

# Alice Neel

## Painter of Modern Life

### Emotional Values

Alice Neel and the American

Reception of German Art

by Petra Gördüren

#### Expressive Realism in Alice Neel's Early Work

It was during her education in Philadelphia that Neel came in contact with American Realism. She extended its tradition and surely also redefined it for twentieth-century art. Neel enrolled at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women (now the Moore College of Art & Design) in 1921. While it was considered a conventional school for upper-class daughters at that time, it looked back with pride on the years in which Robert Henri – the founder of New York's Ashcan School and the leading protagonist of American Realism since the 1910s – served as a teacher there. In retrospect, Neel resolutely declared that she preferred her studies at the School of Design to the well-established Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the oldest art academy in the US. While the latter had opened itself to modern developments in art around 1920, it also cherished the memory of two internationally successful artists from Philadelphia, the Impressionist Mary Cassatt and the fashionable portrait painter Cecilia Beaux – both of them served as negative “role models”, so to speak, from whom Neel programmatically distanced herself with her less accommodating works: “I didn't want to be taught Impressionism [...]”, was the reason the artist gave for the choice of her place of education; “I didn't see life as a *Picnic on the Grass*. I wasn't happy like Renoir.” And she added in further explanation: “I didn't want to be taught a formal form.” Neel thus criticised Impressionism as a formalist art, as a highly aestheticised art form that did not deal with the darker aspects of human life. Depicting these was, however, the declared intention of the artist, who saw painting primarily as a medium of expressing one's opinion and accordingly even as a “philosophy about life”.

The European avant-gardes, including Expressionism and the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, had pursued similar goals in the first decades of the twentieth century: Expressionism, with its turning to an artistic statement defined by inner worlds, and the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, with its critique of the social and political reality of the interwar period. While Neel's links to the tradition of American Realism cannot be denied, her work nonetheless – in a manner that is entirely characteristic of the social realism of American painting in the twenties and thirties – certainly raises the question of a possible reception of European developments in art. German and Scandinavian positions, in particular, must have aroused her attention, for they were seen as less formalistic and, above all, as the expression of subjective feelings in comparison to the dominant French art.

Still, the existing sources make it largely impossible to determine when Neel first came in contact with German avant-garde art. She had, however, already had some contact with German culture

early on in her life. The artist grew up near Philadelphia, a city strongly influenced by German immigrants and their descendants. Two of her professors were also born in Germany. Without mentioning his name, she describes one of them as “very dogmatic”, but she was very enthusiastic about the other, her drawing teacher – the portrait painter and glass artist Paula Himmelsbach Balano, who had come from Leipzig to the US with her family in 1879, while still a child.

Neel’s first known works are dated 1926, when she was living in Havana, recently married to the Cuban painter Carlos Enríquez. Although they are executed with a coarser brushstroke and a gesture that is clearly more expressive, paintings like *Beggars, Havana, Cuba* (Estate of Alice Neel, fig. 1), the portrait *Carlos Enríquez* (cat. 1) and *Mother and Child, Havana* (cat. 2) display a clear affinity with the art of Robert Henri – both in their dark palette and the choice to depict underprivileged social classes. His book *The Art Spirit* was indubitably also of great significance for Neel, as it was for other artists of her generation. Henri propagated a painting that was to lead out of the academies and to turn to everyday life with a subjective, but open-minded gaze: “What we need is more sense of the wonder of life and less of this business of making a picture.” And he demanded that artists develop “a fresh new concern for everyday objects and an awareness of new trends in painting”.

As a student Neel was well-read and, in Havana, she moved within the circles of Cuba’s artistic avant-garde. Their organ was the journal *revista de avance*. The first issue appeared in March 1927 and Enríquez was a regular contributor. It certainly paid attention to developments in Europe, but in this regard its interest was primarily in Cubism, Futurism, and Surrealism. Nonetheless, there was a debate specifically of German literature and philosophy: Leibniz and Hegel were discussed, as were Nietzsche and Husserl. The few traces of German and Austrian avant-garde art that can be tracked down in the journal naturally include scattered illustrations by Max Ernst, George Grosz, and Egon Schiele, whose familiarity can thus be assumed.

### **The American Perspective on a “Serious” Art**

After just over a year in Cuba, Neel returned to America with her daughter in May 1927, her husband following them in the autumn. She settled in New York, where she encountered an art scene in which German and Northern European art was increasingly acquiring traction. Until the beginning of the century, the artistic exchange with Germany had taken place through immigration, journeys abroad for study and also developing institutionalised support; after being broken off during the First World War, critics, gallery owners and museum professionals systematically promoted contact with the young German avant-garde. A few of the exhibitions that were important for the reception of German art took place early on. The Société Anonyme, which was founded by the German- American artist and collector Katherine Sophie Dreier in 1920, and in which Marcel Duchamp was also active, presented Kurt Schwitters to the American public in 1920, Wassily Kandinsky in 1923 and Paul Klee in 1924. In 1926/1927, it organised the highly successful *International Exhibition of Modern Art* at the Brooklyn Museum, which had 52,000 visitors. With artists like Kurt Schwitters and Wassily Kandinsky, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Franz Marc, Gabriele Münter, Heinrich Hoerle and Carl Buchheister, the focus in German art was

on Expressionist, Dadaist and Constructivist tendencies. This catalogue was to become a reference point as a canon for modern art was established in the succeeding years.

Expressionist art, on the other hand, was promoted with dedication by the German art historian William R. Valentiner, who came to the US in 1921. He was initially employed as a curator and then, from 1924 onward, as director at the Detroit Institute of Arts. In collaboration with the Berlin gallery owner Ferdinand Möller, who was looking for new overseas markets for the modern German art represented by his gallery, Valentiner organised the 1923 exhibition *Modern German Art* at New York's Anderson Galleries. Among others, it was artists of the Brücke and the Bauhaus whose works were exhibited – but also that of Emil Nolde, Christian Rohlf's and Franz Radziwill as well as Lyonel Feininger, who was born in New York, but hardly known in the US at that time. More recent art was represented by two of George Grosz's drawings, "an unpleasant surprise" in the judgment of the *New York Times*. While the discussion of the exhibition was not necessarily favourable, it certainly drew attention and was thus considered a success by Valentiner.

One of Valentiner's fundamental aims was to establish a distinction between German art, as an art of inner expression, and French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism: "But there is also an art that is life itself", he wrote in the introduction of the catalogue, "that rises out of the depth like a cry, and it carries the deepest expression of humanity". Valentiner presented Expressionist art as the expression of a tormented soul and characterised it as a German phenomenon – ignoring the fact that the term "Expressionism" had been coined at the beginning of the century with reference to international (including French) avant-garde tendencies. The interest in Expressionism in the US had already begun in the early 1920s, and before the new art of this movement entered the scene, Expressionist film, literature, and music had already made an impression on the American public.

Another protagonist who successfully dedicated himself to the presentation of German art in the US was the art dealer J. B. Neumann, who opened his New York gallery in 1924 and began to show German artists in 1927. In April 1927, shortly before Neel's arrival in the metropolis, Max Beckmann's first solo exhibition in America could be seen there. The show was not a financial success, but the 15 exhibited paintings aroused substantial attention in the press. With a single stroke, Beckmann became known as an "unquestionably strong painter", his work understood as a "selective mirror of life in post-war Central Europe". That same year, the largely conservative Homer Saint-Gaudens, director of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, announced after returning from a trip to Europe: "The greatest change in the art situation in Europe today has taken place in Germany. [...] In Germany art has become completely modernist."

The interest in artistic developments in Germany was reflected in the daily press from the mid-1920s onward, but also in articles on German art in scholarly journals. Oskar Kokoschka and Max Pechstein, Max Ernst and Paul Klee were well-known names; Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Emil Nolde, and Käthe Kollwitz were highly esteemed. George Grosz was known both for his caricature-like, cynical works on paper and for the blasphemy trial of 1928. Otto Dix was another German artist who began to draw increasing attention from 1927 onward. Dix's first solo exhibition was held in

1923 at the gallery of Neumann's partner in Berlin, Karl Nierendorf; Dix was included in Neumann's program and, along with Kokoschka, Pechstein, Willy Jaeckel and Anton Faistauer, he had been represented since the fall of 1927 by several works at the *Carnegie International*, which began in Pittsburgh and toured to Brooklyn and San Francisco.

As was the case every year, the *Carnegie International* – which was presumably the largest regularly-occurring exhibition of international contemporary art at that time – enjoyed a substantial resonance in the press. Among the artists from German-speaking countries, it was particularly Dix and Kokoschka who were discussed. The *New York Times* reproduced Kokoschka's *Portrait of Albert Ehrenstein* (1914, National Gallery, Prague, fig. 26) and praised the psychological insight of its depiction, and the paper also occupied itself extensively with the portrait *Hugo Erfurth with Dog* (1926, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, fig. 28), which is one of Dix's most important likenesses and could be seen there for the first time in the US. It is possible that Neel, who lived in New York at that time, was among the visitors to the exhibition in Brooklyn. Constantly in rebellion against established artistic positions, she must have had a vital interest in an art that the critic Helen Appleton Read assessed in her review of 15 January, 1928, printed in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*: "The German section is in interesting contrast to the French and British. German painters care little for charm, but there is an earnestness [...] and always the psychological twist which gives their art a distinctive personality and interest. [...] Painting does not mean decoration or merely aesthetic satisfaction to the German. It is and always has been a *Weltanschauung* (attitude toward life)." Read, who had also studied with Robert Henri and supported American Realism, emphasised the uncompromising interiority and the forceful psychological expression of German art – aspects which were repeatedly used to characterise it in American art criticism of the 1920s – and thus legitimised its apparent ugliness.

### **Encounters with Modern German Art**

Art as an expression of "life itself" (Valentiner) or as a "*Weltanschauung*" (Read): Such characterisations of the German art of the 1920s display a remarkable affinity with Neel's understanding of art as a "philosophy of life", so that the existence of a comparable mental attitude may be assumed, regardless of the contentious question about a direct reception of German tendencies in art in her work. In addition – to the extent that this can be documented on the basis of the few preserved early paintings and watercolours – there is a clear shift in Neel's work after 1927. While the underprivileged social classes stood in the focal point of her early work as an artist, in works like *The Family* (fig. 30), she redirects her attention to her own life with a clear-sighted and startlingly open analysis of the situation in her parents' home. She unflinchingly deals with her personal suffering, for example, the death of her first daughter Santillana in late 1927, her traumatic separation from Enríquez in May 1930, her financial worries, and the lack of family support: a personal suffering expressed in deeply disturbing, painted compositions and that finally led to the artist's nervous breakdown.

At the same time, German art was achieving increasing acceptance and prominence in the US. Even before its conclusive breakthrough with Alfred H. Barr's *German Painting and Sculpture* in 1931 at the still-new Museum of Modern Art, there were constant reports on exhibition events

dealing with German art. The *New York Times* alone provided extensive coverage of individual artists of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*: on the occasion of the June 1928 exhibition *Deutsche Kunst* (German art) in Düsseldorf; in the autumn, Grosz's trial for blasphemy was one of its daily topics. In early 1929, the paper commented upon Alfred Kuhn's contribution in the special issue of the journal *Survey Graphic* dedicated to Germany: this text provided an extensive overview of contemporary German art and presented Dix, Georg Scholz, George Grosz, and Rudolf Schlichter, among others. In the spring of 1929, Max Beckmann and Karl Hofer were declared to have established themselves on the international market, and it was simultaneously noted that Grosz wanted to secure his presence in the US. Only a few months later, the *New York Times* announced the first purchases of German art for the Art Institute of Detroit and the Art Institute of Chicago. In May of 1930, the newspaper finally pointed out that some considered Nolde the "greatest living German painter", and in August of that year, it praised and prominently reproduced Dix's 1927 painting *Liegende auf Leopardenfell* (*Woman Reclining on a Leopard Skin*; Ithaca, Cornell University, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art) on the occasion of the Venice Biennale.

The reception of German art in the US in 1931 was defined above all by the exhibition *German Painting and Sculpture*. Neel certainly did not see the show: at that time, she had been hospitalised for treatment following her attempted suicide. However, on the basis of her professional interest, we can nonetheless assume that she knew about the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue; indeed, several portraits of the 1930s, for example, *Max White* (1935, cat. 11) and *Elenka* (1936, cat. 18), clearly recall the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Finally, in 1933, she also exhibited together with three of the artists presented in *German Painting and Sculpture*: Pechstein, Beckmann, and Klee. It was the second group show in the US for Neel, who had moved to New York's Greenwich Village – which was popular among intellectuals – in early 1932, following her recovery.

The *Living Art Exhibition*, which J. B. Neumann organised at the Mellon Galleries in Philadelphia after his own gallery went bankrupt, seems to be the only documented direct contact between Neel and the German avant-garde. However, the effects of this encounter were – judging by the sparse source material – of moderate intensity. In this group exhibition, Neumann gathered American, Mexican, and European artists. With five works, Beckmann was the most extensively represented artist. According to the exhibition flyer, Neel presented two works, *Red Houses* and *Snow*; however, it has not yet been possible to identify these with complete certainty, and they may also have fallen victim to the destructive rage of a jealous lover in 1934. Following the exhibition, there was one further meeting with Neumann, who visited the artist in her studio. However, the paintings that Neel showed to the dealer on this occasion, among them the portrait of Joe Gould (1933, cat. 8) – practically a precursor to Martin Kippenberger's "bad painting" – surely represented the most radical position but did not lead to a further business relationship.

The notion that an increasing awareness of German art also contributed to the artistic break in Neel's work after 1927 can perhaps be best illustrated through a direct comparison of two works. We do not know whether the artist saw Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's 1911 painting *Weiblicher Halbakt*

*mit Hut* (*Female Half-Length Nude with a Hat*, Museum Ludwig, Köln, fig. 29), for example, in person or as a reproduction, but the thematic and stylistic similarities with the 1930 portrait *Rhoda Myers with Blue Hat* (cat. 4), as well as with the nude portrait *Ethel Ashton* (1930, cat. 5) from the same year are distinctive. In the formative years of her career, Neel absorbed many influences from various artists and then developed these into an independent position. The expressive force of German Expressionism, but also the relentlessness of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, must have represented a link to American Realist positions in her eyes, and they were surely among the inspiring pictorial worlds within the visual cosmos of an artist who, like every self-assured artist, rigorously rejected imitative quotations of the works that served her as models.