

The Dada Fair is held in Berlin: the polarization of avant-garde culture and cultural traditions leads to a politicization of artistic practices and the emergence of photomontage as a new medium.

The Dada Fair held in June 1920 at Dr. Otto Burchard's gallery in Berlin was the first public appearance of the group of artists—diverse in both project and origin—who came to constitute the official Berlin Dada movement. The fact that the event was announced as a fair rather than as an exhibition signals that from the very outset its parody of the display of commodities, whether at the level of window design or of large commercial presentations, emphasized the Dadaists' intention to radically transform both the structure of exhibitions and the art objects within them [1].

Some of the central objects of the fair—specifically Hannah Höch's (1889–1978) *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Beer Belly of the Weimar Republic* [2], Raoul Hausmann's (1886–1971) *Tatlin at Home* (1920) and *Mechanical Head (Spirit of the Age)* [3], and the collaborative contributions of George Grosz (1893–1959) and John Heartfield (Helmut Herzfelde) (1891–1968)—indicate the diversity of strategies employed by the newly defined group. In contact with the work of both the Italian Futurists and the Soviet avant-garde, Berlin Dada situated itself at the intersection of a critical revision of traditional modernism, on the one hand, and a manifest embracing of the new synthesis of avant-garde art with technology on the other. But more specifically, Berlin Dada also stood in radical opposition to the local avant-garde, namely the hegemonic model of German Expressionism. It was Expressionism's ethos, with its universalizing humanitarian aims, and its practice, with its fervent attempt to fuse spirituality and abstraction, that came under scrutiny and devastating critique at the hands of the Dadaists.

Dada: distraction and destruction

Under the impact of World War I, in which Expressionism had played the fateful and ultimately failed role of trying to appeal to the supposedly universal terms of human existence, Dada explicitly positioned itself against this aspiration for artistic practice. This stance has erroneously appeared to many to be a form of nihilism, but what needs to be stressed instead is the positive nature of Dada's critique. Against Expressionism's effort to fuse the aesthetic and the spiritual, Dada constructed a model of antiaesthetics; against the attempt to claim universality for human experience by



1 • First International Dada Fair at Kunstsalon Dr. Otto Burchard, Berlin, June 1920

assimilating the aesthetic to the mystical, Dada emphasized extreme forms of political secularization of artistic practice.

Several of the Berlin Dada group rallied to the left, identifying with the aims of the Communist Party to the degree, in the cases of Heartfield and Grosz, of becoming members of the Party when it was founded in Germany in 1919. From that perspective it is important to recognize that Berlin Dada is an explicitly politicized avant-garde project previously unknown in the German context. However, this project's axis ranges from a critique of bourgeois concepts of high art to a model for activist propaganda and from embracing French examples of earlier proto-Dada practices—such as Duchamp's and Picabia's—to the systematic development of montage techniques intended to undermine the emerging mass-cultural power of the Weimar publication industry.

The simultaneity of objects, textures, printed matter, and surfaces to which Heartfield and Grosz relate in their initial work from 1918 (no longer extant) clearly has a precursor in Cubism. But this earliest photomontage work to come out of Berlin is explicitly conceived of as a mockery of Cubism's aestheticized, apolitical approach to the emerging power of mass-cultural imagery. In 1919, immediately following this parody of Picasso's form of

▲ 1909, 1915, 1921 ● 1908

▲ 1914, 1916b, 1918, 1919



2 • Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Beer Belly of the Weimar Republic*, c. 1919
 Collage, 114 x 89.8 (44 7/8 x 35 3/4)

1920-1929



3 • Raoul Hausmann, *Mechanical Head (Spirit of The Age)*, c. 1920
Wood, leather, aluminum, brass, and board, 32.5 x 21 x 20 (1 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{5}{8}$)

collage, Heartfield, Hausmann, Höch, and Grosz—jointly and collaboratively—developed their first photomontage projects [4].

These were paralleled in the Soviet Union by the simultaneous development of photomontage by Gustav Klutis and Aleksandr Rodchenko. Although both sides claim to have invented the medium, photomontage had been developed as early as the 1890s as a commercial technique for the design of advertising. In fact, in their first text on the montage, Hausmann and Höch refer to populist models for combining and transforming images as their inspiration, and identify the picture postcards soldiers sent home from the Front as the examples from which they took their cues.

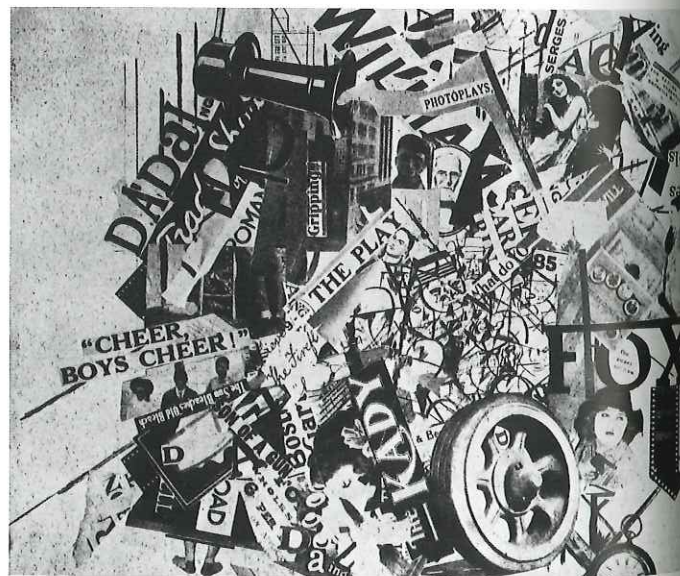
One of the key works of 1919 is Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife ...* in which the full range of technical and strategic ambiguities that would form the project of photomontage is apparent. From an iconically rendered narrative to a purely structural deployment of textual material, the possibilities established in Höch's work would become the axis of a dialectic operation within photomontage itself. In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife ...* the iconic narrative consists of a detailed inventory of key figures from the public world of the Weimar Republic. These move from political figures such as Friedrich Ebert, the Social Democratic President who had been responsible for the murders of members of the Spartakist Bund,

▲ 1921, 1935

specifically Rosa Luxemburg (1870–1919) and Karl Liebknecht (1871–1919), at the hands of his Minister of the Interior, Gustav Noske (who is depicted by Heartfield in a later photomontage as well), to figures of the cultural world such as Albert Einstein, Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945), and the dancer Niddy Impekoven. All of these are disseminated across the field of the work according to a nonhierarchical, noncompositional, and aleatory principle of distribution, mingled with a variety of textual fragments that often invoke the nonsensical syllables “da-da.” According to Huelsenbeck's claim, “dada” was found by inserting a knife into the pages of a dictionary; other origin stories for the term “dada” have been

▲ given, for example by the Cabaret Voltaire Dadaists.

But whether in the context of the Weimar Republic or in that of the Soviet Union, what links Heartfield, Grosz, Höch, and Hausmann on the one hand, and Rodchenko and Klutis on the other, is first of all, the discovery of the photographic permeation of the visual world as a result of the emergence of the mass-cultural distribution of photographic images. Secondly, both groups participate in a nonsemantic production of meaning intended to destroy visual and textual homogeneity, to emphasize the materiality of the signifier over a presumed universal legibility of either the textual or iconic signified, and to stress the rupture and discontinuity of temporal and spatial forms of experience. The critical impulse behind this allogical attack on the very fabric of legibility was the intention to dismantle the mythical representations promoted by the mass-cultural production of commodity imagery and advertising. Lastly, photomontage represents the shared desire to construct a new type of art object, one that is ephemeral, one that has no claim either to innate worth or transhistorical value, one that is instead located within the perspective of intervention and rupture. This defines the political dimension of the photomontage practitioners' decision to stage artistic practice within the very medium of mass-cultural representation rather than outside or in opposition to it.



4 • George Grosz and John Heartfield, *Life and Activity in Universal City at 12.05 midday*, 1919
Photomontage, dimensions unknown

▲ 1916a

as was the case in abstract art's attempt to retreat into the values specific to the mediums of painting or sculpture. These strategies link both groups' activities around 1919.

From photomontage to new narratives

As photomontage developed in Weimar Germany its range of options led its practitioners in various directions. In Hausmann's case the emphasis was increasingly textual with the verbal sign dismantled into graphic and phonetic fragments [5], whereas in Höch's work the focus on photographic imagery eventually displaced the structural separations that characterize the disjunction of textual elements. This was in favor of an increasingly homogeneous type of photomontage in which only two or three fragments are used to form peculiarly enigmatic figures.

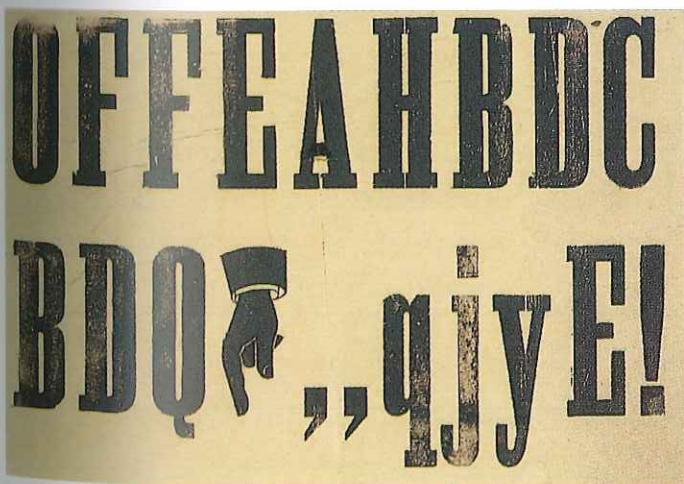
John Heartfield, a third member of the original Berlin Dada group, quickly moved away from what he came to criticize as the "avant-gardist" dimension of the aestheticizing photomontage model, whose nonsensical or anomic qualities he rejected in favor of a new type of photomontage of communicative action. In this new form, photomontage was meant to reach an emerging working-class audience within what the Left hoped would become a proletarian public sphere. Those audiences are directly addressed through a strategy in which all former montage techniques are inverted: disjunction is replaced by narrative; the discontinuity of textures, surfaces, and materials is replaced by an artificially constructed homogeneity that is the result of Heartfield's careful airbrushing techniques; extreme forms of the fragmentation of language that isolated the grapheme or the phoneme are abandoned in favor of the insertion of captions whose function is to construct a revelation that will take a dialectical form. This type of commentary, which operates through the sudden juxtaposition of different types of historical and political information, is similar to what Bertolt Brecht subsequently developed in his own theatrical montage technique which, like Heartfield's work, was intended as an initiation to dialectics.

Heartfield's work also implicitly criticized early Berlin photomontage for having resulted in a set of singular objects that in the end possessed the status of traditional works of art just like any other individual work on paper or on canvas. Heartfield's attempt to create a work within the emerging proletarian public sphere, however, was specifically meant to alter the distribution form of photomontage by making it the vehicle of a printed medium and thus a mass-cultural tool.

The triggering moment in Heartfield's development was his encounter with Willi Münzenberg, who hired Heartfield to become the major designer of the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, the Communist Party organ founded in opposition to the old-style illustrated press. The *AIZ*, as it came to be called, specifically aimed to challenge the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, which had achieved a circulation ranging in the hundreds of thousands and could legitimately be called one of the first examples of mass media, serving as the model for subsequent magazines such as *Life* or *Paris Match*. The *AIZ* was thus conceived as a mass-cultural countertool.

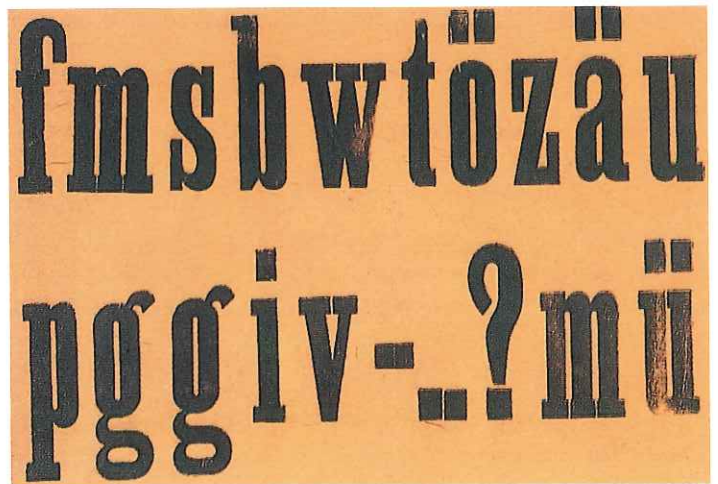
Until his departure from Berlin after the Nazis' takeover of the government in 1933, Heartfield did most of his work for the *AIZ*, or as covers for books published by his brother Weiland Herzfelde and his Malik-Verlag publishing company. A typical example of his shift from the Berlin Dada photomontage aesthetic, as represented by Höch and Hausmann, would be Heartfield's *The Face of Fascism*, his cover illustration for *Italy in Chains*, published in 1928 by the Communist Party. Although juxtaposition, rupture, fracturing, and fragmentation are still operative here, they are so forged into a new coherence as to be able to serve different purposes altogether. Mussolini's head is fused with a skull that penetrates it from within and the vignettes that surround it work, on the right-hand side, to fuse images of victims of violence with the representation of dignitaries of the Pope and the Catholic Church and on the left, to fuse the top-hatted bourgeois capitalist with the armed Fascist street gangs. This technique of fusion was the alternative to what Heartfield criticized as the construction of

1920-1929



5 • Raoul Hausmann, *Off and fmsbw*, 1918

Two phonetic poem posters,
32.5 x 47.5 (12 3/4 x 18 3/4)



▲ 1930a

▲ Introduction 3



6 • John Heartfield, *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute: Little Man Asks for Big Gifts*.
Motto: *Millions Stand Behind Me!*, 1932
Photomontage, 38 x 27 (15 x 10%)

mere nonsensical juxtapositions that generated rupture and shock but carried no political orientation, no countertruth, no moment of sudden revelation.

The fusion of opposites in Heartfield's work in 1928, five years before the rise of the Nazi Party, is particularly astonishing since it indicates the degree to which certain intellectuals were fully aware of the increasing threat to bourgeois institutions and democratic politics and were fully apprised of the need to locate cultural projects within strategies of opposition and resistance. This is even more evident in two of the images that Heartfield designed for the *AIZ* in 1932, portraying the Chairman of the German National Socialist Party, Adolf Hitler, a year before his election to become Chancellor in 1933. In each image, Hitler is depicted as a puppet, a hollow, artificial figure who executes the interests of capital. In the first, *Adolf—the Superman. Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk*, Hitler's body is shown in X-ray with a swastika in place of his heart, an Iron Cross instead of a liver, and his vertebrae made of gold coins, clearly framing the political argument that it was the German entrepreneurial class that was financing the Nazi Party in order to avert and eventually liquidate a proletarian revolution that had been initiated by the formation of the first Communist Party on German territory in 1919. The second, *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute: Little Man*

Asks for Big Gifts. Motto: Millions Stand Behind Me! [6], makes this point even more manifest in that Hitler is presented as a miniature figure standing in front of a huge, anonymous "fat cat" figure of a man passing a bundle of bank notes into the little man's raised arm and hand, thereby producing an ironic rereading of the "Hitler salute." Extremely simplified, grotesque, comical, and therefore all the more stunning, this form of argument was meant to clarify the otherwise inscrutable political and economic links that attracted big business to the leader of German fascism, seen as a counterforce and as a violent form of oppressing Socialist and Communist tendencies within the Weimar Republic. The assumption that *AIZ*, whose circulation at that time reached 350,000, would have a propagandistic effect turned out to be false since large numbers of the working class who had formerly voted Communist would vote for the Nazi Party in 1933, thereby dealing a final blow to the leftist aspirations of the Weimar Republic.

Unsurprisingly, Heartfield was one of the first artists to be prosecuted by the Gestapo after Hitler's rise to power. In 1933 he left for Prague, where his polemical, didactic, and propagandistic efforts against Hitler's regime were so widespread that Hitler intervened with the Czech government to order the closure of Heartfield's exhibitions in Prague.

From semiosis to communicative action

In the parallel evolution of photomontage within the Weimar and Soviet contexts, the changes that emerged around 1925 were aimed at transforming the original strategies. The techniques of allogical shock, of the nonsensical destruction of meaning, of the self-referential foregrounding of the graphic and phonetic dimension of language through an emphasis on fragmentation were now recast so as to be repositioned within the radical project of creating a proletarian public sphere. If by the mid-twenties a key cultural project of the avant-gardes was the transformation of audiences, this in turn required a return to the instrumentalized forms of language and image, where visual recognition and readability are paramount. The type of photomontage that Heartfield and Klutis went on to produce now focused on the values of information and communication. The alogism, the shock, and the rupture of the previous work were discarded as so many bourgeois, avant-gardist jokes; its antiart position was seen as simply performing an act of shadow-boxing with the bourgeois public sphere and a model of culture that had long since been surpassed. The specific task that was now assigned to photomontage was no longer the destruction of painting and sculpture or culture as a separate, autonomous sphere; its task now was to provide mass audiences with images of didactic information and politicization.

One such example comes from a series of photomontages and posters Klutis made between 1928 and 1930 [7], in which the metonymy of a raised hand is used as an emblem of political participation and a key image of the actual representation of the masses in the voting process. Substituting a part of the body for the whole,

the hand clearly “stands for” the subject who raises it, just as the single hand, within the boundaries of which a multitude of other such hands can be seen, “stands for” the unity of purpose produced by a single representative who can speak for a massive electorate. Variations on the image with different textual inscriptions were used for several purposes: one for a call to participate in the election of the Soviets; in another version for an appeal to women to become active in the Soviets through their own vote. The metonymy of the hand as a sign of physical, perceptual, and political participation in the collective process is a central example of how photomontage’s initial strategy of cropping and fragmentation had been transformed by this time.

With the means of photomontage, Heartfield and Klutis therefore became the first members of the avant-garde to invoke propaganda as an artistic model. Almost all discussions of twentieth-century art have shunned this term, since it is seen as being in direct opposition to the modernist definition of the work of art. The term *propaganda* implies manipulation, politicization, and a pure instrumentality that heralds the destruction of subjectivity. Yet Heartfield’s and Klutis’s practice intervened in the very institutions and forms of distribution that had heretofore defined what artistic practice can be. By contrast, they sought the transforma-

tion of an aesthetic of the single object into one lodged in the mass-cultural distribution of the printed magazine, and a shift from the privileged spectator to the participatory masses then emerging through the industrial revolution of the Soviet Union or the changing industrial conditions in Weimar Germany. It was those aspirations that formed the actual structures and historical framework within which the formation of an aesthetic of a proletarian public sphere should be addressed. Propaganda as a counterform to the existing forms of ever-intensifying mass-cultural propaganda, namely advertising, clearly has to be recognized as a deliberate project undertaken by the Dada and Soviet avant-gardes to abolish the contradictions still maintained by the bourgeois vanguardist model of a pure, abstract opposition to the existing forms of mass culture.

FURTHER READING

- Hanne Bergius, *Das Lachen Dadas (The Dada Laughter)* (Giessen: Anabas Verlag, 1989)
 Hanne Bergius, *Montage und Metamechanik: Dada Berlin* (Berlin: Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 2000)
 Brigid Doherty, “The Work of Art and the Problem of Politics in Berlin Dada,” in Leah Dickerman (ed.), “Dada,” special issue, *October*, no. 105, Summer 2003
 Brigid Doherty, “We are all Neurasthenics, or the trauma of Dada Montage,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 1, Fall 1997



7 • Gustav Klutis, *Let us Fulfill the Plan of the Great Projects*, 1930
 Lithograph poster, dimensions unknown