

"Opening" in Neo Rauch's *Die Fuge*

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A thing, as everyone thinks he knows, is that around which the properties have assembled.

—Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art”

That’s not a figure standing there, not a person, but the color in this area has coagulated into a person...

—Neo Rauch, as quoted in “Nothing Can Embarrass Me Anymore”

A giant fissure splits open the earth in *Die Fuge* (The Gap, 2007, fig.1), Neo Rauch’s enormous painting that was featured in his 2007 show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Looming in the distance, a large mountain occupies the upper right half of the composition, reaching up to touch a dark purple sky that indicates the possible approach of night or even a storm. *Die Fuge* bears a striking resemblance to his earlier painting, *Vulkan* (fig.2) from 2002, except that in this more recent work the focus falls on the peculiar set of figures in the painting’s foreground.

Coming forth from the mouth of the opening is a man dressed in 19th century fashion holding a large chain in both hands. His yellow sweater disintegrates at his waist and blends into the dark brown paint of the fissure’s deep shadows, incorporating him into the soil. It is unclear whether he is being consumed by this cavity or climbing out from it. His features are muddled and expressionless as he faces a crew of engineers outfitted in what appear to be matching firefighter uniforms, clustered around the left edge of the gap. These four men overlap each other in poses that indicate activity, but their purpose cannot yet be determined. Holding empty hoses, these figures only hint at the potential for action. With an unclear objective and a shared incompetence on par with the Keystone Cops, their inadequacy to respond to their environment is reinforced by a pale halo that surrounds their collective mass, giving them the appearance that they have been collaged or lifted from another space and time and placed incongruously within this one.

Isolated by their overlapping form, they appear unaware of the figures behind them who are grouped around a brick building, its façade decorated with a diamond pattern and covered with graffiti. In front of the building a male figure, also dressed in 19th-century attire, sits reading at a table. One table leg appears to be made out of a mass of yellow and purple dried paint. Behind this scene, a glimpse inside the building reveals rolls of fabric that are perhaps rolls of painting canvas.

This seated figure’s concentration belies any sense of the extraordinary spectacle unfolding above him. A man frozen in dance hovers over the scene with his back to the viewer. Around his trousers a

rough outline of underpaint gives the impression that he also is not fixed in his surroundings, but instead a figure whose position and posture are displaced. To his right, the incomplete forms of two women's bodies begin to occupy the same space. It is not clear whether they are in the process of revealing their full forms or about to be concealed by the swatch of underpaint that their figures fade into.

Rauch consciously plays with the formal and linguistic possibilities of his revealing title, *Die Fuge*. The most obvious reference is the geographical gap that divides the illusionistic crust of the field in the right half of the painting. This sets up a counterpoint to the disassociative gap that separates the two levitating women. Translated from German, *Fuge* has the dual meaning of *gap* as well as *fugue*, and is defined in Webster's Dictionary as "a disturbed state of consciousness in which the one affected seems to perform acts in full awareness but upon recovery cannot recollect the deeds."¹ An implied loss of memory, or history, pervades Rauch's composition as figures appear dislocated, as if in trances; gaps separate not only the space around them, but also the historical and material space of the painting.

For Martin Heidegger, the origin of a work of art lies in the viewer's ability to locate its "thingness," or its elemental Being. An ordinary "thing," Heidegger contends, is bound up in the material from which the thing is made, but in a work of art this element is more difficult to isolate. To help distinguish between the qualities of an ordinary "thing" and those of a work of art, Heidegger first proposes the "matter/form" model to show how the viewer may reach the essence of the "thing" by thinking in already established terms: "In this synthesis of matter and form a thing-concept has finally been found which applies to things of nature and utensils."² But Heidegger posits that this model is obsolete in terms of art because matter and form have their origin in "usefulness," a term better suited to engage a piece of equipment than a work of art. Instead, Heidegger develops the model of "earth" and "world." The earth describes that type of matter which grounds and protects the "emerging and rising" of the thing, or rather the material properties of "thingness." World does not have substance, but is an intrinsic quality that exists without visible traits. As Heidegger relates, "Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our

¹ "Fugue." *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary Tenth Edition*. Merriam-Webster, Inc., Springfield, Massachusetts. 1996. p 471.

² Martin Heidegger. "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Basic Writings*. Harper & Row, New York. 1977. p 157.

essential being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds.”³ It is World that provides Being with context.

While earth and world are separate, according to Heidegger, both are integral in developing an understanding of the work’s “thingness.” Their relationship is characterized by Heidegger as one of “strife,” and “the unity of the work comes about in the instigation of strife.”⁴ It is by this acting out of two forces in a state of perpetual reaffirmation, or strife, that work reaches a level of “unconcealedness” from which one arrives at truth in a process of “opening up.” World’s tendency towards “openness” and earth’s desire to “conceal” and “shelter” is the necessary foundation of a thing’s Being, and are concepts that appear to be distinct in *Die Fuge*.

In Heideggerian terms, the “opening up” in Rauch’s work is a result of the painting setting forth itself as paint. As in Heidegger’s example of the Greek temple, the paint material of Rauch’s world does not disappear as in the case of illusion, but constantly comes forth and sets itself back. The materiality of paint would be “earth” for Rauch. “It is really about the structure of painting,” says Rauch, “it is certainly possible that the things I do in the way of enriching the surface run counter to the effect of space...I still reveal myself as a painter.”⁵ “Striving” in *Die Fuge* can then be interpreted as the struggle between Rauch’s imagery and his materials. The reflexive qualities that exist in this piece can be observed in instances where the illusionistic motives of Rauch’s depiction cease to represent things and instead call attention to the process of its own paint material. This self-reflexivity occurs at the tree-line of the field in the right of the composition where the boundary separating the two spaces is erased and wiped away, and can also be seen in the two female figures whose bodies are reduced into thin washes of paint that conceal their contours, but reveal the surfaces they are painted upon. Most of Rauch’s figures also exhibit halos that creep out around the edges of their bodily frames and make their boundaries appear incomplete. This halo effect fragments the space and draws attention to the process of assembling the composition. Rauch

³ Ibid., 170.

⁴ Ibid., 173.

⁵ Klaus Werner, “Conversation between Klaus Werner and Neo Rauch,” *Para. exh. cat.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2007. p. 53.

refers to these areas as “unclarified zones” and in them the “truth” as conceived by Heidegger comes forth.

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For Heidegger, truth is revealed through an “opening up” and in *Die Fuge* the gaps that Rauch creates seem to illustrate Heidegger’s concept. In relation to the painted gap that divides the ground and the gap separating the female figures, Rauch “shelters” the surface of the canvas through the addition of paint to create an image of a gap, and then reveals, or opens, the layers of his canvas by wiping paint away to create gaps in the composition’s illusionistic fabric. The collision and rupture of the two female figures is caused by wiping paint away to literally open the painting up to reveal its surface beneath, creating a tension and union between depicted forms and materialistic being. In creating this relationship Rauch focuses our attention to the rupture inherent in revealing the materiality of the things he creates and recalls the concepts of Heidegger: “The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through the world.”⁷

However, this analysis would be incomplete without discussing the third gap that exists both in and of the painting. The formal pun of *Die Fuge* extends onto the very structure of the painted surface by virtue of the fact that the composition is divided into two separate panels that have been brought together to form a single frame. This compositional decision was not done out of structural necessity (there were much larger canvases in the Metropolitan’s exhibition that were not divided) or out of practice (*Vulcan* was made on a single piece of canvas), but reinforces the theme of the painting’s fragmentation. The seam that exists down the center of the composition joins the two hemispheres together and completes the image while also creating a visible fracture, like a structural fault-line. Referencing the illusionistic break in the earth shown by the gap running through the painting’s right hand field, this structural gap divides the actual surface of the painting in half. While it would have been possible to make this structural connection seamless Rauch allowed discrepancies within the form and colors of the two halves to remain, bringing attention to the two spaces. This division truncates the contours of the figures depicted along it, and the colors that extend through the boundaries of the seam remain inconsistent. Incorporating the qualities both of illusion and material into its own construction, we can interpret *Die Fuge* as an image that results from the struggle between form and structure. The gap that defines this painting is responsible for its synthesis

⁶ Holger Liebs, “Nothing Can Embarrass Me Anymore.” Sept. 2006, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. <http://print.signandsight.com/features/972.html>

⁷ Heidegger, 172.

and its fragmentation. It too comes to represent another state of opening and closing by maintaining the illusion of its materials while also drawing attention to them. The internal and external gaps of *Die Fuge* represent the conceptual “opening up” through which the work’s essence and subsequent “truth” come to light.

Rauch’s anachronistic figures and their “rhetorical gestures” also imply a sense of fragmented history and technological “revealing.”⁸ The four uniformed engineers grasp hoses that dip down into the crevasse before them. Poised in front of the raw earth, these men engage with the land as if in an attempt to master it. Their efforts to assert themselves reveal their own collective “will” in trying to turn Nature into material. Yet this “will” can only be considered in a state of potential, for while an attempt appears to be made, there are no signs of progress. The “unclarified” spaces around these figures appear as underpaint, making their contours look unfinished and giving the composition a feeling of pastiche. It is as if *Die Fuge*’s landscape has been generated from various historical eras. It is possible then to conclude that Rauch implies these figures as being dysfunctional, and that their dysfunction is inherent by virtue of their being displaced from another space. However, it is not these would-be engineers who are trying to master Nature, but Rauch who is trying to master History. In Rauch’s work, History is undergoing a “challenging.” In the same way that Heidegger uses land as an example of becoming *den Bestand*, or a “standing reserve” for coal and ore, History is being plowed by Rauch and thus rearranged. As noted by Matthew Biro, “This type of revealing does not allow a thing to emerge naturally and freely into its full truth, but rather transforms all natural things into energy that can be stored and used as such.”⁹ In their posture and disengagement with their surroundings, it is the figures that are transformed into “standing-reserve.” In this sense we see how Rauch uses History as a material to master within his painting. By these means, Rauch’s artistic practice asserts itself over History in the same manner modern technology asserts itself over Nature. In Joseph Kockelman’s interpretation of Heidegger’s wariness of this situation he writes, “What threatens man in his essence is the idea that technicity puts the world in order, while in fact

⁸ Harald Kunde, “The Calm before the Storm,” *Randgebiet*, ed. Klaus Werner, exh. cat. Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig; Haus der Kunst, Munich 2000. p. 36.

⁹ Matthew Biro, *Anselm Kiefer and the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*. Cambridge University Press, New York. 2000. p. 201.

this ordering eliminates all true order and hierarchy. . . .¹⁰ By combining historical markers with shifting and changing points of reference, Rauch collapses historical space in his painting by turning it into material. Rauch explains, “It’s clear there’s a problematic core to [my paintings] that’s grounded in the Apocalypse. I approach the phenomena of this world by letting things through me in a nonhierarchical order,”¹¹ so as to filter it into something private and personal. Rauch uses his figures to “challenge forth” history, fulfilling Heidegger’s idea that “the essence of modern technology starts man upon the way of that revealing through which the real everywhere, more or less distinctly, becomes standing-reserve.”¹² The assortment of historical and temporal markers in *Die Fuge* serve to “enframe” and reveal History to show the *Geschichte*, or essence of history as not simply the record or activity of human beings, but the context necessary to be able to form a historiography.

Rauch’s formal decisions in *Die Fuge* seem to support Heidegger’s philosophy of a work of art through aesthetic and technological “opening up” and “revealing.” It seems the tension in Rauch’s work is the result of a “strife” between his desire to express the structure of paint and his figurative compositions that ultimately become historical kaleidoscopes of fractured forms and disassociative figures. For Heidegger, the truth that is both revealed and concealed in Rauch’s work should give way to an experience of the work in its “thingness.” In the same way that Heidegger’s assessment of van Gogh’s shoes denies the historical implication of their representation, the viewer must also arrive at a state of “self-sustaining meaning.” The illogical demands that Heidegger places on his readers to comprehend what is inarticulatable and to experience work in a capacity that cuts its ties to reference can be construed as further “gaps” in *Die Fuge*. The implied psychological state of a *fugue* implies a moment of lost memory and history, perhaps the only state of mind one can be in to accomplish the tasks that Heidegger sets out. Only by denying what we know can we appreciate the origin of a work of art. This un-definable, un-recognizable, experience of a disassociative state-of-being extends towards to the viewer. In this way Rauch’s work unfolds and reveals itself, not in relation to a previous history, but as a work that generates its own private history.

¹⁰ Joseph J. Kockelmans, *On the Truth of Being: Reflections on Heidegger’s Later Philosophy*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington. 1984. p. 236.

¹¹ Rauch cited in Liebs.

¹² Heidegger, 305.

Heidegger's theories provide a framework for the consideration of Rauch's work, which posits truth through the leveling of history. As the artist who created *Die Fuge*, Rauch would be directly implicated by Heidegger as the person responsible for allowing the work to "emerge as a thing that has been brought forth."¹³ However, what Rauch "reveals" is a work that appears to unravel history and, consequently threatens to unravel its own history as well.

Throughout the composition, Rauch has placed characters in disparate clothing from different eras, mixing 1950's fashion and 18th-century styles. This blending of time and history is reinforced by the halos of underpaint that surround the figures' contours. By repeatedly refusing to fully incorporate the edges of his figures, or the two halves of his painting, Rauch implies that these figures are collaged into this space and treated as "things" in the service of paint. After the viewer recognizes these figures' incompatibility with their world, Rauch's composition teeters on the edge of collapse. By displaying the unfinished edge, Rauch also implies that these figures are not fixed but occupy multiple temporal spaces at once, a fact he acknowledges as a symptom of his artistic practice: "So when I allow a gentleman to appear in the semi-shade of an arbor, dressed in the style of the Napoleonic era, that is either an anachronistic hallucination, or a member of one of those re-enactment societies that are so active here in Leipzig."¹⁴ Similar to the rendering of Rauch's figures, ordered History has no purchase within the composition.

Heidegger's analysis of van Gogh's shoes suggests he would agree that representation is immaterial to the painting's truth. It is not a question of where Rauch's "gentleman" is from, it is a matter of how he is "enframed." His treatment of figures is the "unconcealment" that characterizes modern technology. Rauch would have then, according to Heidegger, "already been claimed by a way of revealing that challenges him to approach nature as an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectlessness of standing reserve."¹⁵ If we follow Heidegger's philosophy of "enframing" and "revealing" in *Die Fuge* we can see how, like Heidegger and Rauch suggest, these worlds are removed from any sense of established time of civilization. History becomes a style for Rauch, who in looking at this subject responds, "there is so much wonderful reserve of seemingly discarded hand-me down material."¹⁶ History

¹³ Ibid., 180.

¹⁴ Interview, *Para.* p. 78.

¹⁵ Heidegger, 300.

¹⁶ Liebs.

through Rauch's work is emptied of meaning, a state that suits Heidegger's philosophy of revealing. Yet by emptying History of meaning, Rauch's work takes a critical stance towards the *Gestell*, or revealing of History.

Like the opening in van Gogh's shoes, "the gap" in Rauch's work is something to be filled. Where Heidegger created a subjective history for Van Gogh's work, we are presented with a subjective history into which we can satisfy our own subjectivity. In this manner I interpret Rauch's work as showing a failure, or breakdown of history. History, as Rauch has admitted, is only a symptom of his greater role as someone who creates pictures: "I am really only still interested in the image and the text between the lines..."¹⁷ In this way I would agree with the interpretation that History is reduced to the standing-reserve and, through Rauch, manipulated into a form of aesthetic production. I see this in some ways as offering a synthesis between aesthetic revealing and technological revealing.

Rauch uses Historical resources but then voids them of their "energy" by turning them into "earth." I see *Die Fuge* as an essential strife between Historical reserve and History. Instead of "truth" coming to light, I feel that the real conflict propelling Rauch's work is the question of Historical context in relation to painting. I think History becomes a convention for "figuring" part of Rauch's creative process and is filtered into a "thing" in the same way his figures are regarded as "things." In *Die Fuge*, paint becomes the material through which Rauch brings forth History, and in turn History reveals itself as paint to create perhaps the most important gap in *Die Fuge*, the one proposed between History and surface.

¹⁷ Werner, 53.