

in the painted portrait that the Western ideals of human individuality and sentient subjectivity had been most visibly enshrined. In fact, portraiture had traditionally functioned in Europe as one of the vehicles for the expression and promotion of an ideal of human volition and control that was essential to humanist philosophy and a central tenet of Enlightenment thought. These notions were personified primarily in images of male monarchs, professionals, and privileged gentlemen, whose individuated physiognomies, characteristic gestures, and well-chosen accessories expressed their apparent power and autonomy. (These qualities were thought to be lacking in women, who were more often understood as the embodiments of sentiment, beauty, and grace.)<sup>11</sup> Numerous nineteenth-century portraits of men embody these values. But in the increasingly industrialized and materialist circuits of nineteenth-century urban modernity, such theories of human agency, coherence, and control began to be challenged. Repetition rather than singularity now formed the basis of figural proliferation in countless *cartes de visite* and humble mug shots alike. Photography, which effectively democratized representation, mimicked the protocols of painted portraiture, depleting its privileged role and raiding its timeworn sets, drapes, conventions, and codes, which could now be used and reused as the situation required.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, science, psychology, and the emergent disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and linguistics devised new theories of subjectivity that served to disempower individuals and render them subject to forces beyond their control—psychic, social, and material.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the traditional values of resemblance and psychological depth in portraiture were widely regarded as the outmoded relics of a former, more optimistic era. Now, if the distortions and simplifications of figurative art were anything to go by, the generic had replaced the specific, the depersonalized was regarded as indicative of humanity's plight, and the accidental and arbitrary nature of representation seemed truer to life than the painstaking pursuit of likeness associated with a redundant realism. Picasso, who, with his peers, had fragmented the integral body—torn it to pieces, so to speak—gave rise to a radical reformulation of the figural that would stretch, by midcentury, to the childlike distortions of Jean Dubuffet in France (fig. 6) and



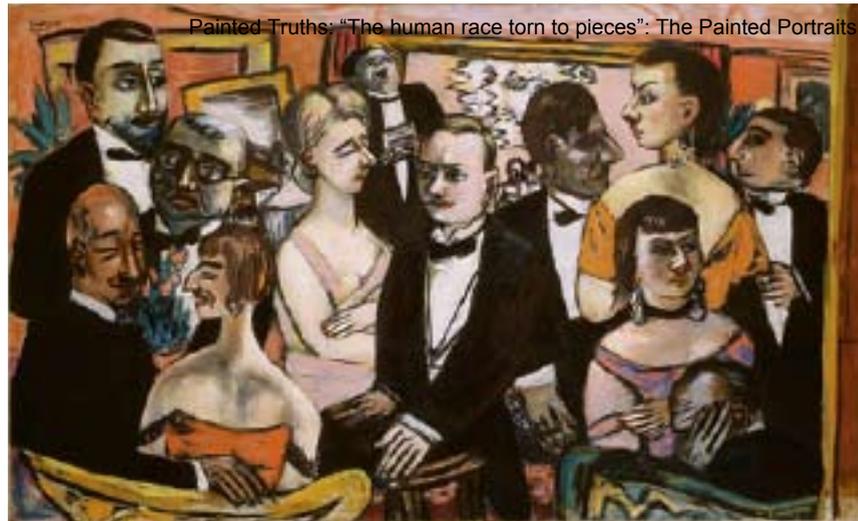
Fig. 6 Jean Dubuffet, *Joë Bousquet in Bed*, from the *More Beautiful Than They Think: Portraits* series, 1947, oil emulsion in water on canvas, 57 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 44 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (146.3 × 114 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund (114.1961).



Fig. 7 Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Olga in an Armchair*, 1917, oil on canvas, 51¼ × 35 inches (130 × 88.8 cm), Musée Picasso, Paris.

even to the gestural simplifications of Willem de Kooning in the United States. In their hands, the portrait became overtly anti-individualistic and antipsychological in a postwar world in which the abstract frontality of the face, with its rounded circumference and cadaverous cavities or superimposed lips, replaced the unique features and distinguishing characteristics of the well-honed human head.<sup>13</sup> Such generalized, distilled figures, although sometimes named and identified in titles, bore little resemblance to their subjects—if they referred to individuals at all. In fact, the very notion of the portrait sitter was rendered problematic. Iconic, symbolic, or titular representation replaced the traditional values of likeness as well as the illusion of three-dimensional presence on which both realist and expressionist modes of depiction had long depended.

For Alice Neel, the nihilistic abstraction of an expressive faciality and distorted physicality associated with European figurative artists from Jean Dubuffet to Francis Bacon was not an option. Nor was it the only possibility for a self-aware figurative painter in the post-Cubist period. Indeed, only a few years after the Cubists had disfigured the face of portraiture, the very iconoclasts who had shattered the integrity of the human form revisited mimesis and resemblance in a series of revisionist, stylized gestures that, in their heightened self-consciousness, remain haunted by the act of destruction from which they had just emerged. Picasso, the high priest of figural dismemberment, was himself to revisit the illusory wholeness that Neoclassical idealism proclaimed in a number of Ingresesque portraits produced after 1915 (fig. 7). But Picasso's flirtation with a self-conscious neotraditionism—part parody, part pastiche<sup>14</sup>—was short-lived. Nor did it ever entail a simple return to an intact world that remained as it had been before things had fallen apart.<sup>15</sup> After Cubism and photography, the possibility of representing the "real" was radically redefined, and the powerful, resistant, and revitalized realisms that emerged throughout the twentieth century remained haunted by alternative representational practices, both mechanical and conceptual. Realism, no longer the ascendant aesthetic in the twentieth century (as it had been in the nineteenth), became the anxious style par excellence, defensive and defiant on the one hand, and painfully aware of its own precarious claims to represent a rapidly changing world on the other. But it is no less powerful for its self-conscious performativity as



style.<sup>16</sup> In Germany, some of the most potent critical views of the corruption, materialism, and militarism of contemporary culture were mounted through the heightened realism and the aesthetic of “ugliness” of painters associated with the New Objectivity like George Grosz and Otto Dix, or the expressive figuration of Max Beckmann, with his acerbic, satirical vision of contemporary society (fig. 8). Whereas Dix mobilized the grotesque and the cruelly comical in conjunction with a historicist engagement with a perceived northern naturalism, Beckmann invoked the exaggerated languages of caricature and crude distortion, each with profoundly political implications. In England, the mundane and the quotidian, traditionally within the purview of realism, were elevated to the visionary in the idiosyncratic canvases of Stanley Spencer, and though they were reduced to the banal in those of Lucian Freud, they were transformed into the tragic and epic via the distorting painterly filters of Francis Bacon (fig. 9). In the Soviet Union, Socialist Realism, which championed an uncritical reflexive naturalism, was tied to the propagandistic and coercive agenda of the state, while in the United States, Social Realism—a less programmatic and prescriptive political project tied to progressive social ends but still dominated by pictorial orthodoxies—flourished under the patronage of the Works Progress Administration. These examples are only some of the manifestations and permutations that went under the name of reborn and reconfigured realist models of depiction and description—tied to the material world—in a century that had, from its early years, sounded the death knell of figuration. Far from the modernist autonomy of mainstream American art, realism in a variety of forms remained a viable, if unrecognized, alternative for many ambitious artists.

Alice Neel’s position in this narrative is fascinating. A figurative painter throughout her working life (although she professed an admiration for abstraction), she was acutely aware of her position as the protagonist of a discredited tradition as well as a member of a marginalized social group. To be a woman and a realist (however mediated by expressionist paintwork) in the twentieth-century United States was to be doubly devalued in mainstream culture. But these two components of her identity are what constitute the foundation of her agency as an artist.

Fig. 8 Max Beckmann, *Paris Society (Gesellschaft Paris)*, 1931, oil on canvas, 43 × 69½ inches (109.2 × 175.6 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 70.1927.

Fig. 9 Francis Bacon, *Study for a Portrait*, 1952, oil and sand on canvas, 34½ × 30¼ inches (88 × 77 cm). Tate, London, bequeathed by Simon Sainsbury, 2006, accessioned 2008, T12616.



Fig. 10 Oskar Kokoschka, *Portrait of Lotte Franzos*, 1909, oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 31 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches (114.9 × 79.4 cm), the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Neel’s commitment to realism is complex. She is known to have refused the label and described herself once as someone committed to a “combination of realism and expressionism.”<sup>17</sup> In any case, her “realism” was always tempered by her sense of herself as a modern painter, a historically conscious artist engaged with a material practice that was neither transparent nor simply descriptive. Her fondness for the expressionist portraits of Oskar Kokoschka (fig. 10) and Edvard Munch is well known, and her attachment to painters from Goya and Velázquez to Van Gogh and Beckmann meant that she was particularly drawn to the gestural, painterly tradition within Western art, especially when tied to the portrayal of human situations and subjects.<sup>18</sup> It could be argued that her commitment to realist precedents characterized her earlier work, and that her attachment to artists associated with the expressionist tradition surfaced later. Neel professed a profound distaste for the detached work of the New Realists because of their lack of “psychological acumen” and “depth” (although some of her early portraits appear clearly indebted to the crisp contours and dry surfaces of painters like Dix), and while she admired the seriousness with which the Soviet Union took its artists, she was no supporter of its state-sanctioned realism and its tired reworking of academic formulae appropriated for the glory of the hero-worker. Nor was she interested in honing her skills to neutral naturalistic ends, which would entail the occlusion of her own physical presence. Neel’s self-conscious mobilization of painterly devices—expressive brushstrokes, bold outlines, simplified compositions, and heightened color—was intended not only to mirror the world but to reveal her visceral and personal encounter with its social and political forces. Like the arch nineteenth-century literary realist Honoré de Balzac (whose *Comédie Humaine* she admired and whom she cited in a lecture as a precedent for a socially concerned art), Neel harnessed her representational strategies to the depiction of ordinary lived experience and a historically located sociality, but she also remained acutely aware of the means of her engagement.<sup>19</sup> And the world she pictured was not so much the product of “nature” but a “man-made” entity in which the powerful and privileged dominated and the oppressed and marginalized suffered. Moreover, her experiences as a woman allowed her to witness and represent that world from a particular vantage point. Early figure



compositions such as *Well Baby Clinic* (1928) both memorialize her personal loss of a child and dramatize the conditions of birth and parturition for the anonymous urban poor through an almost mannerist composition and heightened expressive drawing (fig. 11). In a bare hospital ward, nursing mothers and squawking infants cohabit in an impoverished and dehumanizing setting in which mouths are contorted to grimaces and nipples seem to issue forth blood as well as nourishment. Art was, from the start for Neel, a means of revealing existing forms of oppression and exploitation as well as representing the real social relations under which contemporary life was lived. In this sense, even though she sometimes deployed distortion and exaggeration for effect, Neel certainly was a realist, nurtured and formed in the 1930s left-wing political and artistic circles of Greenwich Village, where a politically committed art was regarded as the only one worth defending. In this context, her attachment to portraiture, which went alongside her figure compositions, risked being seen as a capitulation to the bourgeois “cult of personality.”<sup>20</sup> But for Neel, the depiction of people was always a vehicle through which she could record the manners and mannerisms of an age.<sup>21</sup> When asked, late in life, why she had devoted herself to such a compromised genre, she answered that painting portraits was a form of “writing history” and of recording the data of a recognizable moment in time.<sup>22</sup> For her, portraits not only captured the body, posture, and physiognomy of individuals; they “embodied the character of an era.”<sup>23</sup>

Neel’s concern with individual subjects as the conduits of history links her firmly to the realist tradition of her native country—she was acutely aware of the work of Thomas Eakins and the legacy of the Ashcan School<sup>24</sup>—and that of Europe, culminating in the nineteenth century in the radical innovations of artists such as Daumier, Courbet (fig. 12), and Degas. It was in this context that the painting of the everyday and the lowly had been elevated in the hierarchy of the genres and that painted portraiture was no longer reserved for the world of the privileged and noble. Theorists of the portrait in the nineteenth century asserted the capacity of the genre to map a social terrain by situating appropriately clad figures in credible surroundings and using pose, facial expression, gesture, and accessories to describe a singular human being as well as a moment in time.<sup>25</sup> From her early studies of people in situ, positioned

Fig. 11 Alice Neel, *Well Baby Clinic*, 1928, oil on canvas, 39 × 29 inches (99 × 73.7 cm), Estate of Alice Neel.

Fig. 12 Gustave Courbet, *Madame de Brayer*, 1858, oil on canvas, 36 × 28<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (91.4 × 72.7 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.118).

with characteristic gestures and carefully chosen accessories, Neel was committed to encapsulating the distinctive and the unique at the same time as revealing something larger and more significant than the minutiae of personal experience. Powerful examples of her redolent realism are the portraits she produced in the 1930s of the proletarian writer Max White (plate 9) and the Communist activist Pat Whalen (plate 4), who is shown with steadfast gaze and powerful hands held purposefully over a copy of the *Daily Worker*. In a work reminiscent of a portrait by Cézanne (whose portraits Neel much admired), Whalen's political views are communicated by the nature of the newspaper he reads.<sup>26</sup> Careful to adumbrate the title of the paper and its headline coverage of a steelworkers' strike in strong black print, Neel uses the portrait to convey information, both about the physical appearance of her sitter and about his preferences and political affiliations. The inclusion of revealing details and sartorial clues characterized many of her portraits until the end of her long working life. From the start, abstract ideals were distilled into the bodies of individuated subjects, and each sitter, no matter how pared down and spare in setting and situation, was conceived as a historical agent whose subjectivity was captured in paint. This quality was the hallmark of Neel's portraiture and the basis of its politics. In one of her last portraits, *Meyer Schapiro* (1983) (plate 68), painted nearly fifty years after the images of her worker-poets and activists, she captured the lively intelligence of the famous art historian by animating his lined face and open, engaged expression with his characteristic flyaway wisps of hair. Seated, hands clasped, in an enfolding armchair, and in front of a gridded window, the New York Jewish intellectual is poised as if caught in conversation. The portrait image functions as a mnemonic substitute for an actual life lived in a specific, identifiable place.

In much of her early work, though, Neel found it useful to convey more information than an everyday setting would accommodate, and she sometimes combined a realist veracity and observational detail with imaginary or symbolic allusions. The early portrait *Kenneth Fearing* (1935) (plate 3), for example, shows the Greenwich Village poet as an urban intellectual, his strong and forthright head illuminated by a bare electric lightbulb. But Neel did not isolate Fearing in a study or sitting room, as his particular pose might suggest. Instead