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**The Rebirth of Painting and the Images of the Metropolis:
From German Expressionism to the 'Young Wilds' as a
Neo-Expressionist Movement at the End of the Seventies**

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At the beginning of the 20th century, the big capitals become the centre of gravity of European modernity. For the artists of the time, the metropolis provides a space of vitality and new experience; the dynamics and diversity of urban spaces produce new artistic forms of expression, new ideas and new visual experiences. These tendencies can be found in literature, music, photography and cinematic art alike – but they stand out most radically in painting. I will illustrate the specific relationship between the creative subject, the work of art and the city using the example of German Expressionism. In my short paper, I will focus historically on the early and late 20th century, when Expressionist painting became a mode of representation for a certain way of life as well as for a certain way of experiencing the

world; a mode of representation globally understood and adapted.

Big cities have the potential to fascinate, irritate or destroy; they offer myriad ways of experiencing life – socially, culturally and politically; they release energies, they stimulate the nerves as well as our perception, they are spaces of anonymity and of the masses, they build their own myth and origin character. In the metropolis around 1900, modern artists feel both at home and lost in space. Their artistic inspiration, their radically subjective aesthetic approach emerges from the tensions and discords they experience. The German Expressionist Ludwig Meidner painted this experience programmatically a hundred years ago: ‘I and the City.’ Berlin becomes an apocalyptic urban space here, no aspect of life seems to be stable anymore, everything breaks down, all aspects of life collapse, the old world disintegrates in a rush of glaring colors and exploding forms – elements which were significant also for artists like Kirchner and Grosz. This coincident experience of the self, the world and the work of art, which is characteristic of Expressionist painting, renders it possible for the paintings to express something in their form which escapes realistic modes of representation – the invisible

Ludwig Meidner:
Ich und die Stadt
(*I and the City*), 1913

Apokalyptische Landschaft
(*Apocalyptic Landscape*),
1913

Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner:
Potsdamer Platz, 1914

George Grosz:
Metropolis, 1916/17

city, its character, its originality. The city, its streets, curiosities, people and societies constitute the stage for the manifold encounters and projections of the artist and the urban world.

Nikolaus Braun:
Berliner Straßenszene,
(A Berlin Streetscene),
1921

The image of the city is reinterpreted during the 1970s, when a new generation of 'Young Wilds' depicted their way of experiencing the world in paintings full of energy, vitality and expressive power. These artists, living in Cologne, Hamburg and West Berlin, are driven by a 'hunger for pictures' (Wolfgang Max Faust). After the movements of Fluxus and Concept Art during the 60s and 70s, this new mode of 'crude painting' initiates a renaissance of the canvas, which now becomes the projection screen for a new, intensive idea of 'emotion and hardness'.

K.H. Hödicke: *Roter Himmel über Schöneberg* (Red Sky over Schöneberg), 1975

Helmut Middendorf:
Flugzeugtraum (Dream of an Airplane), 1982

Bernd Zimmer: *Berlin*.

Influenced by Punk and New Wave, the Here and Now of the city becomes a space and time for sensually experiencing obsession and ecstasy: the 'Wild Boys' see themselves as 'indians of the city', as 'urban nomads', as outlaws and Nighthawks. For them, the city becomes a jungle: exotic, dangerous, crass and full of relish. Everything seems to merge: spontaneity, creativity, adventure, danger. In this urban environment they establish their new role of the art-star as performing self. And their painting became the projection of this performing self.

Luciano Castelli:
Indianer I (Indian I),
1982

Rainer Fetting:
Selbstportrait als Indianer (Selfportrait as an Indian), 1982

Helmut Middendorf:
Großstadteingeborene II (Native Citizens II).

Rainer Fetting: *Große Dusche* (Big Shower), 1981

Salomé: *Für Luciano* (For Luciano), 1979; *Klappe* (Darkroom), 1979

Jörg Immendorf:
Nachtwache (Nightwatch),
1982

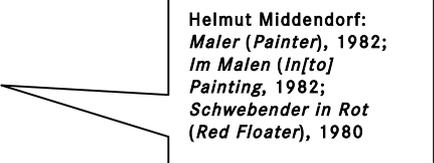
Helmut Middendorf:
Einsamkeit der Köpfe (Loneliness of Heads),
1982; *Electric Night*, 1981

Rainer Fetting: *Drummer und Gitarrist*, 1979

Helmut Middendorf: *Maler* (Painter),
1982; *Im Malen* (In[to] Painting), 1982

Rainer Fetting: *Van Gogh und Mauer* (Van Gogh and Wall), 1978; *Van Gogh und die Hochbahn* (Van Gogh and the overhead railway), 1978-81

Therefore young artists like Rainer Fetting, Helmut Middendorf, Jörg Immendorf, Salomé and Bernd Zimmer are searching for a new form of ‘visual speech’ – and they are thereby expressing the lifestyle, the way of life, the feelings and emotions of a whole generation of young self performing painters. In this way they are trying to find new expressions on the canvas; they paint spontaneously, wildly, directly – and they do it in a decisively anti-intellectual, anti-normative way and with an individual, very personal approach. They are creating images of their own urban lives, subjective, painted messages from the inside out, sometimes enigmatic, but always full of energy and power. The ‘Young Wilds’ of the late 70s and early 80s are looking for urban spaces and locations of emancipation, self-presentation and freedom: ‘What can be done?’: this is the question they ask themselves both aesthetically and existentially; and their answer is always the same: ‘Anything goes!’



Helmut Middendorf:
Maler (Painter), 1982;
*Im Malen (In]to]
Painting*, 1982;
*Schwebender in Rot
(Red Floater)*, 1980

This mode of experiencing the world – now often referred to as ‘postmodern’ – became the global signature of the 80s. The big cities had become centers of seemingly unlimited possibilities for living ones live and experimenting with it. A subjectivity focused

radically on the intoxicating experience of the Now could only flourish in the multicultural spaces of the capitals (with the transdisciplinary option of all kind of arts from music to performances). It is only in the actual sub-cultural spheres of the big cities – with their galleries, lofts, their transformed factories and clubs – that artists from a whole range of different national and educational backgrounds could unleash their creativity. And the cities became then laboratories and playground.

Martin Kippenberger im
Ratinger Hof
Das *SO 36* in Kreuzberg,
um 1985

More than thirty years ago, the message sounded loud and clear: Live fast, live intensive, be a star and be a hero (if only for one night), let your paintings become a document and visual act of your personal life experience. With their artistic gesture and their dynamics, these modes of art stand for acts of painting and for urban images which have emancipated themselves from traditional art institutional contexts and which have thus become an immediate part of city life and of life in the streets, clubs, galleries and underground.

Rainer Fetting:
Moritzplatz I, 1978

In the jungle of the city, everyone can be an artist. Catch the life, express yourself without limits: This was an specific artist-attitude from Berlin to Milano, London and New York. And maybe this

wave of western modernity came like a flood to china. Around the same time – but in a completely different political climate –, Chinese contemporary art produced its own New Wave – with similar feelings, with a similar urge for freedom and need for spaces of experimentation, and with a longing for the unity of art and life.