate temporalities, Grossberg maps less a coterminous than a developmental relation, one that mimics that of capital, shifting the machinic metonym from the printing press to the train. If the progressive rationalization of human labor threatened the hand and, in turn, the head, it was the evolution of the productive faculties of each that defined the human species in the first place. One cannot ignore, that is, "the part played by labor in the transition from ape to man", to borrow the title of an unfinished essay by Friedrich Engels. The path of human development is commensurate with the increasing dexterity of the hand, Engels argued, and the hand's capacities depend on the "ever new operations" required of it by changing modes of production. Moving toward the "mastery of nature", the hand becomes entangled with humankind's mental (or cultural) pursuits, allowing people to produce "the pictures of a Raphael, the statues of a Thorwaldsen, the music of a Paganini".[85] The gorilla in Grossberg's picture does not work the printing press but rather rests on it. If anything, it forms a part of it, a hybrid machine, as if to suggest capital's instrumentalization of animals. To many, rationalized practices seemed to instrumentalize the human in a resonant manner. Frederick W. Taylor hoped his methods would make work so simple that a worker "more nearly resembles in his mental make-up the ox than any other type".[86] Yet, against Charles Baudelaire's quip that "the majority

83
See Dominik J. Schaller, "Every Herero Will Be Shot". Genocide, Concentration Camps, and Slave Labor in German South-West Africa, in: René Lamarchand (ed.), *Forgotten Genocides. Oblivion, Denial, and Memory,* Philadelphia 2011, 51–70, here 52–53.

84
Wilhelm Pinder, *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas*, Berlin 1926, 2.

85
Friedrich Engels, The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man [1876/1995], in: *marxists.org* (December 20, 2022).

86
Quoted in John Berger, Why Look at Animals?, in: id., *About Looking*, New York 1980, 3–28, here 13. Taylor understood rationalization from the beginning as applicable to even the "most complex" forms of labor, writes Harry Braverman. "[I]n fact it was in machine shops, bricklaying, and other such sites for the practice of well-developed crafts that [Taylor]

of artists are no more than highly skilled animals" – and in line with Marx's early contention that "[a]n animal produces only itself, while man reproduces the whole of nature" – Grossberg seems to distinguish himself from the ape by virtue of complex productive faculties.[87]

Grossberg's *Renaissance* (1929) [Fig. 9] has drawn comparison to the work of Giorgio de Chirico, not least because its setting resembles an Italian *piazza*. Like the rest of his paintings, it is more "linear" than "painterly", in Wölfflin's terms, where the former characterizes art of eras including the Renaissance. Again, the only living figures here are animals: birds, a frog, a fly, a squirrel monkey, a tamarin. They all crouch or hang at the front of what looks again like a stage, mingling with stray flora and a central, mysterious device with a circuit board and light bulbs affixed to it. The composition might imply the animals' advanced intelligence or reason – their ability to control the machine before them. But their positions could also confirm comparative incapacity. In 1928 Helmuth Plessner distinguished humans from animals on the grounds that the former possess "a sense of the negative".[88] Animals can produce things and can effect thought, Plessner speculated, but they cannot take things away, that is, cannot imagine things apart from the immediate context in which they are placed. Plessner frames the dynamic in spatial terms. The animal is "frontal", he argues, its "existence oriented toward the surrounding field of alien givenness".[89] Humans, by contrast, are "excentric", attuned to meanings or relations of things beyond their immediate presence. Not only do Grossberg's animals address themselves forwards, but they also accommodate themselves to the objects given, each creature (except the frog) touching a non-animal thing.

Renaissance likewise supports Plessner's post-Cartesian notion of the human as a being "that is no longer on the same plane as that inhabited by its own body" but rather experiences its body as a representation.[90] The content and structure of Grossberg's picture seem to help it, not unlike canonical paintings from its titular

and his immediate successors achieved their most striking results." Analyzing Taylor's program, Braverman sees the manual laborer as, in a way, not the subject of scientific management but the source. The worker, Braverman writes, "combined, in mind and body, the concepts and physical dexterities of the specialty: technique, understood in this way, is, as has often been observed, the predecessor and progenitor of science". *Labor and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York 1974, 108–109.

87
Charles Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life [1863], in: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, transl. by Jonathan Mayne, London 1964, 1–41, here 15; Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, in: *marxists.org* (December 28, 2022).

88
Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology* [1928], transl. by Millay Hyatt, New York 2019, 250.

89
Ibid., 223. Wolfgang Köhler also understood animals (apes, namely) to possess manual skills but lack powers of abstraction, in: *The Mentality of Apes*, transl. by Ella Winter, London 1925.

90
Plessner, Levels of Organic Life, 213.

[Fig. 9]
Carl Grossberg, *Renaissance*, 1929, oil on laminate wood structure, 48 × 38 × 2.6 cm, Rye, New York, the Merrill C. Berman Collection.

period, to produce a (virtual) human subject in the space before the canvas. This subject visualizes a dynamic that, to Plessner, constitutes the root of humanity: the simultaneous experience of one's body "over there", in a particular place, and one's location in a general "here", which is to say nowhere. Unlike Plessner, Erwin Panofsky stressed the historicity of cognitive equivalence. Tracking art's adoption of linear perspective, Panofsky argued that, as a repeatable technique, it rendered one's cognition in mathematical terms, producing "an objectification of the subjective", as well as a rationalization of physical space.[91] In *Renaissance*, as elsewhere, Grossberg invokes Plessner and Panofsky: their insistence on the human's elevated perceptual and intellectual faculties (evidenced, for the latter, by the production of art). But the artist elides these contemporaries, too, in part because his confluence of religious, colonial, and mechanical icons thwarts their evolutionary logics and in part because, despite Grossberg's purported precision, his perspective is miscalculated. The buildings at right and left dictate vanishing points that lie at a great distance from one another (as in de Chirico). Against the homogeneous, subject-fixing space of a Renaissance picture, Grossberg constructs space particular to his own unstable projection, signified as a dream. The mental processes that support his subjectivity still require manual application – through a quasi-mechanical action, copying animal figures from books – but it is precisely this dual capacity that renders his labor (or his conception of it) distinct from that of animals or machines.[92]

VI. On the One Hand a Workshop, On the Other a Museum

Grossberg's *Dampfkessel mit Fledermaus* (1928) [Fig. 10] best outlines his personal and artistic concerns of the rationalization period. Two animals, a flying fox and a flying lemur bat, populate an otherwise lifeless industrial cavern. Observers have narrativized the picture, suggesting that the animals have taken the workers' jobs or that they have crept into the factory after hours.[93] The bat grips a pipe, the bases of which exist somewhere off the panel. The fox appears both afloat and flattened against a retreating ceiling. To the right of the animals sits a large broiler, less complicated in form and less

91
Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* [1927], transl. by Christopher S. Wood, New York 1997, 66.

92
Dual capacity defines the human against the animal for Marx, too: "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax", in: *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, transl. by Ben Fowkes, London 1976, 284. James van Dyke writes via Radziwill that it is not just "technical proficiency and art-historical reference" that define artistic labor but also "imaginative, idiosyncratic formal effects", in: Franz Radziwill, 41.

93
Wieland Schmied, Boiler with Bat, in: Lincoln, German Realism of the Twenties, 166; and Olaf Peters, Carl Grossberg and New Objectivity, in: *Carl Grossberg. Industry and Architecture*, Munich 2017, n.p.

[Fig. 10]
Carl Grossberg, *Dampfkessel mit Fledermaus*, 1928, oil on wood, 55 × 66 cm, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, private collection.

fastidious in rendering than most other Grossberg machines. The artist heightens its incapacity by keeping the broiler disconnected from the pipe and by placing it atop a palette and pedestal. In 1932 Ernst Jünger proposed a condition that Grossberg seems to have intuited. "We live in a world that resembles on the one hand a workshop, and on the other a museum", Jünger wrote. The two locales prescribe different modes of viewing: "while nobody is forced to see in a workshop anything more than a mere workshop, in a museum setting there is an atmosphere of edification taking on grotesque forms." If Jünger had earlier praised the aesthetics, even the magic, of machinery, here he notes some dangers of aestheticization. "We have arrived at a kind of historical fetishism," he offers, "standing in direct proportion to our lack of productive capacity."[94] Grossberg's broiler is an old model; one may well see it as a fetish, or as the sort of "outmoded" object which, to Walter Benjamin, animated surrealism and revealed the fractured rhythm of history.[95]

Grossberg painted *Dampfkessel* in 1928, on the four hundredth anniversary of Albrecht Dürer's death.[96] The composition cites the old master's famous print, *Melencolia I* (1514), in the placement of its two animals (the bat is a dog in the original). Like Dürer, *Melencolia* received attention in the 1920s, figuring in the writings of critics such as Benjamin and art historians such as Panofsky and Fritz Saxl.[97] For Panofsky and Saxl, the print documents Dürer's struggle to perfect and promote a rigorous, scientific art "based on measure, weight, and number", and on "mastery of technique".[98] Creative and scientific, Melencolia serves as a proxy for the artist-thinker himself, with the other details only confirming the link: dogs were typical companions in scholar portraits; the polyhedron marks the feat of perspectival construction.[99] Still, Melencolia's skills do not support her; Benjamin noticed that her "utensils of active life lie

94
Ernst Jünger, *The Worker. Dominion and Form* [1932], transl. by Bogdan Costea and Laurence Paul Hemming, Evanston, IL 2017, 127.

95
Peters, Carl Grossberg, n.p.; Walter Benjamin, Der Surrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäische Intelligenz, in: *Die Literarische Welt*, 1929, repub. as Surrealism. The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia, in: Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (eds.), *Selected Writings*, 2 vols., Cambridge, MA 1999, vol. 2, pt. 1, 207–221, here 210.

96
On the significance of this context to Grossberg, see Peters, Carl Grossberg, n.p.

97
Hartlaub became obsessed with it as well, writing several times to Panofsky about his interpretations; see Hartlaub, Gustav Friedrich, I, C–119, Deutsches Kunstarchiv, Nuremberg. In 1928 the curator organized an exhibition at the Kunsthalle that paired Dürer's prints with work by modern artists, including some that were featured in *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*. See G. F. Hartlaub, *Ausstellung Dürer und die Nachwelt*, Mannheim 1928.

98
Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, Nendeln 1979, 342.

99
Ibid., 322.

unused".[100] She feels powerless, Panofsky argues, like a "creative being reduced to despair".[101] If Dürer's faith in art could waver in 1514, as processes of mechanization first took hold, artists of the 1920s felt an acute crisis in the face of advancing new media, deskilling, and standardization.

Backward looking but knowingly contingent, much *Neue Sachlichkeit* art duly performs a kind of melancholy.[102] Beate Reese understands it in terms that recall Benjamin's diagnosis of writers associated with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in 1931: a resigned "left-wing" affliction.[103] Even more, Reese attributes to artists like Grossberg the melancholy that Sigmund Freud articulated in 1917, in partial response to the traumas of World War I: melancholy as a "painful dejection, [a] cessation of interest in the outside world", resulting from the loss of an unknown "object". The melancholic figure "knows *whom* he has lost", Freud wrote, "but not *what* he has lost in him".[104] Grossberg, scarred by the war and an up-and-down career, indeed sensed something "lost" in the modern world. *Dampfkessel* suggests the loss as tied to the shared vulnerability of art, industry, and the worker tasked with reproducing either (or both). If the outside that one sees through the window in the painting has a horizon, the room does not; its vanishing lines meet at a vertical, securing the space as one for animals (in Plessner's conception) and one which cannot guarantee the human subject that linear perspective presupposes (in, say, Dürer's). At the same time, as in Dürer, the picture brings forth the human, namely the author. The disconnected broiler, having assumed Melencolia's position, could stand for Grossberg, reified and literally powerless – an emblem of the rational world, now overcome by the irrational forces of dreams, time, and capital (a dialectical inversion that would structure National Socialist ideology in the ensuing years, as critics like Ernst Bloch argued).[105]

Grossberg is best known for the pictures of factory interiors that he produced after the period discussed in this paper, that is,

100
Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* [1928], transl. by Howard Eiland, Cambridge, MA 2019, 143.

101
Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton, NJ 1955, 168.

102
Beate Reese, *Melancholie in der Malerei der Neuen Sachlichkeit*, Frankfurt a. M. 1998.

103
Walter Benjamin, Linke Melancholie. Zu Erich Kästners neuem Gedichtbuch, in: *Die Gesellschaft* 8/1, 1931, 181–184, repub. as Left-Wing Melancholy, in: The Weimar Republic Sourcebook, 304–307.

104
Sigmund Freud, Mourning and Melancholia [1918], in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., transl. by James Strachey, London 1964, vol. 14, 239–258, here 244, 245.

105
On Grossberg's vexed relationship to National Socialism and its official art, see Peters, Carl Grossberg.

after Germany's rationalization boom and then during the Third Reich. Many of his factory pictures were products of corporate commissions from businesses throughout Germany, although he produced some at the behest of his dealer, Nierendorf, and for individual patrons. The Hamburg-based Swedish consul August Brinckman commissioned at least five pictures from Grossberg, and the two maintained correspondence into the mid-1930s. Among these pieces was a copy, in 1932, of *Maschinensaal I*, prompting Grossberg to write the sentence that animated this paper: "I've always been interested in technology's advances, but I have felt that we have lost some important things in this progress." How better to figure the persistence of craft skill – an example of what Bloch called German "non-contemporaneity" – than to manually reproduce an idiosyncratic image that suggests, no less, the impending rise of mechanized labor?[106]

Frederic J. Schwartz has shown how Bloch's materialist concept derived loosely from the work of Wilhelm Pinder, who in the mid-1920s advanced a concept of stylistic succession based in the variable length of artists' lives.[107] "The time of [an artist's] birth", the art historian wrote, "determines the development of their nature." As noted above, this produced for Pinder a "multilayered reality", something that rhymes with a claim he had made about recent representational painting in 1922: that it implied history's "periodical rhythm".[108] Rooted partly in biological essentialism and congruent with the art historian's racist nationalism, Pinder's history forms lines, not points, in recognition that certain styles and methods pre- or postdate their documented relevance. By contrast, German proponents of rationalization aimed to fix labor's contingencies and subjectivities into points – to concretize categories like "the human" and "the worker", and to plot them along linear narratives of scientific and social progress. Grossberg played along, dependent upon rationalized systems for subject matter and their managers for sustenance while, like the generalized worker and artist, feeling their effects.[109] One can view his privileged individualism and distance from working-class organization as the type of melancholic resignation with which critics such as Benjamin

106
Ernst Bloch, Preface to the 1935 Edition, in: *Heritage of Our Times*, transl. by Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice, Berkeley, CA 1990, 1–5. Hemingway may have had Grossberg in mind when writing how, in some *Neue Sachlichkeit* art, "the conjunction of techniques from fifteenth-century northern painting with machine age iconography produces an effect of calculated non-synchronicity", in: Introduction. Realism Then and Now, 13.

107
Frederic J. Schwartz, Ernst Bloch and Wilhelm Pinder. Out of Sync, in: *Grey Room* 3, 2001, 54–89.

108
Pinder, Das Problem der Generation, 16, 2; and Wilhelm Pinder, response in Ein neuer Naturalismus?? Eine Rundfrage des Kunstblatts, in: *Das Kunstblatt* 9, 1922, 370.

109
Corporate work supplemented his income in the face of a flagging market; he also went into business for himself as an interior designer in 1928. See Hamburger, Carl Grossberg, 234–353; and Justus Bier, Ein Wohnhausumbau, in: *Die Form* 6, 1931, 63–68, here 63.

charged the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and his pictures of frozen factories as, at best, a form of what Lukács called romantic anti-capitalism.[110] Valorizing artisanal work as a bulwark against what many perceived as capital's irreversible development, Grossberg imagined a world where those machines were no longer threatening. A version of this romanticism percolated into the Nazi period, when officials touted concepts like "joy in work" and "beauty of labor" to ameliorate working-class discontent without altering the workers' social and material positions.[111] But Grossberg's calculated engagement with techniques borne both of and against capital's emergent processes, coupled with his detailed yet abstract form of representation, produces some tension with accusations of romantic withdrawal. Bound to new forms, taken however with old ones, he worked through the conditions that shaped his own life and work, as if the results might reshape that of others.

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110
See Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism, in: *New German Critique* 32, 1984, 42–92. Romantic anticapitalism is connected but not identical to "realism", write Sayre and Löwy, as it can appear in art that is "fantastic" and "surrealist" (49).

111
On fascist appropriation of joy in work, see Campbell, Joy in Work, especially 28–30, 312–385; and on beauty of labor, see Anson Rabinbach, The Aesthetics of Production in the Third Reich, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11/4, 1976, 43–74.