How to do things with pictures in the museum

Photography, montage and political space

Rombout, M.K.

Publication date
2020

Document Version
Other version

License
Other

Citation for published version (APA):
[fig. 1-1] George Grosz (left) and John Heartfield (right) at the First International Dada Fair, Berlin, 1920
CHAPTER ONE
The Combative: “Use Photography as a Weapon!”

1. “Art is Dead!”

In the preface to this study, I discussed the printed disclaimer next to the wall label accompanying the installation of Nadia Myre’s 2013 mammoth beadwork photograph For those who cannot speak: the land, the water, the animals and future generations, placed by nervous officials keeping a wary eye on the ongoing reverberations of colonial practices, contested geographies, and racial incommensurabilities. I would like to consider now another exhibition statement, a placard displayed in 1920 in Berlin at the First International Dada Fair. Held by two artists featured in the exhibition, George Grosz and John Heartfield (né Helmut Herzfelde\(^1\)), this sign proclaims: Die Kunst ist tot. Es lebe die neue Maschinenkunst Tatlins [Art is Dead. Tatlin’s New Machine Art Lives]. [fig. 1-1] This proclamation, created in the aftermath of the violent carnage of the First World War, announces the death of autonomous art (l’art pour l’art) as both aesthetic object and market commodity, and signals the emergence of a new radical vision of camera-based image making. The two placards, the bold one held by agitating Dada artists and the careful institutional disclaimer next to Myre’s critique, may be considered as epochal markers spanning a distance of one hundred years, during which convulsions in science, society, religion, technology and media have propelled an upheaval and re-examination of their respective discourses.

Here, in their announcement heralding the death of art presented at the First International Dada Fair held in Berlin, Grosz and Heartfield jettison the viability of a

---

traditional art system. For the Dada artists, their declaration of the death of art and the ascendance of a new visual language, with its reference to Vladimir Tatlin’s utopian architectural vision for post-revolutionary Russia, is a staged revolt against bourgeois cultural conventions. The artists hold their proclamation at the art gallery of Dr. Otto Burchard amidst the exhibition of some 200 Dada objects. This documentary photograph, and the speech act it both witnesses and performs, points to new roles for the artist, for the work of art and the exhibition space in which it is situated, as well as new kinds of intersections between the domains of art and politics, what Robert Rauschenberg would later refer to as “acting in the gap between life and art.”

The “Art is Dead” proclamation is significant in three respects. It announces the “dead end” of a modernist conception of art as autonomous from the external world and belonging to the private sphere, a communion linking the inner life of the artist with the aesthetic contemplation (and material possession) of the privileged viewer. It is a performance of a new role for the artist, as seen in the 1920 Dada Fair example, described by Walter Benjamin, in tracing the role of the artist established by Soviet Tretiakov, as the important distinction between reporting on the struggle, and intervening in it. Thirdly, it heralds a new social utility for artists as cultural workers, for hybrid forms of visuality combining machine-made elements with human-made elements, and for market distribution promoting accessibility regardless of social class.

In this chapter, I will propose the concept of the combative as a specific performative modality and investigate the pictorial and theoretical dimensions of

---

2 Grosz and Heartfield’s brother Wieland reminisced in their 1925 essay Die Künst ist in Gefahr [The Art of Danger]: “Our mistake was to have concerned ourselves with art at all… We saw the then insane end products of the prevailing social order, and burst out laughing. … We did not yet see that a system underlay this insanity.” Reprinted in Die Zwanziger Jahre, Manifeste und Dokumente deutscher Künstler (Köln: DuMont, 1979), 126-137.

3 The original 1920 introduction to the First International Dada Fair written by Heartfield’s brother, the poet Wieland Herzfelde, was reprinted in October 105 (Summer 2003):93-104.


photomontage as a political instrument. It is my argument that photomontage practice is a particularly potent method (as both concept and practice) to consider as visual speech acts: it is inherently dialectical as both imputed truth (camera-made) and fictitious (cut-and-paste construction). My discussion will consider examples of Heartfield’s incisive work as well as its reception, linking this back to Austin’s conception of unhappy performatives (misfires). Finally, I will explore the iterability of Austin’s work reproduced in Martin Krenn’s 2016 intervention at the St. Lorenz (Austria) memorial space and link this back to Derrida’s conception of iterability through an inaugural act of interpretation.

2. Cutting/Stitching: The Operations of Photomontage

The technique of composite photographic imagery dates to the mid-nineteenth century, as a means by which commercial photographers could construct complex portrait compositions, enhanced landscape elements, or conversation pieces, and as “folk-art” in the form of popular parlour diversions. Cutting out and reassembling photographic images belonged to the realm of popular pastimes, in the assembly of photograph albums, screens, military mementoes. The technique of photomontage was thus deployed to create illusionistic yet “real” representations, such as treacly moral tableaux deployed by celebrated Victorian camera workers Oscar Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson. In my own curatorial experience working with nineteenth and twentieth century collections, there is a remarkable diversity in the use of montage by amateurs and professionals alike, usually with an earnestness to create a pleasing balance of the purported verism of photography with the imaginative flexibility of the painter, the modernity of the machine-made with the craft lineage of the hand-made. An exception to this is the deliberate and obvious comedic “sleight of hand” evidenced in the curious phenomenon of novelty “tall-tale” postcards such as the prank concoctions in which modern framers attempt to harvest impossibly oversize wheat or cart mammoth eggs to market.

---


7 Even so-called “straight” images derived from a single frame were manipulated in the course of production and dissemination, such as formal portraiture augmented by overpainted elements, famously produced in Canada by the prolific Notman studio in Montreal to create popular scenes of snowshoe clubs.
I will introduce now ways in which photomontage practice of the early 20th century contributes to a specifically politicized mode of the performative by drawing out several dimensions: as a strategy to undermine pictorial illusionism; as a medium expressive of both technological image production and the “hand” of the artist; as a mode producing complex and open-ended narratives; as a radical visual analogue for new political ideologies; as a visual language to deterritorialize hegemonic authority and reveal the invisible operations of power; and, as a mode of intersubjective discourse through the technique of suture from film theory. Photomontage as a specific artistic medium is a hybrid mode of expression, the intersection of “machine” and “art” created through the combining of camera-made images with the handcrafting of cutting, fitting and stitching. Its essential operation, rupture of both visual space and semantic space to create difference, parallels the dissimulation of meta-narratives through the century. As a mass-disseminated phenomenon, this new language of photomontage was accessible to both literate and non-literate audiences as never before.8

Pictorial Intervention

As an intervention of spatial illusionism, photomontage performs first as an aesthetic strategy in which the mosaic of fragments, each with its own connotations, reveals the tensions between the visual (and sometimes also textual) fragments and the spatial field. This is discernible in characteristics of disjunctive scale, incoherent spatial relationships and military regiments by integrating studio portraits with painted landscape environments. See Stanley Triggs, *William Notman: The Stamp of a Studio* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/Coach House Press, 1985). Photography and historian Gisèle Freund observes that as photography began to exhibit its potential to reveal more and more about the world, it was manipulated by commercial publishers through editing, juxtaposition, framing, and constructed texts to show less and less. By this statement, Freund asserts the narrowing of political opinion to submission evident in a photographic practice that was increasingly controlled by state or corporate interests. See Freund, “Photography as a Political Tool,” in *Photography and Society*, translation of *Photographie et Société* (Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 1980), 160-173.

8 I note here the importance of the Weimar Worker Photographer Movement initiated by Willi Munzenberg, Heartfield’s publisher, empowering workers to visually represent everyday proletarian life and the material conditions affecting industrial labour. See Leah Ollman, *Camera as Weapon. Worker Photography between the Wars* (San Diego: Museum of Photographic Arts, 1991).
and the violence of its constituting operations: dismemberment (cutting), force (fitting) and stitching (suture).\(^9\)

The perception of the visual world as an organic or machine-like assembly of fragments has been pursued in many ways by photographers and artists of the 20\(^{th}\) century, such as the street views by Eugène Atget and Paul Strand creating in a single photographic exposure a kind of collage from the two-dimensional spatial overlap of three-dimensional advertising hoardings and signs; the \textit{bricolage} of pictures and objects explored by Kurt Schwitters and Robert Rauschenberg; Hannah Höch’s early work as a pattern designer—pinning diaphanous printed paper fragments onto fabric—followed by a lifelong photomontage practice; the cacophonous re-arrangement of popular culture and advertising media in the collages of Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi, the latter stating that the concept of recombinant imagery should infer the words “damage”, “erase”, deface”, “transform”, etc., as metaphors for the creative act itself.\(^{10}\)

**Machine Age Media**

Photomontage was predicated on fragments themselves originating from a “machine art” visual culture (or Benjamin’s oft-cited “age of mechanical reproduction”) produced by an advanced capitalist culture predicated on mass consumption of goods and entertainment: advertising, newspapers, illustrated magazines, typography, graphic design, cinema, but most especially the photograph, particularly those that were presented as book jackets, theatre designs, and magazine covers. The use of montage as a system of representation

---

\(^9\) See also Walter Benjamin’s reference to cutting in his remarks about the work of the painter and that of the photographer, presented as an analogy in contrasting the magician with the surgeon: the surgeon (photographer) cuts into the patient’s body (the subject), cautiously moves his hands around the organs (technical equipment), penetrates the patient via the operation (taking the picture). In the context of my discussion of photomontage, I see Benjamin’s reference to cutting as suggesting the excision of something malignant rather than a deforming dismemberment. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in \textit{Illuminations, Essays and Reflections}, edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968 [1936]), 227.

\(^{10}\) Paolozzi quoted by Brandon Taylor, \textit{Collage. The Making of Modern Art} (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 139. See also John-Paul Stonard’s analysis of Paolozzi’s ‘Bunk’ collages. His analysis includes two points relevant to my research: 1) his discussion of the dispersal of this series of collages across museums, galleries and archives, pointing to the ambiguity of its status; and 2) the minimal regard for these works in Paolozzi’s art historiography until his retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1971 featuring prints made from the original collages. John-Paul Stonard, “The ‘Bunk’ collages of Eduardo Paolozzi,” \textit{The Burlington Magazine} 150 (April 2008):238-249.
works montages announce the gap between sign and referent to destroy the illusionism and unity of pictorial naturalism, replacing it with a construct that is conspicuous in its artificiality.11

Allegory

Beyond the collision of signifying fragments to produce pictorial and political disturbances, montage also enables a fusion that introduces a new, provocative narrative. The dialectical or discursive operations through a cubist-like assemblage of fragmented elements are torn from their originating contexts in order to present an entirely new, and de-naturalized narrative. As Benjamin Buchloh observes “from the very moment of its inception, it seems that the inventors of the strategy of montage were aware of its inherently allegorical nature.”12 Buchloh’s invocation of allegory points to its character of a narrative with multiple levels of meaning, from the literal or surface meaning to the symbolic level. This semantic alchemy—making the invisible visible, falsehood into truth—is the primary driver behind the selection of photomontage by the artists discussed in this study as a method for political speech, or what Craig Owens refers to as the allegorical impulse, in which the work awakens from an unproblematic slumber to critical discourse.13 Allegory as a device is particularly germane to my study as the intersection of allos (other, different) and agoreuein (to speak publicly), or in this context, to say one thing by picturing another. In his essay about Russian author and playwright Nikolai Leskov, Walter Benjamin posits allegorical roles for the author/narrator as the transmitter of cultural truths that exceed temporal and geographic

11 See Kristopher Imbrigotta, “History and Challenge of Photography in Bertolt Brecht’s Kriegsfibel” Radical History Review 106 (Winter 2010):27-45, examining Brecht’s own photomontage project Kriegsfibel, a collection of 69 photograms, juxtaposing “found” photographs with short four-line epigrams directly challenging German narratives and images of the Second World War.


boundaries, as the performer whose travels transcend social boundaries, and as the artisan who employs accessible forms of communication.\textsuperscript{14}

This revealed “truth” set into motion by the narrator requires the recipient to also play an active role as a proponent in its exposure. Vertov identifies the potentiality of overt cutting and splicing as a method of revealing this manipulation: Kino-eye as the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted non-acted; making falsehood into truth.\textsuperscript{15} This effect of fracturing is made more effective by the reliance on synecdoche: the fragments which constitute the composition serve both to conceal the secret origins of the sources and to mark the potent presence of the greater whole from which the fragments were excised. John Berger concurs: “the peculiar advantage of photomontage lies in the fact that everything which has been cut out keeps its familiar photographic appearance. We are still looking first at \textit{things} and only afterwards at symbols.”\textsuperscript{16} Linking this back to the earlier quotation from the same essay by Berger in which he refers to pictures operating “within a field of subjective interactions which are interminable and immeasurable”, Berger is really expressing his conception of photography as an intersubjective construction which both records the intentionality of its production by a specific author and the variability of an eventual audience in creating meaning through the many open-ended juxtapositions of montage. It is in this way that he argues that the image-as-weapon cannot be construed as a viable strategy.\textsuperscript{17}

Radical Vision

Beyond popular applications of photomontage, the practice is also linked to revolutionary theory. Soviet novelist and literary critic Victor Shklovsky also advocated

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15}Vertov, “The Birth of the Kino-Eye” (1924), reprinted in Michelson, \textit{Kino-Eye}, 41.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Berger, “The Political Uses of Photomontage”, 185.
\item \textsuperscript{17}A useful interrogation of the indexical nature of photographs and the role of the spectator in producing meaning is found in \textit{Photography Theory}, the proceedings of a seminar and post-seminar responses by noted critics edited by James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007).
\end{itemize}
for the emergence of new forms that would break from the Tsarist past by producing a defamiliarization of both form and content. For Shklovsky, the visual world incurs the danger of habitualization, a dulling of perceptions (physiological and semantic) clouded by daily life. The path to renewal, in fact indebted to Cubist practices, was a strategy of *ostranenie* [making strange] in order to produce living images free from the trappings of bourgeois notions of romantic art.\(^\text{18}\)

...the old art has already died, the new has yet to be born; we have lost awareness of the world, we are like a violinist who has ceased to feel the bow and the strings.... Only the creation of new forms of art can restore to man the sensation of the world.\(^\text{19}\)

For early Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, cutting and connecting film fragments, sometimes with disjunctive or disorienting effects using unexpected camera movements, angles and acceleration, the new vision was factual, but not necessarily naturalistic or narratival. Vertov, director of *Man with a Movie Camera* (1919), explained his approach to cinema in several published articles, from which I select just two excerpts:

> Kino-Eye means the conquest of space, the visual linkage of people throughout the entire world based on the continuous exchange of visible fact, of film-documents as opposed to the exchange of cinematic or theatrical presentations.\(^\text{20}\)

> I am kino-eye. From one person I take the hands, the strongest and most dexterous; from another I take the legs, the swiftest and most shapely; from a third, the most beautiful and expressive head – and through montage I create a new, perfect man.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^\text{18}\) Viktor Shklovsky, “Art, as Device,” [1919], translated and introduced by Alexandra Berlina, Poetics Today 36/3 (September 2014):151-174. Berlina considers the origins of *ostranenie* as a neologism (and orthographic mistake), as well as variations in translation as making strange/estrangement/enstrangement in English, and relation to Brecht’s *verfremdung*.


Vertov defines montage as “organizing film fragments (shots) into a film object”, meaning “writing” something cinematic with the recorded shots rather than the fragments for “scenes” (the theatrical bias) or for titles (the literary bias).22 The fragmented language of moving film (one thing, then another), and its static photomontage counterpart (one thing and another), expresses the ambition of the machine age to fit or assemble (montieren) and the ensuing techniques comprise collage, adjacency, cut and splice, excision and conflation.

In this way, the deconstruction of pictorial coherence is inextricably linked to the dismantling of entrenched social and political power.23 The trajectory of photomontage as a specifically rhetorical tool to address political discourse has a complex history. At the outset of the twentieth century, it was used in commercial practice as a novel form of advertising featuring photographic images and text paired together. From the late 1910s onward, it was a preferred form of radical aesthetics in the service of the emerging Soviet Union, demonstrated in the agitprop and productivist practices in the work of El Lissitzky, Gustav Klucis and Alexander Rodchenko, and championed by Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Tretiakov as a stylistically innovative and technologically based language that broke away from the tradition of illusionistic naturalism expression associated with imperial Russia. As an operation of negation, it was practiced in Germany as anti-art by Dadaists and championed by Brecht and Benjamin, and later supported by Surrealist writer Louis Aragon in France.24

Just the grasping of a new range of material requires a new dramatic and theatrical form. Can we speak about finance in heroic couplets? ... Petroleum struggles against the five act form.... the dramatic technique of Hebbel and Ibsen is totally insufficient to dramatize even a simple press release [...] Indeed one no longer dares to offer [drama] in its old form to grown-up newspaper readers.25


In this quote, playwright and activist Bertolt Brecht—another contemporary and colleague of Heartfield—calls for new radical expressions to open productive pathways into this developing language for the deconstruction of political discourse: his approach depends on the disabling of naturalism (Verfremdungseffekt, or estrangement) in play performances through sudden disruptions that prevent audiences from being lulled into sentimental illusionism of the social norms portrayed. In many ways, it is a strategy that is symptomatic of the rupture of continuity that characterized the entire twentieth century, as photography critic Timothy Druckrey neatly summarizes:

[... ] from physics to the development of gene splicing, the logic of totalizing narratives has been eroding. As pertinent in the arts as they are in physics, biology, physics, and politics, the themes representing fragmentation and rupture permeate our contemporary theories of identity, race, language, and dreaming, which are splintered into bits with meanings that are neither linear nor singular.26

Druckrey’s observation, written in 1994, looks back across the century, and links photomontage practice formally and semantically to tectonic shifts throughout the industrialized world, and its effects in breaking hegemonic narratives.

Suture

The concept of *suture* is deeply linked to cinematic theory referring to the procedure by which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers, a system of implication or imbrication as the subject emerges within the discourse. The cinematic exposition of subjects is often achieved by the intercutting of shots, so that Shot 1 belongs the first character and Shot 2 to the interlocutor. In the course of the scene, then, we, the audience, behold Perspective 1 and Perspective 2 in alternation. As viewers, we are connected to, or *sutured into*, the film by forming our own interpretations and judgements of the narrative. Kaja Silverman, drawing on Emil Benveniste and Jacques Lacan, suggests that the spectator’s awareness of the world beyond the limitations of the film frame causes a wounding.27 As our visual field is pierced, we are no longer powerful

---


in our possession of the TOTAL visual field as offered by the alternating camera shots.\textsuperscript{28} For Silverman, suture in the context of film theory is the binding that precedes and creates this wound of disempowerment.\textsuperscript{29}

In the context of my research, I position suture differently—not as the trace of “healing” disrupted pictorial and political space—but a \textit{pointing to} its rupture, thus emphasizing the intervention: it is a stitch like the Hollywood Frankenstein monster which points to its own construction and artificiality; the presence of the wound. In my view, photomontage does not work in this way; the positions are all presented simultaneously on the single image field. The significations of one fragment and another do not alternate \textit{(a, then b)}, but rather create a new proposition that includes both the visible and the absent propositions \textit{(a+b = c)}. I would argue that with photomontage practice, the wound is created through the dislocation of the fragments from their origin by the artist (the speaking subject); suture represents the stanching of the bleeding edges of the cut to \textit{enjoin} the beholder in constructing a new proposition.

In the discussion so far, I have introduced John Heartfield as a starting point for the discussion of several ideas that will be woven through this study: new conceptions of the role of the artist and the work of art as a visual speech act; the pictorial and theoretical dimensions of photomontage as a specific visual language; and my proposal of a new set of terms in which to connect Austin’s distinction of kinds of speech acts to a diverse set of political art practices. I have introduced uses of photomontage as a medium desirable for its formal, semantic, political and intersubjective modalities. I have outlined these

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Silverman, “Suture”, 204.
\item \textsuperscript{29} The use of suture as a pictorial symbol, rather than a pictorial strategy, is in itself a powerful statement, and several Canadian examples come to mind: since 2000, the work of Nadia Myre (the artist introduced in my preface) has taken form as literal and symbolic scars. The \textit{Scarscape} project has taken many forms, most notably since 2005, as face-to-face interactions between the artist and participants (more than 800 as of 2011) who render their own personal scars (emotional or physical) onto small raw canvases. \url{https://artmur.com/en/artists/nadia-myre/scarscapes/} Her \textit{Scarscape} works are examined closely in Amanda Jane Graham, “Abstract Divisions: Tracing Nadia Myre’s Scar Trajectory” in \textit{Nadia Myre. Encounters} (Montreal and Ottawa: Éditions Art Mûr, Musée d’art contemporain des Laurentides, Carleton University Art Gallery, 2011), 61-71. Jana Sterbak’s \textit{Vanitas: Flesh Dress For An Albino Anorectic} (1987) featuring a live model wearing a “dress” created from flank steaks stitched together; and the large format colour photograph \textit{Memory Gap: an Unexpected Beauty} (1988) by Geneviève Cadieux, an example of her interest in the body as a landscape, focusing on small details (such as a mouth, bruise, or scar) in extreme close-ups.
\end{itemize}
operations of montage in some detail above as both a preamble to consider the performativity of Heartfield’s photomontage and also all the works considered in my research as they are linked by their common membership in a confrontational genre of pictorial production in which the political is both thematically embedded in the work and its activating strategy of address. Beyond their accepted (and acceptable) status as objects that describe the world (and here we could think of the mimetic function of art in general, as well as radical practices specifically) but stand apart from it, we can consider works of contemporary political art that engage in the world, insistently entering into the arena of contested discourses, calling forth audiences and setting into motion manifold responses. I will now turn toward aspects of Heartfield’s own practice in framing photomontage as a weapon, as a strategy I will call the combative.

3. The Combative

Heartfield’s works are arguably the most widely known examples of political photomontage: his work of the 1920s and 1930s has been extensively examined as political art and graphic design, championed as potent critiques, and derided as polemical propaganda.30 In Heartfield’s dialectical photomontages, the process of making recombinant images is inextricably linked to the use-value of a weapon and of wounding: curator Eberhard Roters notes that “the tools they use are pointed—the pencil, the pen, the burin, the etching needle and the woodcut knife, like lances, daggers and stilettos.”31 By the end of the 1920s, Heartfield had joined the publishing team of the Berlin-based magazine AIZ (Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung, or Workers’ Illustrated Newspaper) and was responsible for eviscerating photomontage critiques of contemporary political figures, most notably Adolf Hitler and leading members of the National Socialist Party. In his critique of the rise and entrenchment of Hitler’s Nazi Party in the 1930s, Heartfield

30 Foremost among these scholars is Sabine Kriebel, whose study Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontages of John Heartfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014) thoroughly examines Heartfield’s work from the perspective of performativity, and film theory, bringing to light new interpretations of both his alignment and detachment from Communist doctrine.

endeavoured to directly enter into combat against the prevailing political discourse.

Heartfield produced 237 photomontages created for AIZ—renamed *Volks Illustrierte* [*People’s Illustrated*] in 1936—created between 1930 and 1938. This body of work may be generally characterized as photomontage that is simultaneously an obvious construction and an attempt to portray a seamless visual field intended to create an ersatz naturalistic composition: creating the compositions often involved extensive picture research or the taking of new photographs, changing scale through the photographic enlarger, airbrushing joined images, and finally, taking a new photograph of the pasted-up work to create a smooth, flat image surface. These techniques were orchestrated to “fill” a pre-determined composition and generate a credible “sleight of hand” illusion by delivering absurd yet plausible constructions with the verisimilitude of lens-based images. In this sense, the AIZ montages appear “seamless”, as if the scars of their construction had faded to the point of invisibility undetectability.

I have selected for close reading two montages by Heartfield created for AIZ to show how he sought to deploy the potentiality of the image as a weapon, and how the performance of these photomontages constitutes combative action.

*Benütze Foto Als Waffe* [*Use Photography as a Weapon!*]

Heartfield’s photomontage self-portrait with Karl Zorgeibel [figs. 1-2 and 1-3] created for publication in *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (*AIZ*) shows the brooding artist with furrowed brow busy at work “decapitating” Berlin’s police chief with a pair of long scissors. Here, Heartfield uses a smooth montage technique creating a single print from combined negatives to give the impression of (seamless) naturalism. The picture points to a ludic representation of the power of the artist triumphing over the power of the state as Heartfield decapitates his somnolent victim, who exceeds both pictorial and ideological space. More significantly, the double portrait serves as a kind of manifesto about the rhetorical strategies of artists to manufacture images as weapons to puncture prevailing political discourse.

---

Heartfield’s originating photomontage artwork was graphically reproduced by rotogravure and positioned on page 17 of the September 1929 issue of *AIZ*. [fig.1-3] The total speech situation must here include the violent political landscape which engendered Heartfield’s exhortation to “use photography as a weapon”. Zorgiebel had earlier prohibited all outdoor meetings and demonstrations in response to violent street clashes between and among communists, socialists and National Socialists.\(^3^3\) He was considered the instigator of the unprecedented police violence toward communist demonstrators on May Day 1929, dubbed *Blutmai* or Bloody May by the radical Left. \(^3^4\) In the aftermath of

---


\(^3^4\) Brecht directly witnessed the killing of civilians during the May Day street skirmishes from the window of Fritz Sternberg’s apartment: see *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, by Erdmut Wizisla and translated by Christine Shuttleworth (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 5.
the clashes, police placed entire districts of working-class Berlin under martial law; thirty civilians were killed, more than half of them innocent bystanders; nearly two hundred were wounded; and more than 1200 arrested.\textsuperscript{35}

In Heartfield’s hands, the image of Zorgeibel the victimizer is transformed into Zorgeibel receiving justice and reproduced in a mass-circulation magazine with a circulation of nearly 500,000 copies. In this way, Sabine Kriebel has argued, Heartfield’s avenging image elicits wish fulfillment for \textit{AIZ}’s traumatized readers, nearly all directly or indirectly connected to the bloody event and its equally violent aftermath, by providing the beholder with resolution, satisfaction, retribution, and pleasure as she held the paper open with her own hands. She writes, “amplifying that viewer-image relationship is Heartfield’s gaze, directed at the viewer, away from his activity of bloodless violence… addressing an imaginary audience to witness an execution.”\textsuperscript{36} Rosalind Krauss goes further to note that Heartfield’s images as printed in \textit{AIZ} implicate the very body of the beholder inserted into the space afforded by holding open the paper’s tabloid format pages. The closed visual space of the “image/screen” of illusion literally enfolds the viewer’s body between the pages, inviting a self-conscious corporeality, one either of radical difference or of politicized unity.\textsuperscript{37}

Bal argues that the rhetorical address of an intellectual idea (such as argumentation seeking social reform or redress) cannot take hold without this profound emotional penetration, and she positions the experience of affect rather than the specific political propositions as the critical component in engaging spectators:

\textit{[\ldots] intensity without particularizing expression, so that the viewer can experience the affect on her own terms. Only then can affect be relational, the experience of art subjective, and art still be political. Indeed, by using the medium of affect rather than thematizing affect, [the work] enters the domain of political efficacy.}\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} Sabine Kriebel, “Manufacturing Discontent: John Heartfield’s Mass Medium,” \textit{New German Critique} 107/36 (Summer 2009), 559.

\textsuperscript{36} Kriebel, “Manufacturing Discontent”, 559.

\textsuperscript{37} Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism.” \textit{October} (Winter 1981) 19:3-34. The printed text on the page by F. C. Weiskopf praises Heartfield for discarding art-for-pleasure practice by creating an art that addresses the tremendous societal conflict, permits readers to see and understand the call to support the Party and its struggle [against Fascism]. (translation and synopsis mine.)

In this way, Bal maintains, the event work must address the viewer in an intensely affective and visceral way that brings the viewer into the awareness of his/her political space; it cannot posit a specific political position to be effective.\(^{39}\) Jill Bennett terms this affective intervention practical aesthetics: the political is not in the theme but the collision point, a means of inhabiting the event’s affect produced by the space itself.\(^{40}\) Affective transactions (between objects in a gallery, between subjects and subjects or between subjects and events) create new spaces that are by definition transdisciplinary.

There is another, important sense in which this work succeeds in addressing the intersubjectivity of the addressee as part of political resistance. The selection of montage in itself iterates a language of the political imaginary. The montage image, composed from the fragments of other images, favours collectivity (plurality) over hegemony (unity). As such, it is ineradicably tied to challenging dominant discourse. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduce the concept of the rhizome, a term borrowed from botany referring to root-like stems or rootstock, such as the gnarled forms of a ginger root or iris bulb.\(^{41}\) New roots may emit from any point, thus taking shape as a dynamic, multivalent, decentered organism, in contrast to the theoretical model of a tree, with a rigid, hierarchical organism with branches springing from a single root. They link the rhizome also to a spider’s web or a network or assemblage of choices, a “machinic assemblage” of free agency:

To enter or leave the machine, to be in the machine, to walk around it, to approach it – these are all still components of the machine itself: these are states of desire, free of all interpretation […] The problem is not that of being free but of finding a way out, or even a way in, another side, a hallway, an adjacency.\(^{42}\)

---


\(^{42}\) Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka, 7-8. The use of suture as a pictorial symbol, rather than a pictorial strategy, is in itself a powerful statement, as I will discuss in the following chapter.
In this sense, the recombinant photomontage is a multiplicity, both in its manifold “entry points” structurally and endless, fluid juxtapositions that resist a single semantic reading. As a visual expression associated with dis-order, it is also a politically deterritorialized zone: the rhizome threatens the central axis (authority) of the vertical structure of the tree and subverts its hierarchies. This concept has been framed by Deleuze and Guattari in linguistic terms as the concept of a minor language, a form of political resistance, marked by three characteristics, namely, the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation.

Extending to literary works, the first characteristic of minor literature may be defined as language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. The consideration of the operations of minor language has migrated from literary to visual modalities, notably in the writing of Mieke Bleyen and Hilde van Gelder, considering the characteristics of fragmentation, decentering and plurality in photography, and extending beyond this, by Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes writing on contemporary artists Tacita Dean and Rodney Graham and their work interweaving found or reworked images, literary objects and art writing. In the context of my own research study, I consider photomontage to be an inherently minor language, as a hybrid form that disrupts photographic images from their mode of originating circulation; deterritorializes the

---

43 Carrol Clarkson’s observation regarding the deterritorialization of political boundaries aided or impeded by legal mechanisms is also germane here, as she presents her argument in the context of artistic action (drawing the line): the law delimits boundaries, which are fluid in nature as they are continuously being redrawn. [Drawing the Line: Toward an Aesthetics of Transitional Justice (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 32.] These fragments carry with them the traces referring to preceding contexts, a process I consider analogous to the ways in which photomontage operates, with the displaced fragments referencing their original context while speaking to a new emergent narrative.

boundary between image and text; addresses political immediacy; integrates displaced fragments from mass media cultural production as found objects; and traditionally occupies a low, or even outsider status, within the hierarchy of the fine arts.

Deutsche Eicheln [Germans Acorns]

Hitler was appointed Chancellor on January 30, 1933. By September, when Deutsche Eicheln was published from AIZ’s relocated offices in Prague45, German society was unrecognizable: civil liberties, such as rights of assembly and freedom of the press had been suspended and government empowered to detain people indefinitely without charge; the offices of opposition parties were raided and assets seized; a national boycott of Jewish businesses had been imposed; and all non-Aryan civil servants were required to retire from the legal profession and civil service, including professors and instructors in educational institutions, and the dismissal of twenty museum directors and curators; the Bauhaus School was closed; and censorship of the arts through book burnings, and defamatory exhibitions of “degenerate art”.46 Concomitant with the turbulence and violence of these upheavals, increased militarization was also evident (in violation of the Versailles Treaty) including the militarization of youths, for instance, through the transformation of scout groups to Hitler youth organizations.

Heartfield uses disjunctive scale to make evident the constructed nature of the image: Hitler’s head is oversize attached to a puny body; by contrast the oak leaves and “acorns” are preposterously large. For readers of Heartfield’s time, the iconography of the oak tree and acorns was well established. The oak tree was revered as a sacred living

45 Deutsche Eicheln was printed in Volume 12, #37 (September 21, 1933), preceding the article “Wie sie die Jugend Vergiften” [“How They Poison the Young”]. AIZ published its last issue in Berlin on 5 March 1933 and relocated to Prague later that month. Evans, Heartfield, 12. Jindřich Toman has studied Heartfield’s practice in Prague 1933-1938: “Émigré Traces: John Heartfield in Prague,” History of Photography 32/3 (2008):272-286.

46 While there are numerous comprehensive histories of this period, I consulted here an essay that contextualizes the political events and their impact on arts and culture: see Stephanie Barron’s essay “1937: Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany,” in Degenerate Art: the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany, edited by Stephanie Barron (with contributions by Peter Guenther, Andreas Hünneke, Annegret Janda, Mario—Andreas von Lüttichau, Michael Meyer, William Moritz, George L. Mosse, Christoph Zuschlag), 9-23. Los Angeles, CA and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Harry Abrams, 1991. The comprehensive catalogue also provides a side-by-side chronology correlating political and cultural events.
entity associated with good luck and bounty. The oak tree was particularly important to German Romantic literature, music and painting as a metaphor for an enduring spirit, a symbol of the “deep history” of the primeval (German) forest, icon of transcendental spirituality, and subject of landscape naturalism.\(^{47}\) As long-standing emotionally-charged symbols of nationalism, the oak tree and leaf were appropriated by National Socialists as symbols of patriotism and military prowess, for example, as emblems on Nazi and SS uniforms.\(^{48}\) \textit{Deutsche Eicheln} addresses the emphasis on both militarization and doctrination of future forces by showing Hitler watering an oak tree, whose “fruits” or acorns are missiles with a variety of “caps” featuring Prussian helmets, soldier’s helmets, swastikas, and a gas mask.\(^{49}\)

Through his publication of this photomontage and dozens of others printed in AIZ, Heartfield endeavoured to unmask and defuse the state-controlled operations of myth deployed by Nazi spectacles, which were already operating in a visual rhetorical field through choreographed pageantry, military garb and symbols.\(^{50}\) (I will return to \textit{Deutsche Eicheln} below in the context of its archival and curatorial use in Martin Krenn’s 2016 Mahnmal Friedenkriez St. Lorenz (Austria) intervention, but before doing so, I would like to consider how Heartfield’s combative stance came to viewed as “unhappy”

---


\(^{48}\) See United States. War Department. Military Intelligence Division, \textit{Handbook on German Military Forces}, 1943. This publication is available as a free ebook at https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=hwwZLLDgvD8C&hl=en&pg=GBS.PP1

\(^{49}\) David Evans notes that Heartfield’s photomontage preceded the article “Wie sie die Jugend vergriffen” [How they poison the young]: the acorns are intended to suggest both young Germans and war preparations. Evans, 156.

\(^{50}\) For an extended analysis of the aesthetics of Nazi propaganda and orchestrated spectacle, see Siegfried Kracauer, \textit{From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947) and Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” in \textit{Under the Sign of Saturn} (New York: Farrar, 1980), 73-105. As British novelist and writer Martin Amis reminds us, this period witnessed the birth of mass-media propaganda: people were unaware, then, that propaganda \textit{was} propaganda—and propaganda worked. (See Amis, \textit{Koba the Dread. Laughter and the Twenty Million} (Toronto: Vintage Books, 2003), 213.) It is useful to link Heartfield’s practice to the critiques of his contemporaries: Walter Benjamin in several essays, but also Ernst Cassirer, \textit{The Myth of the State}. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1946) and Ernst Bloch, in \textit{Héritage de ce Temps}, translated from the German by Jean Lacoste (Paris: Payot, 1978) in addressing the specific problem of staging myths and countermyths promulgated by and within the Nazi state.
(failed) in an Austinian sense, and how the 2016 re-presentation of his work can be regarded as a recharging of the potency of his work)

Patricia Leighton observes, “the point of the photomontage is not, simply, to denote a visual lie, but to elicit a psychic truth.”\textsuperscript{51} Heartfield’s work invites his audience to recognize the deception: it performs as an act of unmasking narrative. What is the “doing” that is done? It is not talismanic magic: Heartfield’s pictorial “execution” of Zorgeibel does not literally prevent Chief Zorgeibel from issuing orders of brutality against citizens. As interventions, Heartfield’s work discussed in this chapter endeavours to operate in the total speech environment by smashing the boundary between workers and intellectuals, between actors and spectators, and in this sense carries with it a powerful cathartic effect, akin to Brechtian alienation. By adopting the strategy of the combative, however, Heartfield works in a structured us/them paradigm set into motion by his direct experience of opposing combatants (in the First World War), and after, by competing sociopolitical systems (capitalism, communism, fascism). The combative is an attack mechanism, and as such is an extreme expression that escalates to the point of paralysis, realized in the real-world, years-long entrenchment of German against Allied soldiers along mud-filled trenches in France and Belgium.

Heartfield, the traumatized First World War veteran, saw himself as a civilian combatant embedded in within, and the service of the Communist revolution. Samuel Beckett, whose own wartime intelligence service for the Resistance during the Second World War was recognized with the award of the \textit{Croix de Guerre} and the \textit{Médaille de la Reconnaissance}, was also profoundly affected by his wartime ordeal of imminent capture, itinerant hiding, hunger, cold, alienation and disorientation.\textsuperscript{52} His post-war work, like Dada’s nihilistic anti-art stance, was anti-literature, a kind of degree-zero writing reflecting the pragmatic exigencies of near-death and survival rather than Heartfield’s still hopeful choice of ideological commitment to communism. Is


\textsuperscript{52} See Terry Eagleton’s essay, “Political Beckett?” \textit{New Left Review} (July/August 2006):67-74, for an account of Beckett’s political stance, concluding that “like Freud and Adorno, Beckett knew that the sober, bleak-eyed realists service the cause of human emancipation more faithfully than the bright-eyed utopians.” (74)
Heartfield’s doing something combative through visual speech acts superior to doing *nothing*? Or, as Terry Eagleton asks, is Beckett’s posture of waiting the “doing something”, or the suspension of it?

4. Unhappy Performatives?

In the previous sections, I outlined Heartfield’s conception (and performance) of the political artist in the context of European social and political upheavals of the early twentieth century. I have discussed how he considered his photomontages to have potency as weapons, and proposed the term “the combative” as his performative strategy. In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin delineated ways in which performative acts fail to success *as intended*, which he termed “unhappy” or “infelicitous” performatives. Austin delineated two major categories for these: 1) *misfires*, in which conditions render the act null and void (such as not adhering to conventional procedure, or involving inappropriate circumstances and persons, or else flawed in some way or incomplete); and 2) *abuses*, in which the act has taken place, but to which it has been subject to “bad faith” (such as an insincerity or breach). Austin devotes Lectures II, III and IV to exploring categories and examples of misfires and abuses as ways in which the performative utterance may go wrong, yet all of these are predicated on a flaw on the conditions of the utterance, or the performance of the utterer, and not on the role of the addressee in interpreting the speech act. I point to this important dimension of Austin’s thinking because this omission regarding variables in the reception of the utterance has the point of departure for advocacy for the role of meaning-making on the part of the addressee, as I had cited in the introduction in the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. I will now consider two ways in which the *reception* of Heartfield’s weapons may be considered to have been “unhappy”.

*Myth of the State*

In some ways, Heartfield’s own contemporaries, with the exception of Benjamin’s prescient essay on the mechanical reproduction of images, failed to understand the powerful allegorical potential of technically advanced popular forms of art, including photomontage. Surrealist Louis Aragon referred to *Adolf the Superman* in 1935:
John Heartfield today knows how to salute beauty. He knows how to create those images which are the very beauty of our age, for they represent the cry of the masses—the people’s struggle against the brown hangman whose trachea is crammed with gold coins.\textsuperscript{53}

In his last work, \textit{The Myth of the State} (1946), German philosopher Ernst Cassirer endeavoured to address the immediate, urgent problem of Hitler’s National Socialism by exploring the dangerous vulnerability of myth to \textit{suppress} human agency as readily as to advance liberation. For Cassirer, myth was the matrix of human culture, integral to the process of communal binding and subsequent individual emancipation: while recognizing different and irreducible versions of the world, it could also provide a “unity in the manifold”.

The first technique in this transformation, according to Cassirer, was a change in the function of language and speech, employing words to stir violent, emotional passions and, subsequently, political response:

\begin{quote}
The new political myths do not grow up freely; they are not the wild fruits of an exuberant imagination. They are artificial things fabricated by very skillful and cunning artisans. It has been reserved for the twentieth century, our great technical age, to develop a new technique of myth. Henceforth, myths can be manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods as any other modern weapons—as machine guns or airplanes.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Cassirer knew that the Nazi messages were delivered in communications forms that were both machine-generated and mass-produced, such as the popular press, radio broadcasts, films, posters, standardized clothing and ritualistic parades in which the participants performed in machine-precision unison. At the conclusion of his essay, published after the war, Cassirer admitted regretfully that the ludicrous nature of Nazi mythology resulted in intellectuals not taking it seriously enough as it began to take hold in the


\textsuperscript{54} Ernst Cassirer, \textit{The Myth of the State} (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1946), 282.
collective mind of the German nation. In this important essay, Cassirer begins to understand why he and others did not respond earlier in denouncing Nazi ideology: for emancipated intellectuals, especially for historians and philosophers, the decontextualized, slogan-like pronouncements did seem so ludicrous as to be beneath notice or rebuttal, regrettably familiar today.

There is another crucial characteristic of Nazism, it seems to me, that caused it to escape Cassirer’s initial attention: the technological means by which its myths were delivered. Circulating as book covers and the front-page graphics of workers’ newspapers, Heartfield’s images were regarded as being of insufficient “heft”, merely marginal mass media imagery not to be taken seriously as opposition to rising fascism (and its own manifold project of aestheticizing politics in painting, photography, film, audio broadcasts, and live events). It is my proposition that Cassirer mistakenly regarded these modes of transmission not only as technological in origin, but as merely ephemeral mass-media communications: the truly combative would be posited in serious, critical writing, that is, in Cassirer’s own language (game) of intellectual discourse, or in serious cultural activities accustomed to contemplation by the viewer, such as fine art. The power of mass communications as used by the German Nazis was absolutely effective and its consequences far-reaching: the ability of mass media to distract large populations, to erode ethical self-responsibility, and to collapse the private sphere of individual thought, has become even more sophisticated over time and is by no means confined to totalitarian regimes. Fed by a steady diet on the theme of “One People, One Nation, One Leader” in the daily newspaper, on radio broadcasts and choreographed group assemblies, the possibility of Aufgegeben, the imperative to exercise individual ethical responsibility, was eroded among the German populace.

---

55 I would argue that Cassirer, as had Benjamin, was beginning to see the potential of new technologies as mechanisms in political speech, not only for the dissemination of fascist propaganda but also for its contestation. By 1938, both Cassirer and Heartfield had fled Germany and Benjamin had taken his own life. Cassirer died in the United States in 1946 and Heartfield, who had escaped to Prague in 1933 (where AIZ continued to publish attacks on National Socialism; it was shut down there in 1938) before relocating to London in 1938. Heartfield eventually settled in East Germany, where he attempted to resume his practice as a designer of published books until his death in 1968. See Evans, John Heartfield, 9.
In Cassirer’s assessment of German political myths of the 1930s, it is possible to discover his failure to regard the addressivity of contemporary images (machine made or mass produced) to operate as speech acts, in the Austinian sense. The catalytic power of political propositions expressed in iconic terms was not considered seriously then by leading writers of art, culture and myth, and only somewhat accepted in the consideration of politically based art of the 1960s, but still usually relegated to faint applause of laudable attempts made by artists to improve the world.

The challenge, I believe, is to get beyond seeing political art as either failed politics or failed art (or both). Rockhill states this in another way: it is less helpful to attempt to evaluate the success or failure of a particular work than to explore its social politicity, the political dimensions that play themselves out in the historical struggles between various forms of social agency.\(^{57}\) Analyses of works by Heartfield (and other radical artists of his generation) by Jo Spence, Eckhard Siepman, Sabine Kriebel, and Gavin Grindon, endeavour to locate their works as semiotic constructions addressing social contexts.\(^{58}\)

**Art Historiography**

The introduction of John Heartfield’s radical practices into a canon of art history (that smooth narrative of visual evolution) has sutured him either as a curiosity of commercial graphic design, or a member of a *jejune* group of artist revolutionaries.\(^{59}\) A review of art

---

\(^{57}\) Rockhill, 6.


historiography by Heartfield’s immediate contemporaries, as well as later twentieth century art writers, provides a sense of underestimation due in large part to his choice of medium, associated with commercial or “low” art.\textsuperscript{60}

An early reconsideration of Heartfield’s work was explored by John Berger, a Marxist English artist and critic, whose popular and germinal BBC television series and book \textit{Ways of Seeing} provided a Benjaminian introduction into the study of images and made critical exploration of visual culture accessible to a mass audience.\textsuperscript{61} In writing about Heartfield and the political use of photomontage specifically, Berger finds that the concept of ideological weapons cannot be effective in the same way as material weapons:

The effectiveness of a weapon can be estimated quantitatively. Its performance is isolable and repeatable. One chooses a weapon for a situation. The effectiveness of a work of the imagination cannot be estimated quantitatively. Its performance is not isolable or repeatable. It changes with circumstances. It creates its own situation.... And this is part of its nature because it is intended to operate within a field of subjective interactions which are interminable and immeasurable.\textsuperscript{62}

In this remark (to which I will return in the last section of this introduction to examine in a different light), Berger points to the contingent nature of the performance “environment” as preventing the quantification of the weapon’s effectiveness, and therefore, a proof of successful performance cannot be made. For Berger, in the dialectic between the freedom of the imagination and the servitude of didacticism, good propaganda makes bad art.

Australian art critic Robert Hughes, like Berger, ventured into popular media with his 1980 BBC television series and book \textit{Modern Art, The Shock of the New}.\textsuperscript{63} Unlike

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item Heartfield's decision to settle in the newly founded German Democratic Republic in 1950, where he lived until his death in 1968, is also a contributing factor. Initially, he was professionally “marginalized”, not only as part of the general official suspicion of émigrés from the West, but of the avant-garde nature of Heartfield’s production in particular, which was condemned as a remnant of cultural elitism and outside the social realist visual vocabulary. For an account of the last decades of Heartfield’s life, see Evans, \textit{Heartfield}, 37-39.
\item Berger, “Political Uses”, 188.
\item Hughes, like many of the postwar art world milieu, lamented the rise of art as discourse of the everyday composed of banal images from mass culture, which overtook a more hopeful (and romantic) concept of art that transcends the mundane. See Martha Rosler’s critical account of the feminist art practice in “The Figure of the Artist, the Figure of the Woman,” in \textit{Decoys and Disruptions. Selected Writings, 1975-2001},
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Berger, his stance was resolutely conservative and at times, bombastically contrarian, as evidenced in his revulsion for much of the twentieth-century avant-garde and post-modernism generally, and the work of Andy Warhol specifically. Writing about Heartfield and his contemporaries in his essay, “The Decline of the City of Mahagonny”, Hughes abruptly terminates the possibility of a rhetorical function of Dada images such as Heartfield’s, stating that such work is “shallow”, whereas fine art requires the “long look” and is infinitely more than an array of social signs awaiting deconstruction:

This trip turns out to be not worth taking. It has produced a clever novelty art of diminishing returns; far from affording artists continuous inspiration, mass-media sources for art have become a dead end. They have [produced] a fine-arts culture given over to information and not experience.

In Hughes’ articulation of visuality, pictures ought to be carriers of something apart from the arena of knowledge and from readily available forms of communication from the external world. Art should emanate from the internal resources of the creator as a thing apart from daily life.

For other writers on art, the “problem” with Heartfield’s work is found not in its intentionality to address the rise of Hitler as dictator but rather in its “low art” or graphical production as commercially reproduced imagery. German-born French photographer and historian Gisèle Freund was also a contemporary of Heartfield. She


65 Hughes, “The Decline…”, 15.

later conceded that Heartfield’s photomontage technique reached large audiences but considered his caricatures to be “contrivances” lacking in creative depth:

John Heartfield’s photomontage [Adolph the Superman] left little to the imagination in his portrayal of Hitler’s biological needs. However, contrivances were not always necessary to make a comment—simple photographs taken out of context or positioned in a calculated way could likewise affect the enormous magazine-reading audiences. [emphasis mine]67

Freund also worked as a photojournalist for illustrated magazines. One of her first stories, shot at a pro-labour rally in Frankfurt on May 1, 1932, “shows a recent march of anti-fascist students” who had been “regularly attacked by Nazi groups.”68 Her comment reveals her own bias for the straight image using a Leica (a new, lighter handheld camera), a creative intuition of the decisive moment, rather than as labourious paste-up job in the darkroom. The reference to novelty is noted also by Heartfield’s contemporary, historian and critic Georg Lukács:

In montage’s original form as photomontage, it is capable of striking effects and on occasion it can even become a powerful political weapon. Such effects arise from its technique of juxtaposing heterogeneous, unrelated pieces of reality torn from their context. A good photomontage has the same effect as a good joke.69

Lukács was dismissive of Heartfield’s photomontages because he considered its basic element, the fragmentary photograph “torn from its context”, incapable of making any significant subjectivist statement about the world.70 Ernst Gombrich, a germinal figure in modern art history, points us to the locus of the problem of an insufficient “long look” in the low-art associations of the mass-disseminated media:

. the professional art historian has had little occasion to busy himself with the vast mass of ephemeral propaganda prints, broadsheets, and cartoons which were produced in ever-increasing volume from the sixteenth century onward. He is quite happy to leave these


68 Freund recounts this event and reproduces the May Day images in Gisèle Freund. Photographer, translated by John Shepley (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), 23-35: “At least a third of those assembled on this day are unemployed, and this, when one includes their families, represents a total of twenty million people living in poverty.”


70 Evans, John Heartfield, 38.
puzzling and often ugly images to the historian who may know how to unriddle their recondite allusions to long-forgotten issues and events. But historians in their turn usually think they have more important and more relevant documents to study in the state papers and speeches of a period...  

John Willett, historian of German art, supports this observation and points out that in the period in which Heartfield launched his image weapons, contemporary critics regarding political art predicated on radical uses of new communications technology, were caught without disposing of a coherent language for mass-distributed works. This condition has resulted in unevenness in criticism as some works were exalted as high art, and others deemed too profane to be intelligently discussed. Such assessments about the physical nature of the object and its shifting stages between studio to newsprint to art gallery bring to mind Heartfield’s contemporary and colleague, Walter Benjamin, and his oft-cited essay on the nature of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

---


73 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Illuminations, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schicken Books, 1968), 217-252. Another vital avenue in considering the work of Heartfield in this context is his prolific book cover design for Malik Verlag. In the late 1920s, the energies of Heartfield’s Dada nihilism morphed into the productive forces of subversive design during his tenure as graphic designer at the Berlin publishing house Malik Verlag, founded by Heartfield’s brother, the poet Wieland Herzfelde. Heartfield designed striking book covers for John dos Passos, J. Dorfmann, and Upton Sinclair, intended to reach both avant-garde and general audiences. (Lavin, Cut with the Kitchen Knife, 16). The book cover was important in the case of a small publishing house with largely unknown authors: the images had to command attention and convey a sense of the controversial nature of the book. His contemporary and sometimes champion Benjamin considered Heartfield’s book jackets as “political instruments”. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in Art After Modernism. Rethinking Representation, edited by Brian Wallis, (New York and Boston: The New Museum of Contemporary Art/David R. Godine, 1984 [1934]), 304. It is also useful to recall Rosalind Krauss’s observation that “through a lens of political performativity, we might look to publishing and mass culture expressions as the real point, and the paintings and sculptures then only quaint forms of the auratic.” Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” October 19 (Winter 1981): 3-34. The book cover was not only the visual enticement attracting potential readers to a book, it was in a sense a fused component of the entire semantic construction, as noted by Hungarian-born critic Alfred Kemény, writing in 1931 for the journal of the Worker Photography Movement, Der Arbeiter-Fotograf, referring to the function of the photomontage book cover as the book’s “outer skin” and lauding Heartfield’s practice as a pathway of accessibility for a broader selection of readers. Durus [Alfred Kemény], “Fotomontage, Fotogramm,” published originally in Der Arbeiter-Fotograf 5:7 (1931);167; English version located in in Photography in the Modern Era. European Documents and Critical Writings 1913-1940, edited by Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Aperture, 1989), 182-184. I note here the importance of the Weimar Worker Photographer Movement initiated by Willi Munzenberg, Heartfield’s publisher, empowering
The combative as a visual speech strategy has been interrogated by several writers who comment on the dead end of the historical avant-garde. Heartfield’s strategy for the combative agency of pictures, like the contestatory stance of his Dada and Surrealist contemporaries, has been contained and evaluated as a negative dialectics which ultimately fails due to a number of factors. For Adorno, the purpose of the political aesthetic in the present as a critique of what-is is highly problematic, pointing up the offering of partisan positions instead of rattling the very cage of meaning itself.\textsuperscript{74} Located inside the dominant discourse and unable to transcend the social constructs of its own making to transform subject positions, “the notion of a ‘message’ in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world; the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners, who could only be rescued from deception by refusing it.”\textsuperscript{75} This criticism, which directly implicates a critique of Sartrean and Brechtian political theatre, is locked in a stalemated revolutionary stance of the negative being against what is, rather than for what could be, effectively a shouting match, destroying what also destroys. In this light, the work becomes a short-lived aesthetic phenomenon marked by aesthetic disenchantment and political impotency. We have come back full circle to Robert Hughes’ dismissive failure to hold the “long look”. But beyond that critique, other critiques of the historical avant-garde that I will return in subsequent chapters are briefly summarized here as: Peter Bürger on the exhaustion of rupture and revolution in avant-garde art in \textit{The Theory of the Avant-Garde} as well as his respondent, Hal Foster writing in \textit{The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century}; Jacques Rancière, in \textit{The Emancipated Spectator}, locating the historical avant-garde as an object lesson in Marxist superstructure divided between those who possess an understanding of the social system teaching and arming for struggle those who have suffered because of that system so as to arm them for struggle; Mieke Bal’s

\textsuperscript{74} See, for example, Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in \textit{Aesthetics and Politics}, edited by Fredric Jameson (London: Verso, 2007 [1977]), 177-195.

\textsuperscript{75} Adorno, “Commitment”, 193.
assertion that the political impact of art is not dependent on political statements, but, on the contrary, must stay away from the rhetoric of politics (Endless Andness); and Gabriel Rockhill, cautioning against the erroneous investment of the talisman complex attributed to the work itself (Radical History and the Politics of Art).  

5. Citation as Intervention

The potency and potentiality of political art as a kind of speech act, as framed by Heartfield and beyond, lies in its dynamic presence as a dialectical, discursive and interactive event, not in the static presentation of an object or in the fixed position of popular and critical receptions. Poised between material thing and temporal event, the act of beholding can be compared to Austin’s metaphor of the evanescent character of a flame, flickering, hovering. As older (radical) works outlive their original historical moments and become canonical, meaning-making continues to be a dynamic act of interpretation as works are re-presented in new stage settings.  

As I demonstrated in the introduction to this study, post-Austinian perspectives have contributed to expanding both the scope and valence of Austin’s original thinking. Specifically, I cited Derrida’s insistence on the temporal dimension of performativity, the utterance (book, picture) being created for a presumed future addressee. This iterability activates the possibility of inaugural performances in new contexts. In “The Politics of Citation,” Bal asks, “What happens to affectivity in a different context? What are the risks in re-presenting the original premise?” Or, as Judith Butler argues, does the indefinite circulability of the image allows the event to continue to happen and, indeed, thanks to these images, does not stop happening?

---


Today, standing in the wake of so many provocative contributions from political philosophy, linguistics and visual theory, I argue it is possible to see with new eyes the workings of Heartfield’s radical art practices as political speech acts. In his introduction to *Landscape and Power*, W.J.T. Mitchell proposes to change the word “landscape” from a noun to a verb, to “think of landscape not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.”

Working from Mitchell’s proposal as a starting point, it is possible to trace out their radical art as an *event* from the perspective of practice and theory. From this perspective of action and agency, it is possible to apply a transhistorical lens to see how the radical event-based strategies of Heartfield and the Dadaists have been taken up by other performance/participation projects. For example, the nihilist refusal inherent in combative Dada strategy can be located in Guy Debord’s influential 1967 book *Society of the Spectacle* (and the 1973 film of the same title). Debord exhorts individuals to detach from the passive, somnolent state of everyday participation in late capitalist consumption, lulled by the spectacle, the ubiquitous and normativizing presentation of social relations through contemporary media. The strategy for the rupture of this narcotizing dream is *détournement* [diversion, or disturbance], an intervention in the course of everyday activities. Individual autonomy can be reclaimed by “waking up” to see the habitual and the desirable as market constructs and to attempt to fashion a new version of daily life in which an enhanced and active consciousness helps to shape “authentic” identities and combative AIZ images to address the advancing menace of Nazi power in real time, as

---


[fig 1-5] Martin Krenn, intervention at the Mahnmal Friedenkreuz St. Lorenz (Austria) memorial space, 2016 featuring John Heartfield, *Deutsche Eicheln*
well as the physical proximity of AIZ readers, holding the paper before them, and literally sharing the space of the printed image.

The Mahnmal Friedenkriez St. Lorenz (Austria) Intervention

I would like to consider now the journey of Heartfield’s 1933 photomontage *Deutsche Eicheln*, as a speech act utterance resuscitated in our own present time, some eight decades distant. In 2016, German artist and curator Martin Krenn won a public commission to create an intervention/installation at the Freidenkreuz memorial to the Wehrmacht troop Jorkisch located above St. Lorenz, Austria. Working with RAHM Architekten (architects), Robert Streibel (historian) and Gregor Kremser (artist and historian), Krenn designed a transparent 2987 cm x 4280 cm (approximately 98 ft. x 140 ft.) metal and fabric version of the *Deutsche Eicheln* photomontage and anchored to the front face of the cross. [fig.1-5]

Prior to the project, the site, located in a secluded forest location overlooking the picturesque valley below, consisted of three elements: the towering “Peace Cross”, a soldier’s helmet mounted on a post, and a plaque that reads “Zum cedenken fur die gefallenenen helden der kampfgruppe Jockisch” [In commemoration of the fallen heroes of the Jockisch combat group.] Krenn transformed the site through the installation of a large-scale billboard version of *Deutsche Eicheln* anchored to the freestanding wooden “Peace Cross” of the memorial space that continued to attract veneration by neo-Nazi sympathizers. In his recorded commentary about the project, Krenn notes that he was...

---


84 See description of the *Deutsche Eicheln* project commission by Public Art: http://www.publicart.at/en/projects/all/?pnr=879&weiter=1
[fig. 1-6] Visitors to the installation

[fig. 1-7] Detail
struck by site, with its sweeping view of the town below and modest commemoration of the fallen heroes, the absurdity of the Peace Cross as the symbol of war, and the Wehrmacht soldiers honoured as victims, rather than perpetrators, as was later established.\(^{85}\)

Krenn re-imagined the wooded terrain as the living example of German national symbols the oak tree and acorn, historically associated with patriotism and military prowess co-opted by Nazi indoctrination of soldiers: he altered the site by “reprinting” Heartfield’s *Deutsche Eicheln* at a towering scale to match/cover the Peace Cross using a permeable substrate screen that enables views to both the original commemorative plaque as well as the surrounding trees behind the work. [fig. 1-6] This produces several effects. In the original photomontage, Hitler “waters” the oak tree of military might, a representation created as a metaphor. With the actual trees visible behind the screen, the implication of Nazi political doctrine “blooming” in the present time is made manifest. [fig. 1-7] The “surface” image (*Deutsche Eicheln*) and the actual trees on the other side of the screen become conflated, creating a new montage fusing object and representation creating an appearance at once entirely artificiality and *trompe l’oeil* naturalism.

The intervention, commissioned as a permanent installation, was unveiled on April 3, 2016, with a gathering of Austrian government officials, artists, documentarians, historians, and art lovers in attendance. Krenn creates a powerful example of detaching an archival source and crossing boundaries between art production, curatorial intervention, and critical scholarship.\(^{86}\) Krenn’s practice points to both the fluidity of boundaries of professional domains, and the tremendous power the integration of these disciplines


\(^{86}\) Krenn’s doctoral study was supervised by Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes. Examples of his notable scholarship are “The Political Sphere in Art Practices, 2013-2016.” Accessed November 1, 2017 http://www.martinkrenn.net/?s=public+sphere, and his role as editor of *Dialectical Interventions: Art in the Social Realm* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).
contributes to a combative strategy to address supremacist ideology. I will turn the
discussion now to the consideration of montage by Hannah Höch, one of Heartfield’s
colleagues in the Berlin Dada group, and the House Beautiful series by Martha Rosler,
and propose the integrative as a performative strategy.