

Attack of the Nay-sayers

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ERNST WILHELM NAY
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Rarely can a single exhibition review have figured so prominently in an artist's career as that written in 1964 by Hans Platschek about the painter Ernst Wilhelm Nay, following a display of the artist's work at the third *documenta* exhibition in Kassel. Nay was then the best-known abstract painter in West Germany, at the peak of a gilded career that had begun in the early 1930s and which, despite the inclusion of two of his paintings in the 1937 exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, had continued largely undisturbed throughout the war. Having taken part in the invasion of France as an infantry soldier, from mid-1942 Nay was able to continue painting in a tranquil studio, lent to him by an amateur sculptor, in Le Mans. Following a short period of internment after the war's end, Nay sat out the Allied occupation painting in rural retreat near Frankfurt. His apparent imperviousness to politics and history is shown by paintings that embrace poetic Surrealism in the 1930s, allegorical figuration in the 40s, before turning towards an ambitious and increasingly striking abstraction after the war until his death in 1968.

This indifference to the political environment, and the perceived idea of "backward-looking utopianism", were the focus of Platschek's attack, which appeared in *Die Zeit* and ignited fierce debate. What irked the younger painter was the inflated rhetoric surrounding Nay's work – a rhetoric that had been elevated in the Federal Republic to the status of official encomium. Platschek identified this as the "Nay-Effekt", a fundamentalist way of looking and writing that indiscriminately linked pictorial form and colour to myths of antiquity, the Orient, and the "Abendland" of Western Europe. Werner Haftmann's monograph on Nay (1960), half sermon, half press release, was a good exam-

ple. In tracing Haftmann's prose back to the lexicon of the Nazi architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg, Platschek, like other young writers in the early 1960s, reveals his own *Sprachskepsis*, a deep concern over the unthinking continuation of Nazi vocabulary and critical psychology in the post-war world.

How much Platschek's review actually contributed to the fall-off of Nay's reputation after 1964 is another matter. From the mid-1950s, and particularly after the death of Willi Baumeister in 1955, Nay was West Germany's leading *Exportkünstler*, and received every official accolade available. He was the only West German painter with any standing in New York. But in 1964 a younger generation of artists, including Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz, were coming to the public's attention. And politics re-entered the art world with the emergence of Joseph Beuys, who made one of his most notable early public appearances in Aachen that year. East German painters including Werner Tübke, Wolfgang Mattheuer and Bernhard Heisig were raising the profile of figurative painting in the East. Furthermore, *documenta III* represented the victory in Europe of a new, post-Pollock, American Pop Art in the form of paintings by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.

Nay was disturbed by the shift in public opinion, but went on working. The current exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, curated by Ingrid Pfeiffer, shows what he did next: a sequence of simple composi-



"White-Black-Yellow", 1968

tions using one or two colours and combinations of intriguing cut-out shapes, called the "elementary series". Although these have been compared with the "Hard Edge" painting of artists like Kenneth Noland, a close inspection reveals a much more painterly, idiosyncratic approach. Nay never benefited from the uniform flat paint surface produced by acrylic paints, but rather used a variety of watery, chalky, or opaque surfaces. His "elementary" canvases are finished off with delicate touches rather than produced to a plan. The simple colours often give a playing card-like emblematic quality, and show Nay's ability to use colour in a deliberately

unsophisticated, "primitivizing" manner, like the natural colours used on antique sculpture.

It is the right moment to reassess the impact of these works beyond the circumstances of their first appearance. They stand up well, and comparisons with Nay's contemporaries are not hard to summon. Pfeiffer has also reconstructed the *documenta* installation from 1964. Three large square canvases hang at an angle from the ceiling; they are "stepped", like the underside of a staircase. The effect is curious – both immediate and historic. The paintings use an eye motif, which Nay developed throughout his work as a metonym for the human figure. The palette is brutal, unmixed, contributing to the sense of an oppressive downward stare.

Nay's implication with so many cultural and political figures during the Weimar years and throughout the Third Reich is a further root of interest in his work today. During the war he corresponded with Carl Schmitt, whom he had met in Berlin in the late 1930s, and who owned at least two paintings by the artist, including the beguiling "Schwarzer Diamant" (1933), a strange Max Ernst-like production. Nay also met Ernst Jünger during the war, and is favourably described in the writer's diaries. After the war he corresponded with Martin Heidegger, and privately defended the philosopher against Günter Grass's parody in his novel *Hundejahre*. Although he avoided other artists and was inclined to see himself as bearing alone the destiny of Western European art, his relation to other painters' work is of interest: to that of Henri Rousseau and Ernst in the early years, Kirchner in the 1930s, and then, after the war, American painters such as Sam Francis. The final canvases are a humane response to the flat, bright images of Pop Art, bringing to them a sense of heraldic pageantry. Nay absorbed influences in his own way, and by his own lights, even if he was never quite the master of them in the manner that he and his supporters so frequently claimed.