Political photomontage: transformation, revelation, and "truth"

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POLITICAL PHOTOMONTAGE:
TRANSFORMATION, REVELATION, AND “TRUTH”

by

Wendy Ann Parker

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Art History in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

December 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Craig Adcock
This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Art History at the December 2011 graduation.

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Christopher Roy
To my father, James Thomas Daly
The results of the invention cannot, even remotely, be seen—but all experience, in matters of philosophical discovery, teaches us that, in such discovery, it is the unforeseen upon which we must calculate most largely. It is a theorem almost demonstrated that the consequences of any new scientific invention will, at the present day exceed, by very much, the wildest expectations of the most imaginative.

~Edgar Allen Poe, “The Daguerreotype”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the culmination of work that began eleven years ago at Keene State College, when Professor Henry Freedman made his memorable entrance into a lecture hall filled with one hundred fifty undergraduates. Advancing deliberately down the steps toward the movie-theater sized screen on which a slide of the paintings from the caves at Lascaux was projected, he intoned, “Before there was science, before there was religion, there was art.” The last bit was delivered with a dramatic flourish as he gestured over his shoulder at the image at the same time that he pivoted to face the class. Although I could not explain why at the time, I knew that something momentous had just happened. I understand now that the implications of “Doc’s” pronouncement touched off and continue to fuel my zeal for art and art history.

In the time that has passed since that day, I have had the privilege to study and work in the company of passionate and committed scholars here at the University of Iowa. Without exception, every professor here has generously encouraged me to find ways to incorporate my major interests into research projects for their classes, regardless of their own areas of expertise. This has allowed me to do some very creative work, some of which has found its way into this particular project. I am grateful to all of them for their open-mindedness and adventurous spirits.

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point. Professor Adcock’s gifts brings an air of refinement to this thesis that it would otherwise be sadly lacking. Professor Robert Bork has also been integral to the successful completion of this project. His kindness and encouragement, balanced with his gift of knowing exactly how to light a fire, provided the perfect remedy for a nasty case of writer’s block, and I cannot thank him enough. In addition, his insightful and nuanced notes on earlier drafts of this work galvanized me to think more meaningfully about what ideas I was trying to convey. Finally, Professor Christopher Roy has been an enthusiastic supporter of my work, not only in his African Art classes, but in my own interest in Dada art. More specifically, he is as big a fan of Kurt Schwitters as I am, and our chats on the subject have kept me energized.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1915 and 1916, artists, writers, performers, and philosophers gathered in Zurich, going there either to recover from the horrors of the World War that was raging on three fronts, or to escape it all together. World War I was like no war that had come before, with technology that made it possible for people to kill each other in vast numbers, anonymously, across long distances, and using such things as mustard gas that inflicted terrible suffering before bringing death. From among the Zurich group there emerged Dada, not so much a movement, since it would ultimately manifest itself in many different ways, but more an aggressive spirit. Calling it an “attack,” John Coplans and Walter Hopps argued that Dada emerged as a result of “the lack of a viable artistic procedure fully capable of encompassing states of paradox, absurdity, and irrationality as part of the nature of human experience.”

Dada works would take many forms, including painting, drawing, and sculpture; but new modes were called for, and soon artists were working in photomontage, appropriated away from folk practice and turned into a powerful means of political expression.

Just as paintings are more than pigment, line, and support, so too are photographs more than recordings of what objects look like, or witnesses to events. One of the earliest concerns for photographers was the medium’s potential for telling the truth more accurately than ever before—in art, or anywhere. People could see with their own eyes the truth in nature. What artists working with photomontage strove to

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do was to tell an even greater truth by using photographs expressively, much the way painters use color and line.

In the evolution of photography, it seems only natural that the medium would have found its way fairly quickly into the realm of fine art. In 1857, Oscar Rejlander created his allegorical montage, *The Two Ways of Life*, in imitation of the moralistic paintings in fashion at the time. (Figure I.1) The controversial photograph, which depicts a young man being encouraged to choose a life of piety over one of degeneracy, drew some criticism because Victorian viewers found the nudity just a little too real. Still, they were able to appreciate Rejlander’s skill in creating such an unusually large image. The criticism escalated, however, once Rejlander revealed that the photograph was actually a combination print made from approximately thirty negatives. Apparently, people were unable to appreciate the substantial amount of labor such a process entailed: Rejlander and his wife spent “no less than six weeks” creating the image.

Regardless of the artistic quality of the photographs themselves, it is arguable that the photographic image could not be fully integrated into the world of fine art until it, itself, had been cut up (perhaps even with a kitchen knife), broken into its constituent parts, and reconstructed in works of aesthetic design that took the images away from their narrative rôle and recast them as allegory, form, and nuance. In the

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4. Leggat, “Rejlander.”
case of twentieth-century photomontage, the photograph is at once a signifier of something recognizable, and a tool that hints at something greater. The Berlin Dadas who worked in photomontage understood the narrative possibilities this presented, and with few exceptions used the photo fragments in much the same spirit that Picasso and Braque had first employed fragments of newspaper, for example, as stand-ins for the real thing in their collages. Some, such as John Heartfield and Hannah Höch, took the possibilities presented by photomontage several steps further, he in the political arena and she in the more aesthetically creative. Interestingly, Heartfield’s methodology was not unlike Rejlander’s, with the images pieced together from negatives rather than from finished photographs glued to a support, as in the case of Höch, Kurt Schwitters, and Martha Rosler.

Photomontage as praxis has generated considerable discussion in the century or so since it was adopted as a means of art-making by the Dadas. It has many genesis stories, and several of the Dadas claim to have either been the first to discover it or to have outright “invented” the process of combining photographs taken from various sources in order to create a new image. Brigid Doherty astutely remarks that “transformation or transfiguration would be a better word than invention for what the dadaists did with and to photomontage, since Hausmann, Höch, Grosz, Heartfield, and Herzfelde all agree that Dada montage emerged in response to material that they encountered in popular culture and the mass media . . .”

Regardless of who among the artists did it first, however, amateurs had been in the habit of

making photomontages for their own purposes before artists began to explore the aesthetic and, especially, political possibilities the medium offered. For example, before and during World War I, it was not uncommon for families of soldiers away at war to superimpose portrait images of loved ones onto photographs of anonymous soldiers, and to hang these montaged portraits on their walls.

Both Höch and Raoul Hausmann cite such photomontages as inspirations for their Dada creations, and Höch even went so far as to appropriate one such folk image, give it a title, and sign it. (Figure I.2) Although Hausmann and Höch made the same discovery at the same time, they both went on to use photomontage to quite different purposes. Hausmann put them to distinctly political ends during the Dada years, and then all but disappeared from the art scene. Höch, whose Dada-era works were political, later abandoned that approach and went on to develop photomontage as an aesthetic practice—a practice that remains unparalleled.

6. Though Rejlander’s accomplishment with The Two Ways of Life is remarkable, the image was the result of an experiment. The Dadas were the first artists to fully explore the medium’s many possible forms and uses.

7. Hausmann claims that he began making collaged works in 1918, but that it was during a vacation with Höch that he was inspired him to incorporate photographs. He writes, “. . . it was on the occasion of a visit to . . . the island of Usedom, in the little village of Heidebrink, that I conceived the idea of photomontage. On the wall of almost every house was a colored lithograph depicting the image of a grenadier against a background of barracks. To make this military memento more personal, a photographic portrait of a soldier had been used in place of the head. This was like a stroke of lightning, one could—I saw it instantly—make paintings entirely composed of cut-out photographs. On returning to Berlin in September, I began to realize this new vision by using photos from magazines and the movies. Captured by a renovating zeal, I also needed a name for this technique, and in general agreement with George Grosz, John Heartfield, Johannes Baader, and Hannah Höch, we decided to call these works photomontages.” Raoul Hausmann, “New Painting and Photomontage,” in Dadas on Art: Tzara, Arp, Duchamp and Others, Lucy R. Lippard, ed. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 61. Originally published in Raoul Hausmann, “Peinture nouvelle et photmontage,” translated by Mimi Wheeler from Courrier Dada (Paris: Terrain Vague, 1958).

John Heartfield and George Grosz also claim credit for the “invention” of photomontage. Wieland Herzfelde, in his memoir about his brother, recalls a “care package” he (Wieland) received at the Western Front from George Grosz. In addition to such silly items as starched shirt fronts and tea samples claiming to arouse patriotism and optimism, Grosz also enclosed a piece of cardboard upon which were glued “in wild disorder . . . advertisements for trusses, fraternity songbooks, and enriched dogfood, labels from Schnapps and wine bottles, photos from illustrated magazines—arbitrarily cut out and absurdly joined together.”\(^9\) Grosz and Heartfield soon began to send such handmade “postcards” to other soldiers at the front, as Herzfelde explains:

Decades later my brother was to tell of postcards sent from the front, on which photo cutouts were assembled in order to say in pictures what would have been censored in words. A few friends . . . made a legend of it, maintaining that anonymous people had invented photomontage in this manner. The fact remains that many recipients of these cards took great pleasure in them and attempted similar things. That encouraged Heartfield to develop a conscious technique from what had begun as a game of political provocation.\(^10\)

This background is largely the basis for Grosz’s claim that photomontage was invented by him and Heartfield.

As for naming the process, Hausmann explained how it came about: “We called this process photomontage because it embodied our refusal to play the part of the artist. We regarded ourselves as engineers, and our work as construction: we


assembled (in French: monter) our work, like a fitter.”11 Heartfield, dubbed “Monteur Dada” by his colleagues in Berlin’s Club Dada, made some of the most technically sophisticated photomontages in the group.12 While many working in photomontage chose to deliberately leave the cut edges exposed in order to support the “constructed” aspect of the pictures (especially Höch), Heartfield used a method that hid the cut marks and resulted in seamless pictures.

This thesis focuses on how photomontage has been used by certain artists during periods of political unrest and artistic revolution. For the purposes of this study, “photomontage” is defined as any artwork into which a photograph is collaged in order to construct a political narrative. The photograph(s) may come from the mass media, or may be privately created. This thesis is concerned with more than photomontage as a means of creating overtly political art, however. In the chapter devoted to Kurt Schwitters, collage and assemblage are also discussed. His collages are generally small, averaging about 10” x 12” and are usually arranged on either paper or cardboard supports; although some have objects glued or nailed to them, for the most part they consist of pasted papers, painted images, and the occasional photograph. Schwitters’ assemblages are much larger, usually have a wooden support, and contain a wide variety of large and small objects. Such an expansion of the discussion is necessary not only because Schwitters did not work extensively in photomontage, but


12. Heartfield’s brother explained how he earned his nickname, writing, “John, it is true, was nicknamed even during the war the Monteur (assemblyman) by his friends, not because of his working technique, but because he was in the habit of wearing overalls. He did not want to look like an artist, but he did not want to look like an advertising executive, either.” Wieland Herzfelde, qtd. in Sabine Tania Kriebel, “Revolutionary Beauty: John Heartfield, Political Photomontage, and the Crisis of the European Left, 1929–1938,” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003), 3–4.
also because he used the new media at a time when it was politically dangerous to do so. His decision to persist in making these kinds of works in the face of threat and derision by the National Socialists is profoundly political. Important, too, is the fact that Schwitters, like Heartfield, fled Germany because he was being persecuted by the Nazis. He left for Norway in 1937, the same year his work was featured in the Nazi “Entartete Kunst” exhibit. When the Nazis invaded Norway in 1940, Schwitters emigrated to England, where he died in 1948. As a close friend to many of the Dadas, and a tireless supporter of their efforts, Schwitters has earned a place in this discussion.

The final chapter circles back to pure photomontage that is used for strongly didactic political expression. Martha Rosler’s montages may take their cues from the earlier works by Höch, Hausmann, and especially Heartfield, but hers differ in significant ways that can be traced to how montage was being used by Pop artists. Following World War II, when New York had become the art capital of the Western world, politically charged work gave way (via Surrealism) to Abstract Expressionism, and then to Pop art. Rosler was naturally aware of the kind of work being made in New York as well as in California; during the late sixties and into the seventies she alternated living on both coasts.

With the advent of Pop Art, appropriation became fashionable once more, although in a more commercial rather than agitational way. Rosler appreciated the wealth of material available for appropriation and recognized the opportunities such practice presented, not only for the creation of works that address the increasing commercialization of art, but also for the opportunity to create works that were more
politically attuned. She refers to her appropriation of printed materials as “quotation” and has written about it extensively. To Rosler, such appropriation is rich with creative possibilities, as is demonstrated in her “Bringing the War Home” series, discussed at length in the final chapter.

In the first three chapters, then, artists of the Dada era are considered in terms of their philosophies regarding art and politics, with the final chapter providing a look at how a more contemporary artist has chosen to use photomontage in her work as an artist/activist. Specifically, Chapter One provides a general overview of the artwork and writing of the most politically motivated of the Dadas in Berlin, with particular attention to the work of Heartfield. Chapter Two examines the differing styles and goals of Hannah Höch versus the other Berlin Dadas, including Raoul Hausmann, with whom she worked closely from 1915 until 1922. Chapter Three is given to Kurt Schwitters, whose strong opinions about mixing art and politics provide a useful foil to the prevailing attitudes among his fellows. The final chapter considers photomontage as practiced by Martha Rosler in her “Bringing the War Home” works.

13. Because this thesis is primarily concerned with an analysis of the development of political photomontage, it will not include a discussion of Surrealist photomontage, such as work by Max Ernst. Although other types of photomontages will be discussed, such as those created by Hannah Höch and Kurt Schwitters, the majority of works will concern these artists’ attitudes toward politics and aesthetics. Artists who created Surrealist pictures in this medium appear to have had a much different agenda, concerned primarily with an exploration of the inner life rather than with lived experience, and so do not fit within the parameters for this study. That said, an analysis of the political connotations of pre-World War II Surrealist works certainly has intriguing possibilities.

14. Hans Arp is not included in this study, but it is worth mentioning that he, Schwitters, and Höch all shared a common philosophy about art-making. All three were very interested in creative freedom and experimentation, and none ever shared in the more extreme anti-art attitudes of their colleagues.
Her philosophy regarding politics and art has its roots in Dada, but also grows out of the Pop Art tradition, with its emphasis on consumerism.
Figure I.1 Oscar Rejlander, *The Two Ways of Life*, 1857, Albumen print (30” x 16”)

Figure I.2 Military Memento, 1897–99, signed by Hannah Hoch and inscribed by her as The Beginning of Photomontage, colored engraving and photomontage
CHAPTER ONE
JOHN HEARTFIELD AND BERLIN DADA:
TOWARD “A MORE ABSOLUTE TRUTH”

For, in truth, the Daguerreotyped plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands. If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear—but the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented.

-Edgar Allen Poe, “The Daguerreotype”

Reactions to photography and its possibilities changed in a number of ways in the years immediately following its invention(s), as people began to realize its many possible uses. Poe’s reaction, in particular, claiming that photography could render images more “truthful” than anything that could be rendered through painting, was almost immediately challenged by photographers experimenting with painterly practices. It seems only natural that once a scientific discovery is made, the next question after “What can we do with this?” is “What else can we do with it?” Regarding “truth,” it didn’t take long for photographers to move from what something looks like to what something is.

Of course, Poe’s reaction must be considered in its own context. Photography was brand new, and people were only just beginning to understand its potentialities. Naturally, it was astonishing to see a permanent image created through an objective

scientific process—it had never been seen before. Such accuracy of appearance is only one thing, one aspect of what it is to truly apprehend an object or subject. As time went by, though, and initial wonder subsided, other ideas and possibilities began to emerge.

In this regard, photomontage, the practice of using photographs combined with other photographs, paint, text, and/or objects, is a most logical development, and people began to do this fairly early. But it was the Dadas, especially those in Club Dada in Berlin, who first employed it in order to question or illustrate or criticize the nature of “truth.” They understood that truth is not objective, but subjective. There is no single truth, but many truths—based not only on appearance, but also on matters that become apparent through proximity, experience, personal knowledge, etc. Although their early works were alternately bellicose and whimsical (or sometimes both at the same time), it wasn’t long before the Dadas became more serious. Whether they were responding to war and corruption, or challenging artistic conventions that reflected bourgeois tastes, they came to understand the potential of the medium to provide a new aesthetic vocabulary and a powerful political practice.

This first chapter offers the most obvious exploration of photomontage as political practice, but it will be seen later that there are many ways an artist can create politically charged works. But before delving into this particular area, it will be helpful to consider some earlier makers of political art in the more traditional media of painting and, especially, prints. Interestingly, an exchange of essays that was

2. People had been familiar with images created using a camera obscura, and later, the camera lucida, but the ability to “paint with light” was a true wonder, and Poe’s enthusiastic reception of it was typical of people at that time.
published in the March 2009 issue of the *Art Bulletin* regarding Ariel Dorfman’s 2006 play, *Picasso’s Closet*, provides a helpful starting place. The script itself, complete with cast list and stage directions, was presented first, followed by “Responses” from Pepe Karmel, Patricia Leighton, and Mieke Bal, which were then followed by Dorfman’s response. Because one wonders how the discussion of a play could really be a suitable place to begin an analysis of the effectiveness of photomontage as political art, it is helpful to note Bal’s reminder that theatrical theory is quite close to cinema theory, and Walter Benjamin himself alluded to the Dadas’ experiments with photomontage as anticipating montage in film.³

Many of Dorfman’s plays are about responsibility, and *Picasso’s Closet* is no exception. In this case, Dorfman explores the question of Picasso’s responsibility (or not) to use his fame to protect certain of his friends (such as Max Jacob, who perished in an internment camp while en route to a concentration camp), or to be a notable member of the French Resistance.⁴ In his various scenes Picasso engages in conversations with Captain Lucht, as well as with Dora Maar, Jean Cocteau, and, in a way, Max Jacob. These conversations address many subjects, including the role of art in politics and the responsibility (or not) of artists to create political art, and Picasso is forced a number of times to defend both his choosing to stay in Paris during World

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³ Mieke Bal, “Response: Ariel Dorfman’s Quest for Responsibility” *Art Bulletin* 91 (March 2009): 48–49. Dorfman’s play is on pp. 6–29, and I offer only a brief synopsis here, since it is the responses that are most relevant to this project. The Benjamin reference is from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), 237–38.

⁴ There is a second storyline as well, one that works to disorient the audience because it presents a scenario in which Picasso is killed by a (fictional) member of the German Army, Captain Lucht, who hates Picasso for the “degenerate” nature of his work, especially *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*. The play incorporates both the “real” biography of Picasso dying in 1973 having lived into his nineties, and at the same time the narrative of his execution in 1943 at the hands of the German officer.
War II and to not get involved in the politics of that war. It is important to note that Dorfman explains in his response that the character of Captain Lucht is “almost a precursor of . . . Osama bin Laden.” Here, and in other places, is an example of a specific character who contains recognizable characteristics of a more contemporary figure, thus keeping the historicizing aspects of the play from pigeon-holing it in a single moment in time. The idea of such transcendence as an essential aspect of effective political art is important not only to Dorfman but also, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, to such artists as Martha Rosler.

Dorfman writes eloquently about his own experiences in dealing with the same issues as his fictional Picasso, about living in exile and his own feelings of “cowardice and courage and betrayal.” He also notes his experience creating political art, “how difficult and tricky it is to affirm life and beauty in the midst of death and vindictiveness and violence, the traps and temptations that await anyone trying to reconcile the arts and a thirst for social justice:”

it is natural [given the political nature of his œuvre] for critics, spectators, and readers to presume that the primary purpose of my literature would be to denounce injustice as a way of changing the world. I have nothing, of course, against denouncing injustice and certainly nothing against changing the world, but the bulk of my labor as a writer has been dedicated to the more revolutionary task of not offering “reassuring answers,” either stylistically or thematically, to the challenge of responsibility.

Dorfman credits Bal with understanding his unwillingness to take specific “partisan positions,” explaining that “this sort of propaganda art . . . entails no joy of genuine


6. Ibid., 52.

7. Ibid., 52, 57.
revelation. It fails as art because it does not unnerve or transform the reader or the spectator deeply, does not question its own assumptions, does not demand true labor and elaboration.”

Bal addresses also what she refers to as the “false binary of politics and aesthetics.” She describes Dorfman’s play as “a conceptual laboratory of thinking about how art can be both political and art—political not in spite of being art, as a side effect or abuse, but because it is art.” In order to attempt to answer her own question, Bal turns to Paola Marrati’s book, Gilles Deleuze: Cinéma et philosophie, specifically her discussion of the “affection-image,” which Marrati describes as the image that “transforms the movement of translation into a movement of expression,” “in pure quality.” Bal goes on to extrapolate Marrati’s interpretation of Deleuze’s cinematic theory and to explain how it applies to the problems addressed in Dorfman’s Picasso’s Closet. Because Bal’s analysis is quite relevant to the discussion regarding Dada photomontage as well as that practiced by Rosler, it is worth quoting at length here:

8. Ibid., 57–58. Emphasis in the original. Dorfman’s mention of “partisan positions” refers to remarks in Mieke Bal’s “Response,” in which she describes political art that functions as “punctual protest . . . a singular political statement addressing a specific issue for its own sake and presented within the framework of the art world. Such art is not political qua art; it just happens to have a political meaning. . . . Nor can it be effective in its engagement with the suffering of others. Instead, the singularity of the suffering is primary and cannot be limited to the contingency of the protest against it. Such a punctual protest, always belated, in turn is limited to partisan positions already taken before the confrontation with art. . . .” Bal, “Response,” 46 (emphases in the original).


10. Ibid.

[The typical incarnation of the affection-image in film] is the close-up. My intuition is that Dorfman’s Picasso, while staying aloof from identification, functions a bit like a close-up in this sense.\(^\text{12}\)

If we are to understand how the focus on Picasso can be a close-up as well as hold the emotions at bay, it is important to realize that this type of image is not a mediating image between the work and the spectator, nor an enticement to action. These two negations are of crucial importance for our reflection on what political art can be and do. What the affection-image does is provoke a confluence, even if conflicted, between subject and object, without canceling out the heterogeneity and without falling into a deceptive harmony. The meaning of affect—or, in Deleuze’s terminology, affection—depends on the momentary suspension of translation. The singularity of the image presented—whether a close-up of, say, a face, or an event, say, a moral dilemma—gathers up an intensity, but not every spectator will experience this intensity with the same emotions.

Affect, in this conception, is a medium, not a message. Dorfman skillfully deploys the suspension it entails. The play carefully avoids hysteria or pathos, so as not to distract us from the work’s contagious intensity. This is precisely what affect is: 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, Dorfman’s work enters the domain of political efficacy.\(^\text{13}\)

The close-up, that moment when all contextual information is forced out of the frame and all the viewer is left with is affect—the expression on the subject’s face, or the intensity of the single frame of the event depicted—with only this bit of information, the viewer must decide what it means. It is political in that the artist has chosen what to show for a specific reason, but it is not overly didactic because the viewer ultimately decides the meaning. The viewer must first ask, What is it I’m seeing?, and then must decide what it means. The depiction is not a call to action, but to reflection. A call to action, or at least a call to specific action, risks making the

\(^{12}\) One of the chief complaints by audience members of the play was that the character of Picasso was unsympathetic. Bal cites theater critic Peter Marks, who wrote that the play “holds the audience at arm’s length.” Peter Marks, “Picasso’s Closet: An Artist with No Place to Hide,” Washington Post, June 27, 2006, C01. (In Bal, 50, note 15.)

\(^{13}\) Bal, “Response,” 48–49.
image propaganda. When context is removed, then particularity—time and place—fall away, and it is possible for people to engage with and relate to the work over generations. The message transcends time.

Bal stresses the difference between specificity and particularity, and it is an important distinction. Specificity can speak to human experience and response. In terms of Guernica, this might be, “when war happens, here is the result.” In this case, the specific event is not the Spanish Civil War, but war in general. But if the artist isn’t careful (or doesn’t care to be), and so emphasizes a particular event, for example the rise of Hitler (Heartfield) or the Vietnam War (Rosler), then it is possible for the viewer to simply dismiss the work as illustrating something that happened “ago” but is no longer relevant beyond the place given it in the history books. The event retains its historical narrative, but risks being drained of its human impact. But an artist who manages to avoid this trap, who manages to create a work that is political in relation to lived experience—of war, of corruption, of any kind of preventable suffering—and yet doesn’t descend into pathos, or indulge in shrill rhetoric, then that artist has created a work that is truly an example of political art, both things together. Affecting, not affected.

Bal refers to Picasso as “a hero . . . of ‘political art.’”14 She explains that Guernica “is known as political because it was not simply an evocation in paint, in a style the artist made famous, of the horrors of war but was conceived for a specific time and place: the Spanish Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et

Techniques of 1937,” which in itself gave the work a political context. But even more important was that it was designed for specific placement in the gallery so that the effect on visitors would be especially dramatic. Picasso meant that it should be exhibited on the right side of a gallery space so that rather than being seen as a “still iconography that indicts violence at all times,” it would be experienced as “a movement, almost a film, which brings the particular violence close to the viewer, involving the latter in its moving movement,” resulting in an image that is “more singular in its political thrust.” She continues, “All violence is evil, yes, but this violence destroys these people, this place we can engage with.”

Bal then goes on to elucidate the oft-noted connection between Guernica and Goya’s Los Desastres de la Guerra series of etchings. She brings up the critical point that makes Goya’s works so timeless: “Although Goya was one of several artists to respond to the gruesome

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid. Bal is especially frustrated because once the painting was moved from its original berth at the Exposition, it was no longer exhibited so that visitors would have the same experience of dramatic movement within the painting. She writes that now that it has been removed from its original “urgent context . . . the unfortunate contemporary hanging demonstrates that the political in art can be excised without assaulting the work itself.” She notes that Picasso chose to paint what traditionally would have been a mural, given its size and subject matter, on canvas instead so that it would not be destroyed after the exhibit. She then asks, “Was Picasso a coward to do it on canvas, thus allowing its neutralization? Or should we extend the ethical obligations politics imposes on art to the agents of exhibitions and blame them for this situation?” (ibid.) In other words, she seems offended that what had been meant to be experienced as a timeless indictment of war violence has, due to insensitive hanging, been reduced to a static reminder of a particular historical event, making the painting something of a castrated relic.

17. Ibid. This observation seems contradictory to Bal’s concern about artists creating works of “punctual protest,” but that need not be the case. It is equally understandable that the particular reference to what happened in Guernica allows viewers to sympathize with a group of people who actually suffered, and as a result be able to recognize that such suffering could be related to people anywhere, at any time, who were in similar circumstance. The painting evokes feelings of empathy that are transferable to others who suffer the same terror and grief. Just as in her remarks about Goya’s Los Desastres de la Guerra etchings, Bal interprets the painting as a humane rather than nationalistic protest.
Napoleonic Wars, his etchings focus on the horrors of war in general. They are not a nationalistic protest but a humane one.”

This last point is of key importance to any understanding of political art as opposed to propaganda, for although the suffering of the figures in Guernica was of course inspired by the atrocities visited upon the residents of that defenseless town for which the painting is named, it is suffering that can be understood as having been shared by people long before—and long after—the events depicted. The same is true of Goya’s etchings, in which it is quite often impossible to distinguish just who is killing whom, or even which people are the villains. (Figures 1.1–1.4)

The dichotomy of “specific” vs. “particular” brings a real tension to the matter of Heartfield’s work in particular, especially those photomontages that contain images of Hitler and Göbbels, because they deal with particular villains. But then, Heartfield himself was in the habit of claiming to be following Daumier’s example, and Daumier very often named the culprits who inspired his satirical drawings. (Figures 1.5–1.8)

However, both Heartfield’s and Daumier’s works (as well as the work of many of the Dada artists, in Berlin and elsewhere) can be understood as caricature, and caricature has an abstracting effect that on the one hand castigates specific guilty parties, but on the other tends to universalize their sins so that others who are also guilty of these kinds of accusations can be recognized as well.

Heartfield was not the only member of the Berlin branch of the Dadas who claimed Daumier as an important influence. George Grosz, discussing a difference between high art and art of a more illustrative and journalistic nature, wrote,

18. Ibid.
I began to understand there was a better goal than to work just for oneself and the art dealer. I wanted to become an illustrator, a journalist. High art, so far as it strove to portray the beauty of the world, was of less interest to me than ever—I was interested in the tendentious painters, the moralists: Hogarth, Goya, Daumier, and such artists.19

To cite Goya and Daumier is particularly appropriate when thinking about art that questions the efficacy of war. Both of them created works that are obviously critical of war, Goya’s being more dramatic and graphic while Daumier’s are more satirical. Too, both chose more often to create prints rather than paintings in order to express their ideas on the subject.20 Prints are easily reproduced and distributed, which naturally makes them more effective as instruments of protest. In the United States, artists such as John Sloan, George Bellows, and Boardman Robinson were creating protest images which they published in the Socialist journal, *The Masses*. (Figure 1.9) What is key about these types of images, though, is that while they are clearly anti-war pictures, they direct the viewer’s attention to the idea of war, and not toward any specific action. These are not nationalistic in flavor; they do not take a side but only concern themselves with the destruction wrought by war in general. This keeps them out of the arena of propaganda.

On the other hand, there is Heartfield’s insistence that his photomontages were political propaganda. Heartfield understood transformation. He did it in his work, transforming disparate images into fresh and pungent narratives aimed at


20. Of course, they did not work exclusively in prints, as Goya’s *The Second of May, 1808* (1814), and the even more famous *The Third of May, 1808* (1814), attest. Still, those paintings depict specific events and are heavily romanticized, much in the style of traditional history paintings.
enlightening the general public, and he did it to himself as well. Spurred by his
distaste for the fashionable greeting between Germans during World War I, “May
God punish England,” he Anglicized his name in 1917, shedding “Helmut Herzfeld”
for John Heartfield. Like most of the Dadas, he lived his convictions. He continued
working in photomontage after Dada ended, creating works for such Communist
publications as *Der Knuppel, Die Rote Fahne*, and most famously the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte
Zeitung* (AIZ). Art historian Dawn Ades notes that, “When his photomontages were
exhibited, Heartfield always insisted on having copies of the papers on show beside
the original, to underline the fact that his works were political propaganda aimed at a
wide public, not private, unique, unrepeateable works of art.”21

Heartfield’s reference to himself as a propagandist sits uncomfortably with
many who argue that his photomontages deserve to be considered works of fine art
but consider propaganda to be outside of such consideration. However, in her
exemplary 2003 dissertation, Sabine T. Kriebel provides a helpful discussion of the
shift in meaning assigned to the word “propaganda” before and after the rise of the
National Socialists.22 When Heartfield called himself a propagandist, he was referring
to his creation and mass dissemination of images designed specifically to reach the
broadest audience possible, both physically (by publishing them in pamphlets and
magazines) and ideologically—meaning that most viewers would be able to easily
understand the message these pictures carried. Heartfield’s notion of propaganda was

exact same belief, as is discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.

about distributing information, but it was not the wholesale brain-washing that
Hitler’s propaganda minister, Joseph Göbbels, was attempting. (Figures 1.10–1.12) As
Kriebel explains, “the goal is persuasion, not indoctrination.”

*Wieland Herzfelde as “Progress-Dada” was the first deliberately political photomontage published by Heartfield. (Figure 1.13) It appeared on the cover of the broadsheet *Jedermann sein eigner Fussball* (Everyone His Own Soccerball) published by Heartfield and his brother, Wieland Herzfelde, in February 1919.*

Herzfelde explained,

> My brother was copublisher of this magazine. In it he began for the first time to use photography consciously in the service of political agitation. To one side of the title he had pasted me as a flying soccer ball, and underneath, a photo of an open fan, on which were pasted (as in the previous century the pictures of admirers on ball-fans) seven photo-portraits of members of the Eberte-Noske-Scheidermann administration.

The second photomontage mentioned was made by George Grosz, and titled *Galerie deutscher Manneschönheit, Preisfrage “Wer ist der Schönste?”* (Gallery of German Male Beauty, Prize Question: “Who Is the Most Beautiful?”), and was published on the same page of *Jedermann* as Heartfield’s *Wieland Herzfelde*. (Figure 1.13) As noted, this montage in the shape of a lady’s fan contains pictures of the new Social Democrat leader Friedrich Ebert and members of his administration, as well as of General Ludendorff. The latter was particularly disliked by Heartfield, Herzfelde, Grosz, and

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24. Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch had been working in photomontage earlier than this, although none of their works were made public until the Dada Fair in 1920.

Johannes Baader, all of whom were heavily involved with the burgeoning Communist Party. General Ludendorff had been responsible for quashing the communist Spartacist Uprising in January 1919, just weeks before *Jedermann* was published.\(^{26}\) Brigid Doherty mentions the “mocking” quality of Grosz choosing to present these men’s portraits on “an accoutrement of middle-class women, [an object] with a built-in readiness to change shape or collapse.”\(^{27}\) Such an illustration makes clear the Dadas’ contempt for the new regime, and their lack of faith in its staying power. Photomontage provided the opportunity for these artists to use photographs of these important and easily recognized people in pointed and unflattering ways. That Grosz chose to use such distinguished-looking portraits in *Galerie deutscher Mannesschönheit* makes these men appear even more absurd than they might had he chosen to use candid photographs instead.\(^{28}\) The broadsheet was banned the same day it was published, but only after approximately seventy-six hundred copies had been distributed on the street.\(^{29}\) Both of these photomontages were exhibited at the Dada Fair the following year.


\(^{27}\) Ibid., 98.

\(^{28}\) The Dadas did employ candid pictures in their works, as well. For example, Hannah Höch used candid images of Weimar President Friederich Ebert and his Minister of Defense, Gustav Noske, to lacerating effect in her *Dada-Rundschau* (*Dada-Panorama*), 1919. (Figure 2.6)

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 97. Herzfelde, whose company, Malik Verlag, was responsible for publishing *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball* and its successor *Die Pleite*, was subsequently arrested for his actions. Ibid., 97–98.
Heartfield’s montages, almost without exception, are an iteration of “here is the problem.” Those of the Nazis, under Göbbels, declare, “here is the solution.” Once again, Heartfield’s rhetoric invites viewers to be critical, while that of the Nazis exhorts specific action. As for his choice of medium, Peter Selz notes that, “as Daumier had done a century earlier with lithography, John Heartfield turned to the newest, the least traditionally encumbered medium to comment on his time with powerful anger and great artistic talent.” Selz’s characterization of photomontage as “the least traditionally encumbered medium” speaks not only to the Dadas interest in breaking away from historicizing techniques, but also to a whole new way of creating blatantly socially critical work that could be easily reproduced and distributed, just as Daumier’s prints were.

Kriebel observes that “of the 237 photomontages that Heartfield generated for AIZ, only eight of them were positive,” made to promote Communist ideals. The rest were negative in tone, criticizing the Weimar political environment and the rising National Socialists. She argues that the positive montages are not as powerful as the others, writing, “the Monteur was rarely at his finest as a cheerleader for the Communist Party after 1929, his images usually sentimental at best and formulaic at


31. Goya worked on the Los Desastres series in secret during the six-year Peninsular War (1808–1814) between Spain and France. Other artists were persecuted and arrested for painting events villanizing the French. Although the plates were all completed by 1823, the prints were not published until 1863, thirty-five years after Goya had died. He had originally planned to publish them right after he had completed the series, but with Spain back under the rule of absolutist Ferdinand VII, that would have been ill-advised. On May 11, 1814, Fernando announced that the war was to be forgotten, making it impossible for Goya to make Los Desastres de la Guerra available to the public.

worst.” (Figure 1.14) This is a strong demonstration that photomontage is most effective when the artist brings together discordant images in order to illustrate disjuncture, rather than gathering together like images in order to show how things should be. If a master such as Heartfield couldn’t manage it, then it is easy to understand why Nazi attempts are largely forgotten except as examples of ham-fisted propaganda.

Kriebel argues against German historian Gerhard Paul’s assertion that photography and photomontage played only a peripheral role in the 1932 election campaigns. Her extensive research in this area provides substantial evidence to the contrary, as she cites “essays written by Nazi propagandists [that] attest to the powerful allure of the mass-produced photograph as a means of mass persuasion.”

She maintains that in addition to the National Socialists and political critics, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the National People’s Party (DNVP) also used photomontage to propagate their ideas. All of this makes it easy to understand that photomontage was a powerful political tool. But was it also, as created by Heartfield (for example), still recognizable as fine art?

To answer this question, it is most helpful to consider his methodology in comparison to what the Nazis (for example) were doing. Kriebel provides an excellent description of the various Deutschlandflugen, a series of montages created for Hitler on the eve of the April 9th election in 1932. (Figures 1.15 and 1.16) She explains that the various elements were cut out and arranged with no attempt to disguise the
fact that the photos were taken from other sources and combined to make the picture.

White space appears around the figures and there are body parts that are “unabashedly abbreviated” and “truncated.” She explains that these design decisions were deliberately made in order to

articulate a semiotics of accessibility, not only self-consciously in content but also in form. Their amateurish availability constitutes the terms of their suture with their audience, signaling the interdependence of the sign system and the audience that it interpellates . . . These photomontages declare themselves as popular art, or mass art, where the immediacy of production (all is laid bare) slides into visual accessibility. It leans upon the social perception of photomontage as a mass art, solidified by its success in advertising. Combining medium with message, these pictures declare that photomontage, like Hitler, is a form of popular expression.35

Compare this with a description of Heartfield’s methodology, as related by W. Reissman, one of the photographers who worked for him:

The photographs which I made for Heartfield, in accordance with an exact pencil sketch and always under his personal supervision, often took hours, many hours. He insisted upon nuances which I could no longer perceive. In the darkroom he would stand by the enlarger until the prints were ready. I was generally so tired that I could no longer stand or think. . . . but he hurried home with the photos still damp, dried them, cut them out, and assembled them under a heavy sheet of glass. Then he would sleep for one or two hours, and at eight in the morning he would be sitting with the retoucher. There he would stay for two, three, four or five hours, always fearing that the retouching would spoil it. Then the photomontage is finished, but there is not much time for relaxation: new tasks, new ideas. He burrows in the photo-libraries for hours, looking for a suitable photo of . . . whoever is needed—or at least for a suitable head, for the rest can be managed. Then he turns again to the photographers, all of whom he hates, me included, because of the nuances we are unable to perceive.36

Here, then, is clear evidence that while the montages made under the direction of Göbbel’s Reichspropaganda-Abteilung may have deliberately set out to create a sense of

35. Ibid., 150.

36. W. Reissman, qtd. in Ades, Photomontage, 49.
inclusiveness in the audience, Heartfield had an entirely different agenda. He wanted the message to be easily apprehended by the viewers, but he never at any point failed to hold himself (or, apparently, his assistants) to the highest artistic standards when it came to creating the works. His pictures are sophisticated both in methodology and in presentation. Although they were clearly, and admittedly, crafted to propagate information and generate critical thinking, Heartfield’s montages transcend the ephemeral quality of their materials and original message; they stand as works of fine art. The fact that he was chased out of Germany after his work was declared degenerate, and that the Nazis then adopted his chosen medium in order to propagate their own ideas, makes it equally clear that photomontage in general was understood as a potent propagandist’s tool.\(^{37}\)

This brings us back to the discussion at the beginning of this chapter regarding “truth” in photography and, by extension, photomontage. John Berger, in his lucid essay, “The Political Uses of Photo-Montage,” gets right to the most effective property of photomontage in his explanation of how the rupture of these images from their original sources and their suturing into their new context (to borrow Kriebel’s terminology) contributes to their success as propaganda:

[B]ecause things have been shifted, because the natural continuities within which they [that is, the images of the people or events in the photographs] normally exist have been broken, and because they have now been arranged to transmit an unexpected message, we are made conscious of the arbitrariness of the continuous normal message. Their ideological covering or disguise, which

\(^{37}\) Kriebel writes of the Nazi appropriation of photomontage, and also about how Heartfield “barely escaped arrest by the Gestapo in the spring of 1933, walking across the Sudeten Mountains in a snowstorm to join the AIZ production staff in Prague.” There he continued making anti-Nazi photomontages, and “his works produced the first diplomatic scandal between the new Germany and Czechoslovakia.” Sabine Kriebel, “Photomontage in the Year 1932: John Heartfield and the National Socialists,” *Oxford Art Journal* 31, no. 1 (2008): 126–127.
fits them so well when they are in their proper place that it becomes indistinguishable from their appearances, is abruptly revealed for what it is. Appearances themselves are suddenly showing us how they deceive us.\(^{38}\)

Berger mentions Heartfield’s discovery of the ability of photomontage to “demystify things,”\(^{39}\) and his *The Meaning of the Hitler Salute* is an excellent example.\(^{40}\) (Figure 1.17) In this work, Heartfield reveals what is really behind Hitler’s salute: the pursuit of large handouts of cash from wealthy backers. The “millions” referenced in his motto refers to Marks, not men. A second work dating from 1932 and appearing in *AIZ* reinforces this idea: *Adolf, der Übermensch: Schlacht Gold und redet Blech* (Adolf the Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Tin). (Figure 1.18) In this picture, Heartfield ingeniously creates the impression of an x-ray that shows quite literally just what the title indicates. One is immediately reminded of Daumier’s *Gargantua*. (Figure 1.5)

Berger then goes on to discuss a problem that surely must plague all political artists, even if only in private moments, regarding artistic integrity and “moral leverage.” Here again is a subject that Heartfield and his Berlin Dada colleagues contended with, that Martha Rosler contends with now, and it is the primary issue that “Picasso” struggles with in Dorfman’s play. Dorfman himself writes eloquently about his own experience with this question. He praises Patricia Leighton for “shrewdly” pointing out the connection between “Picasso,” Picasso, and Dorfman and

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39. Ibid.

40. This demystification is also true of photomontage as practiced by Martha Rosler as will be seen in Chapter Four. It is precisely what motivates the self-proclaimed activist artist. Berger wrote this essay in 1969, when Rosler had been working on her “Bringing the War Home” series for two years, and it is possible (although he does not reference her work) that he may have seen some of those pictures.
“the ways in which art reacts to ‘the cataclysmic political events of [his, my, our] time,’ the ‘uncomfortable position’ he and I shared when . . . we decided to live rather than die, how we came to value the imagination we served above the immediate political cause in which we each believed.”

Regarding moral leverage, Berger explains:

The moral leverage was gained through asking questions concerning utility and effectiveness. Am I being useful enough? Is my work effective enough? These questions were closely connected with the belief that a work of art or a work of propaganda (the distinction is of little importance here) was a *weapon* of political struggle. Works of imagination can exert great political and social influence. Politically revolutionary artists hope to integrate their work into a mass struggle. But the influence of their work cannot be determined, either by the artist or by a political commissar, in advance. And it is here that we can see that to compare a work of imagination with a weapon is to resort to a dangerous and far-fetched metaphor.

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 imagination cannot be estimated quantitatively. Its performance is not isolable and repeatable. It changes with circumstances. It creates its own situation. There is no *foreseeable* quantitative correlation between the quality of a work of imagination and its effectiveness. And this is part of its nature because it is intended to operate within a field of subject interactions which are interminable and immeasurable. This is not to grant to art an ineffable value; it is only to emphasize that the imagination, when true to its impulse, is continually and inevitably questioning the existing category of usefulness.

Although he doesn’t mention him directly, Berger appears to be in dialogue, at least partly, with Louis Aragon’s 1935 essay, “John Heartfield and the Revolutionary Beauty.” Aragon’s oft-quoted salute to Heartfield is a passionate, if somewhat


43. An excerpt of this essay appears in Appendix A. It was originally published as Louis Aragon, “John Heartfield et la beauté revolutionaire,” *Commune* (Paris, May 1935). Translated into German by Wieland Herzfelde and reproduced in his *John Heartfield: Leben und Werk*. Aragon was prompted to
overzealous (his crediting Heartfield as the sole inventor of photomontage is problematic, to say the least), assessment of what is most important in his political montages. Aragon’s definition of beauty is that which expresses “the cry of the people,” and he declares that Heartfield is able to speak for them without compromising his artistic integrity—the very concern voiced by Berger, and that activist artists continue to struggle with. In Aragon’s view, then, Heartfield is not only making art, but he is making the most important kind—revolutionary. He says nothing of propaganda. At the same time, he refers to Heartfield’s photomontages as “a weapon in the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat,” and it is that remark that may have sparked Berger’s discussion of that same idea.

Who, then, is right? Did Heartfield’s work, particularly that made between 1929 and 1939, have any effect on its current political environment? Heartfield’s pictures continue to be recognized as works of fine art, but did they fare as well as works of propaganda? It certainly doesn’t seem so; Hitler came to power despite Heartfield’s best efforts, using photomontage, to reveal the truth about how corrupt Hitler was, and how his rise would inevitably result in war. Still, it is important to remember that, according to Heartfield’s pre-1932 understanding of propaganda, his

write this essay when he heard that an exhibition of Heartfield’s work in Prague was closed because of pressure from the German (Nazi) consulate there. As already mentioned, Heartfield had moved to Prague in 1933, after his work was declared degenerate by the Nazis and he was being sought for arrest. When the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia, Heartfield escaped to England, where he remained until after the war.

44. I must qualify this remark. Although Eastern European art historians have long appreciated his artistic achievements in the medium, it is only recently that Heartfield’s photomontages have received any recognition for their artistic merit from Western art historians. Until the 1980s, the only works that appeared in art history texts were those from his brief time as a Dada artist, even though as early as 1921 Heartfield had moved away from his more chaotic Dada style and begun to refine his artistic process in the medium.
project was not a failure. He did indeed manage to create a large number of highly provocative pictures that were broadly disseminated, and his work was deemed enough of a threat that he was forced to flee Germany in order to retain his freedom. And let us not forget that the Nazis (as well as the other political parties mentioned earlier) recognized the potential of photomontage to deliver powerful messages, and so appropriated the medium—if not Heartfield’s technical expertise and lacerating imagination—in an effort to sway public opinion their way. Their works are largely forgotten, but political artists today still cite Heartfield as an important influence in their own work in photomontage. Rosler herself recently remarked, “I thought he was a master of something I was only fooling around with. His work was more sophisticated, with a highly developed sense of how to mix together irony and newspaper quotations, various forms of text and imagery. I was glad to know he existed.”

45. In fairness, Nazi works are just as likely deliberately neglected. Nearly seventy years after the end of World War II, it is still uncomfortable to entertain the possibility that such works might have artistic merit. Even Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will is treated cautiously, with positive remarks limited mostly to the formal qualities of the film.

Figure 1.1 Francisco de Goya, "The Same," from Los Desastres de la Guerra, 1810–1820, etching, drypoint

Figure 1.2 Francisco de Goya, "The ravages of war," Los Desastres de la Guerra, 1810–1820, etching, drypoint

Figure 1.3 Francisco de Goya, "They do not want to," Los Desastres de la Guerra, 1810–1820, etching, drypoint
Figure 1.4 Francisco de Goya, "Wonderful heroism! Against dead men!" Los Desastres de la Guerra, 1810-1820, etching, drypoint

Figure 1.5 Honoré Daumier, Gargantua, 1832, lithograph (8.5” x 12”). Daumier spent six months in jail for this particular picture.

Figure 1.6 Honoré Daumier, Louis Philippe rides among his eager subjects, 1834, Lithograph (10” x 12”)

Figure 1.7  Honoré Daumier, Between War and Peace, 1855, lithograph (8” x 9.5”)

Figure 1.8  Honoré Daumier, German Unity, 1870–71, lithograph (8.5” x 7.1”)

Figure 1.9  Boardman Robinson, Untitled, from The Masses, 1916
Figure 1.10 Hans Schweitzer (Mjölner), Nazi poster, c. 1930, the caption reads, “National Socialism: The Organized Will of the Nation.” Mjölner was Göbbels’ favorite propagandist.

Figure 1.11 Nazi propaganda poster, 1930, “A Nazi sword kills a snake, the blade passing through a red Star of David. The red words coming from the snake are: usury, Versailles, unemployment, war guilt lie, Marxism, Bolshevism, lies and betrayal, inflation, Locarno, Dawes Pact, Young Plan, corruption, Barmat, Kutistker, Sklarek [the last three Jews involved in major financial scandals], prostitution, terror, civil war.”

47. All of the Nazi posters are provided with permission from Prof. Randall Bytwerk, German Propaganda Archive, Site, CAS Department, Calvin College, 1810 East Beltline Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546, http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/ (accessed August 31, 2011)

48. Text from ibid.
Figure 1.12 Mjölner, 1943, text reads, “Victory or Bolshevism”

Figure 1.13 From the cover of Jedermann sein eignes Fussball: John Heartfield, Wieland Herzfelde as “Progress-Dada,” 1919; George Grosz, Galerie deutscher Mannesschönheit, Preisfrage “Wer ist der Schönste?”, 1919
Figure 1.14  John Heartfield, "Für Brot und Freiheit" (For Bread and Freedom), AIZ cover, Summer 1930, an example of one of Heartfield’s less successful montages

Figures 1.15 Photomontage created to mark Hitler’s 1932 campaign travels, the Deutschlandflug, published in the April 9, 1932 issue of Illustrierter Beobachter. 49

Figure 1.16 Photomontage created to mark Hitler’s 1932 campaign travels, the Deutschlandflug, published in the July 30, 1932 issue of Illustrierter Beobachter.

Figure 1.17 John Heartfield, "Der Sinn des Hitlergrusses: Kleiner Mann bittet um große Gaben. Motto: Millionen Stehen Hinter Mir!" (The Meaning of the Hitler Salute: Little man asks for big gifts. Motto: Millions Stand Behind Me!), AIZ cover, October 1932
Figure 1.18 John Heartfield, *Adolf, der Übermensch: Schluckt Gold und redet Blech* (Adolf, the Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Tin), AIZ, July 17, 1932, copperplate photogravure⁵⁰

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CHAPTER TWO

HANNAH HÖCH: LETTING THE EDGES SHOW

The peculiar characteristics of photography and its approaches have opened up a new and immensely fantastic field for a creative human being: a new, magical territory, for the discovery of which freedom is the first prerequisite ... Whenever we want to force this “photomontage” to yield new forms, we must be prepared for a journey of discovery, we must start without any preconceptions; most of all, we must be open to the beauties of fortuity. Here more than anywhere else, these beauties, wandering and extravagant, obligingly enrich our fantasy.

-Hannah Höch

Not all artists working in photomontage followed Heartfield's example in terms of how they created their works, or what they “used” them for. Although Heartfield is one of the most effective artists to use the medium, others were able to develop photomontage in important and uniquely creative ways. In his essay, “Berlin Dada,” Hans J. Kleinschmidt wisely cautions against some grouping all Dadas together as if they all shared the same ideology. Nothing could be further from the truth. While the Berlin group was the most politically outspoken, and it is plain that none of them approved of the Weimar Republic, they did not agree as to what would be better. Kleinschmidt cites “Die dadaistische Bewegung” (The Dada Movement), written by Richard Huelsenbeck, in which Huelsenbeck claims that there “really never was a movement; only men of talent, originality and intelligence imbued with the aggressive dada spirit.”

1. Hannah Höch, qtd. in Maud Lavin, Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 220. This was originally published in “On Today’s Photomontage,” Stredisko 4, 1, trans. from the original German into Czech by František Kalivoda, and from Czech into English by Jitka Salaguarda.

they did not even agree on what kind of art (if any) they should be making. But even in this maelstrom of discussion and disagreement, there was also a spirit of collaboration which, as has been seen, resulted in one of the most important innovations in art: photomontage.

Kleinschmidt goes on to criticize poet Al Alvarez’s book, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, as “imaginative and misguided.” He specifically refers to the chapter, “Dada: Suicide as an Art,” and remarks, “Here is a literary critic armed with a dangerous weapon, a theory, a preconceived notion, and he will be damned if he will permit facts to spoil his cherished concepts.” Again, this is a pitfall that Dada scholars would do well to avoid. Even long after they have all passed on, the Dadas continue to confound anyone who thinks they can be figured out as a group. There is no box big enough to contain all of them under one label, except, perhaps, for the label they chose for themselves—Dada—regardless of who did the actual choosing.

Regarding the Dadas’ use of photomontage, one need only look in order to perceive the individual ways in which each artist working in the medium saw it as the most effective means for expressing his or her political and/or artistic goals. If there

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4. The debate over who came up with the name Dada is a thing of legend, with Richard Huelsenbeck claiming that he and Hugo Ball came up with the name, and Tristan Tzara insisting that it was him. In his delightful *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, Hans Richter refers to the “Homeric struggle over the ownership of the trademark.” (Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* [London: Thames & Hudson Ltd. 1965, 1997; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004], 31.) This argument persisted for decades, and delayed the publication of Robert Motherwell’s invaluable *Dada Painters and Poets* anthology for a year. It is still not clear just who deserves the credit.

5. Again, this study is limited only to those artists who worked in political photomontage, and so this chapter is primarily concerned with George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, and especially Hannah Höch. Grosz and Hausmann eventually abandoned photomontage, but Höch would go on to experiment with it in ways that are as important for its technical evolution as Heartfield’s work was, although not with the same political emphasis (once the Dada era had passed).
was any shared philosophy among this group—or among any of the other Dada
groups, for that matter—it was a belief in creative freedom, for artists to be able to
shake off the influence of the ruling class and create in a purer way.\footnote{That said, this deserves a bit of clarification, because some of the Dadas were not as generous about what other artists were doing. For example, Huelsenbeck famously denied Kurt Schwitters entrance into Club Dada, even when Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch vouched for him, because of Schwitters' associations with Der Sturm and Expressionist artists. This will be covered in greater detail in Chapter Three.}

“The art of the past no longer exists as it once did,” John Berger declared in
1972. “Its authority is lost. In its place there is a language of images. What matters
now is who uses that language for what purpose.”\footnote{John Berger, \textit{Ways of Seeing} (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 33.} This is a perfect description of
photomontage, regardless of whether the resulting pictures are created for aesthetic or
political reasons. A “language of images” makes possible any number of narratives
and interpretations. For example, there are many ways to interpret Grosz’s \textit{My
Germany}. (Figure 2.1) Some might categorize it as a typical Dada photomontage, and
leave it at that. A Grosz scholar might regard it as an early example of his
experiments with photomontage, and then go back to discussing Grosz’s much better
known paintings and drawings. Someone interested in the psychological effects of
World War I on Germans might focus on the work as a perfect example of the rage
and confusion felt by many in that country during the tumultuous post-war years.
Someone else might see this particular work as one of the earliest photomontages
exploring the connection between war and capitalism, a subject that continues to be
relevant in the work of contemporary artists.\footnote{As might be guessed, the last example refers to me. The credit for pointing out \textit{My Germany’s} status as “one of the first montages to show the inglorious association of money and war” belongs to Dawn Ades, \textit{Photomontage}, 26.}
Grosz’s *My Germany* was created to be included in the anthology, *Dadaco*, originally slated to be published by Munich publisher Kurt Wolff in 1920. The collection of illustrations and writings submitted by Dadas working in Germany, Switzerland, and Barcelona, and edited by Heartfield, was ultimately never published. The project, however, demonstrates the collaborative spirit shared by the Dadas, both within their own local groups, and also internationally. Grosz collaborated on a number of photomontage works, mostly with Heartfield, and was also involved in publishing ventures with Wieland Herzfelde. But after the Dada movement imploded or metamorphosed into something else, Grosz went back to painting and drawing—he was the best draughtsman in the group—before finally giving up on art-making altogether.

Collaboration was a key characteristic of Berlin Dada practice, and Raoul Hausmann was another eager participant. He occasionally worked closely with Grosz, as well as with Heartfield and Johannes Baader. In addition to creating works together, they also often referenced one another within those works. For example, although Hausmann was the one to create the picture *The Art Critic* (1919), Grosz’s name appears stamped on it (and crossed out) twice. (Figure 2.2) Sometimes the artists would even be featured together, as in Hausmann’s and Baader’s dual self-...

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9. *Dadaco* included illustrations by Grosz and Raoul Hausmann, as well as poetry and essays written by John Heartfield, Hugo Ball, and Vincente Huidobro. A lack of funds likely was responsible for it never being published. Still, though money was always a concern for the Dadas, their propensity for collaboration enriched at least their work. For one of the essays written for *Dadaco* see, “*Dadaco, Unpublished anthology, Munich, 1920,*” introduction by Emily Hage, translated from the German by Kathryn Woodham and Timothy Adès, in Dawn Ades, ed., *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 98–104.

10. Hausmann and Grosz had many disagreements, both political and artistic, over the course of their Dada relationship, and Rudolf Kuenzli suggests that this treatment of Grosz’s name likely reflects that tension. See Rudolf Kuenzli, *Dada* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2006), 92.
portrait from 1919–1920. (Figure 2.3) Baader’s photomontage from that same period, *Reklame für mich: Dada Milchstrasse* (Advertisement for Myself: Dada Milky Way) features another dual portrait with Hausmann, and was assembled on Hausmann’s own poster, *Dada Milchstrasse* (Dada Milky Way). (Figure 2.4)

Hausmann also worked with Hannah Höch over the course of their turbulent seven-year relationship, and it has already been noted that these two are considered by some (including themselves) to have been the “inventors” of photomontage as a professional, as opposed to folk, art medium. It has been argued that Hausmann benefitted more from her influence than she ever did from his:

[Hausmann] himself was only to a certain extent capable of the synthetic criticism so typical of H.H., nor did he ever achieved [sic] a completely unprejudiced self-expression or reflection of his various levels of experience. He needed the exalted and provocative self-representation which the association with Huelsenbeck and Baader in the turbulent Dada movement gave him as artistic stimulus.11

Höch herself noted late in her life, “He really needed stimulus to be able to realise his ideas and create something permanent. As far as I know he found it difficult after we parted to establish himself as an artist, although I am sure that he is still an inexhaustible source of ideas to his friends even now.”12

Höch’s photomontage works stand on equal footing with Heartfield’s as the finest examples of high art to come out of Club Dada.13 The others who worked in the

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11. Karin Thomas, “Hannah Höch—the ‘good girl who works hard,’ The Feminist Question—Mark,” in Hoh and Goetz, *Collages*, 74. Hans Richter is largely responsible for saddling Höch with the label of “good girl.” See, for example, his *Dada Art and Anti-Art*, 132.


13. It might seem that Max Ernst should be included here, as well, but even though he was acquainted with the Berlin group, and even collaborated with them and showed his work alongside theirs, he is most often recognized as a member of the Cologne Dada group. Also, although Ernst’s photomontages,
medium appreciated that it made collaborative work so . . . effectively collaborative. That is, looking at most works that were created by more than one person, it is very difficult—if not impossible—to figure out just who contributed which parts. And this was very much in keeping with the Dada rejection of “the artist’s hand,” those signature qualities that they suspected added value to a work of art simply because of the name attached to it. In this regard, Höch and Heartfield stand out; one can easily discern their pictures in any collection of photomontages. For example, Höch’s pictures from 1919 to about 1923 are recognizable for their deliberate formal composition and attention to surface (Figures 2.5, 2.6), while her later works are recognizable for the whimsical and often surreal images resulting from her careful blending of parts of many photographs to create a single figure (Figures 2.7, 2.10). Heartfield’s works are unique for their seamless quality, achieved through his exacting process, described in Chapter One.

Although there was no single Dada agenda, one project the various groups did have in common was a strong criticism of art culture. They challenged prevailing bourgeois attitudes about the inherent value attributed to fine art, questioned what qualifies as such and why, and then went about creating works not just of “gallery” art, but also works in the literary, musical, and performance arenas, that ultimately—and literally—broke it all down. What they never seemed to anticipate, however, is that despite their best efforts to make it all as unpalatable for the audience as possible (until at the very least the 1920 Dada Fair in Berlin), there were some among the

the single works and those published as “picture novels,” are of course quite important and successful, they are much closer to Surrealism than to Dada. Even as much as Höch’s works evolved once she moved away from a political focus, they always retained a dash of humor and creativity that looks straight back to Dada.
critics and audience members who understood that criticism and applauded the Dadas’ efforts. Such recognition resulted, for better or worse, in many of the Dadas being recognized as people with something legitimate to say.14

By 1923, Dada was effectively over, and although some of its practitioners left art behind for good, others took what they had learned from their Dada experiments and brought about a considerable broadening of art-making possibilities. As has already been demonstrated, Heartfield’s political photomontage techniques have continued to gain recognition, and his pictures are valued as works of fine art, making photomontage the tool of choice for other political artists. Höch would take photomontage in quite a different direction. To begin, though, her early work does resemble that of her Berlin colleagues, at least on the surface. Or, better, it shows their influence. Still, her style was her own, and Peter Krieger summarizes this quite succinctly:

If we look closely at Hannah Höch’s early Dada collages and montages we see that for all the dynamic and turbulence [sic], even apparent arbitrariness, there is a hidden order in the arrangement of the material. It derives from the selection and compilation and flows only apparently against the stream through all her work, from beginning to end. It is evident in the field of tension to the irony and sarcasm, and in the playful grace. . . . As with a secret alchemy she succeeded through the inventiveness of her combinations in creating new worlds of form and meaning from fragments of the most banal material even in the urgency of the polemics. In that she was closer to her

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14. Clearly this is a very simplified summary of the Dada years. The scope of this chapter does not allow for much more, nor does the topic itself require that there be greater general discussion. There are many books that treat Dada as a whole, as well as books dedicated to specific groups or individuals, but the most helpful single source for anyone interested in a reasonably concise overview is the excellent *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, in association with Distributed Art Publishers, 2005), edited by Leah Dickerman, with essays by leading Dada scholars. It is the exhibition catalogue for the comprehensive 2005–2006 Dada exhibition that traveled to Paris, New York, and Washington, D.C., and it contains essays about each group, biographies for all of the artists, writers, film-makers, performers, etc. who were notably involved, a timeline tracking developments and events in each location where Dadas were active, and hundreds of high-quality images of their works.
friends Schwitters and Arp than the Berlin Dadaists Hausmann, Baader, George Grosz, Huelsenbeck and the two Herzfeld brothers.  

This helps explain why Höch’s most famous Dada work, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany (1919–1920)* stands as something of an outlier when compared not only to her later work, but also to that of the other Berlin Dadas. (Figure 2.5) When it appears again and again in the Dada scholarly writing as the poster child (if you will) of the Berlin Dada group, it most certainly is one of the best representatives for that specific time and place. For example, Peter Boswell, organizer of an important and comprehensive 1996–1997 exhibit of Höch’s photomontages, claims that *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* “stands as a visual summa of Berlin Dada’s exuberant condemnation of contemporaneous German society and its wholehearted immersion in the revolutionary chaos of post-Wilhelmine Germany.”  

*Cut with the Kitchen Knife* represents a specific time in art history, and also a specific moment in the development of photomontage as practiced by Höch. It is her work in its nascent phase, at once complete and effective in itself, and yet a harbinger of things to come. In this work, Höch blends the political beliefs of her colleagues and the experimental and radical nature of Dada art (or anti-art, depending on which of the Dadas is being considered).

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16. Hereafter to be referred to as *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*.

Höch made this poster at the same time that she was employed by Ullstein Verlag as a designer of embroidery and lace patterns for such magazines as *Die Dame* and *Die praktische Berlinerin*, and it shows the influence of her own design practice.\(^\text{18}\)

Makela argues that

Höch’s collage work is more surface-oriented than that, for example, of [Max] Ernst, just as it is more strongly patterned and rigorously structured than that of the Berlin Dadaists. . . . From the outset, Höch’s photomontage aesthetic was deeply rooted in design traditions, and it was perhaps this as much as anything that led many to discount her work. The exception to the rule is *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, the only of her photomontages to have partaken of the visual chaos that characterized Berlin Dada.\(^\text{19}\)

Höch’s ability to synthesize current events and the artistic influence of her colleagues with her own aesthetic sense allowed her to produce works that not only were successful in their own time, but have gone on to transcend their time and place. At the same time, that this particular work is so often pointed to as a perfect illustration of Berlin Dada attitudes (although it differs in a number of ways from the other works included in the Dada Fair of 1920\(^\text{20}\)) would seem to make it impossible for this argument to stand. Ultimately, then, it appears to transcend Berlin, but not Dada.

\(^{18}\) Like Heartfield, Herzfelde, and Grosz, who also worked for magazine publishers (most famously, Herzfelde’s Malik Verlag), Höch worked part-time for Ullstein Verlag from 1916 to 1926, and the influence of this kind of work on her photomontages is discussed at length in Maria Makela, “By Design: The Early Work of Hannah Höch in Context,” in *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, 49–80. Artists’ experiences working for publishing companies, especially those that published periodicals rather than books, provided them with a wealth of materials to use in their art-making. This was obviously a fortuitous connection for those working in photomontage. It is notable that Kurt Schwitters also worked in publishing for a time.

\(^{19}\) Makela, “By Design,” 62.

\(^{20}\) For example, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* was the largest photomontage there. It was also the most complex in that it included a large number of individual images grouped very deliberately for narrative purposes, and also for compositional reasons. Photomontages by others contain far fewer “cut-outs,” and are characterized by a static quality, while Höch’s is full of movement. Makela points out that *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* is the only one of Höch’s works “to have partaken in the visual chaos” of others in the Berlin group, but really, upon closer consideration it is easy to see the underlying order of this swirling crowd.
Höch worked outside the prevailing style of her comrades, while enjoying the greater creative freedom made possible within Dada practice.

It is quite likely that the nature of her design work for Ullstein Verlag also allowed Höch to develop a keen eye for organizing the various elements in her photomontages so that the ideas behind what she was making were more successfully conveyed in a more sophisticated than obviously narrative way. This greater subtlety requires more of the viewer than the more overtly political and angry works of Hausmann or Grosz, and Makela asserts, “Indeed, of all the artists working with photomontage in the late 1910s and early 1920s, probably only Max Ernst came close to rivaling Höch’s extraordinary technical facility, and even his collage work from this time is less multilayered and complex.”

Makela goes on to point out that the real value of Höch’s expertise in design is not only her ability to choose and cut with great precision, but more importantly how such skills contributed to how she dealt with the surface of her artworks. There is nothing illusory in how her works are designed; one is always acutely aware of how the images have been arranged on a two-dimensional surface. This is partly because Höch preferred not to try to hide the fact that the images were affixed to the surface, whereas this was most definitely not the case with Heartfield, who worked very hard to erase all evidence of suture. Höch, on the other hand, liked her edges to show. In this her work is more similar to Schwitters’, with his emphasis on the “thingness” of those objects he inserted into his collages and assemblages. Höch, too, reminds the viewer that these images once existed in another place before they were appropriated.

21. Ibid.
for her work, which in turn connects her with Martha Rosler, who does this deliberately as well. Both Höch and Rosler play with viewers, inviting them to try and figure out where these bits originally came from. This lends an ephemeral quality to the work that is in direct tension with the usual timelessness that fine artists traditionally strive for.

As a modern artist, Höch abandoned the historicizing aspects of art making, and kept herself abreast of what was happening right now, whether it was 1916 or 1976. She was very aware of the burgeoning film scene in the late 1910s and ’20s, and attended the cinema regularly. Regarding the rebirth of photomontage in 1919, Höch explained, “This rebirth was due, in the first place, to the high level of quality photography has achieved; second, to film; and third, to reportage photography, which has proliferated immensely.”22 In her photomontage, Höch explored many of the problems that interested filmmakers such as fellow Dada artist Hans Richter, who investigated the formal and narrative possibilities of montage in film. In fact, several of her pictures from the late 1920s and beyond pay homage to avant-garde film and also to popular film stars.

Höch was not the only artist (Dada or otherwise) interested in avant-garde film, and she and the others would have seen “a heterogeneous mix of melodrama, documentary, scientific short, comedy, daily news and headlines, ethnographic clip, and advertisement.”23 An assortment of these types of images appear in Cut with the Kitchen Knife. Makholm sums up the impact of film on Höch’s photomontage very

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22. Qtd. in Lavin, Cut with the Kitchen Knife, 220.

nicely: “Film offered an aesthetic theory through which photomontage could shed its Dada garments and emerge as a viable alternative to the increasing commercialism of art. Höch’s ‘free’ photomontage could reassert the struggle to capture a tangible, unified experience, such as that found in a single filmic model.”

As an object itself, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* represents the most contemporary endeavors of the Berlin Dadas to challenge conventional thinking about what constitutes a work of art. Again, the subject matter treats the shift in government that led from a militaristic to a democratic culture, both of which were suspect, and both of which were issues of greatest significance to avant-garde artists in Weimar Germany. Additionally, and this was of particular importance to Höch, there is much to be gleaned about the New Woman and her place in modern society. Raoul Hausmann and the other men in Club Dada were also interested in this, but were not so sensitive to the subject as Höch was. Only she would treat the subject of women consistently and quite ironically throughout her career.

In the case of *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, women are seen as the activators of change. The poster design is one of centrifugal motion, with the body of the well-known dancer Niddy Impekoven and the head of Käthe Kollwitz placed at the center and setting the whole composition in motion. The bodies of many other women

24. Ibid., 120. The gist of the whole first chapter of Makholm’s dissertation is that Höch’s (among others) early (1918–1922) photomontages were not simply a modernist assessment of current events and attitudes in Weimar Germany, but an attempt to create the same effects of cinema in a static form. The Dadas all visited the cinema regularly, and some (George Grosz and John Heartfield—interesting that these were the two who also Americanized their names) even worked in the film industry making propaganda films for the government, in addition to those making strictly experimental films (Hans Richter, Victor Eggling, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray, for example).

25. The cast of characters appearing in this poster is discussed in many places, but most comprehensively in chapter one of Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 13–46.
(often with a man’s head attached, and those heads most often belonging to members of Club Dada) appear throughout this work, and all are strong and active. The idea of the New Woman was born at the same time as the Weimar Republic, and coincides with woman suffrage in Germany. It was a topic of much discussion among Germans in general, and so those who saw the poster would have recognized the commentary on the new rôles of women in German society. At the same time, Höch’s commentary on women in the treatment of Impekoven and Kollwitz is not necessarily all positive. Lavin argues that this is at its most basic a violent representation of a female mind-body split. Particularly for the female viewer, the severing of Kollwitz’s head and Impekoven’s body provides a more urgent and personal level of critique than the overarching condemnation of the Weimar government and the military. Anger surfaces, as does a sense of frustration with the separation of the life of the mind from the power of the female body so clearly celebrated in Cut with the Kitchen Knife—adding a sharper edge to the liberating tone of the montage.

In the photomontage, Dada-Panorama (1919), Höch positions her usual signature, “H. H.,” juxtaposed to text that translates as “limitless freedom for H. H.” (Figure 2.6) When pronounced in German, the initials read “ha ha,” and art historian Brigid Doherty asserts that this is no accident. One wonders if this was the case in most (if not all) of the times when Höch signed her work with just these initials. Given her reputation for humorous irony and a generally less scathing critique in her work than the other Berlin Dadas, it seems at least possible. Her works display a more

26. This is discussed at length in ibid., most specifically in the introduction, “Representing the New Woman,” 1–12.

27. Ibid., 32.

utopian and optimistic sense than one that is anchored primarily in destruction or outright rejection of any hope of order being possible without completely destroying German traditions and culture.\(^{29}\) For Höch, at least in these early works, hope for the future appears to lie in the hands (and bodies) of women, specifically the assertive and physically fit New Woman.

That said, even women are not exempt from mockery, as demonstrated in the aforementioned Dada-Panorama, in which women politicians are depicted wearing antique robes. The women, two of the thirty-six who were elected to the National Assembly in January 1919 after women were granted suffrage, while shown striding forward confidently, were also recognized by contemporary viewers as in costume. Doherty points out that this was a criticism right out of Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in which Marx criticizes French “revolutionaries” (or pseudorevolutionaries) who “anxiously summon up the spirits of the past to their aid, borrowing from them names, rallying-cries, costumes, in order to stage the new world-historical drama in this time-honoured disguise and borrowed speech.”\(^{30}\)

Although Höch was quite interested in exploring the rôles of women, in particular the New Woman during the Weimar period but also the subject of women

\(^{29}\) Utopianism is at the heart of many Dada works, and is especially detectable in many of Höch’s more political works. Maud Lavin notes that, “Among those on the critical left . . . there was a desire to use montage to connect this state of wonderment to a desire for a better, classless future society based on specific aspects of present-day reality. In other words, there was a dialectical approach to utopianism that incorporated radical fantasies of the future and concrete elements . . . of contemporary life. Thus, utopianism was not a starry-eyed fantasy but a legitimate form of social critique, and montage was an essential formal aspect of its construction.” Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, 74–75.

in general, she did not limit herself to this. She treated many subjects in her work, and created a variety of images that spoofed politics, first of the Weimar (including *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*), and later (before she realized how dangerous it was) the Nazis.\(^3\) (Figure 2.7) It is important to understand that, while she did indeed poke fun at politics, she was never as hostile in her expression as the hyper-political and bombastic boys of Club Dada. Höch employed a gentler humor than her colleagues—although still sharp enough to draw the attention of Nazi officials, who eventually visited her home and declared her art degenerate. In this way, she creates something of a middle ground between the ostensibly apolitical works of Schwitters, for example, and the unflinching social criticism of the Berlin Dadas. Of course, by the time Hitler took over in 1933, the Dada movement had ended, and the participating artists had either moved into politics or had moved on to other modes of artistic expression, most notably Surrealism. They had turned their focus inward. Höch, however, continued to develop the practice of photomontage over the entire course of her career as an artist, always looking outward. The freedom afforded her during the Dada period was merely the catalyst for a lifelong exploration of the possibilities for expression in this medium.

\(^3\) The reference to the Nazis is not obvious in this image, however Makela notes the following regarding the caption to the image in the exhibition catalog already cited, 119: “A composite of an adult male and a bawling baby, this photomontage has been known for years as *The Small P*, based on the inscription at the lower right of the image. Yet, as Höch noted somewhat enigmatically on the back of a photograph of the work, now in the Hannah Höch Archive at the Berlinische Galerie, this nonsensical title was not the original one. “Der kleine Pg” had been inscribed earlier, just below the ‘H.H.’ that is now at the lower left, on a piece of paper Höch subsequently removed. When the collage is held in a raking light, this unmistakable reference to a ‘Parteigenosse,’ or member of the National Socialist Party, is still evident in the form of indentations in the backing page that were created by the pressure from the artist’s pen or pencil. The exact position of the now-missing scrap of paper is also evident from the discoloration of the areas over which it was originally glued. Fearful of retribution for her unflattering portrait of a Nazi as an infantile malcontent, Höch probably retitled the photomontage sometime during the Third Reich.”
It is worthwhile to examine more closely the differences between Höch’s work during the Weimar period as compared to that of the other members of Club Dada. As Lavin points out, “Amid the array of Berlin Dada production, Hannah Höch’s work was distinguished by her interest in the allegorical uses of montage to represent the society, gender rôles, and modernity of Weimar Germany.” The rest of the members of this group were more interested in the narrative possibilities presented by photomontage. Hausmann described the political uses of early photomontage in a speech given at the 1931 “Photomontage” exhibit at the Museum of Applied Art in Berlin:

The members of the Club Dada, all of whom were more or less on the Left in politics, were not of course concerned to set up new aesthetic rules for creating art, on the contrary, they were not at first concerned with art at all really, they were totally committed to finding new material forms of expression for new ideas. Dada, a sort of cultural criticism, stopped at nothing, and it is a fact that a large part of the early photomontages were a biting satire on contemporary political events.

His words were bold and also accurately described precisely those qualities that would later offend the Nazis enough for them to include several photomontages in their 1937 “Entartete Kunst” exhibit.

Höch, however, had very different ideas about the possible uses for the medium, stating, “Collage was born with the Dada movement, and it never ceased to hold me. I always believed that one should not only use it for tendentious works or applied art . . . but that it was a form of expression complete in itself and could

32. Ibid., 16.

33. Quoted in Höch and Adriani, Collages, 51. Speech at the opening of the “Photomontage” exhibit at the former Museum of Applied Art in Berlin in 1931. See Appendix B for the full text.
culminate in purely aesthetic work.”\textsuperscript{34} Höch’s early photomontages, including \textit{Cut with the Kitchen Knife}, were indeed tendentious. As Lavin points out, “the historical context is all-important. Höch’s work requires our sensitivity to a historically specific spectator, the meanings and ambiguities she would perceive, and to utopias, desires, and fears time-bound to Weimar Germany.”\textsuperscript{35}

There are many differences between Höch’s photomontages, particularly the one at the center of this chapter, and those made by other members of the Berlin Dadas. For example, while theirs are frequently incendiary in content and often depict shouting self-portraits (Figure 2.8), \textit{Cut with the Kitchen Knife} has a much cooler presentation. It is political, yes, but it is more about modernity and the New Woman and the rôles that these might play in creating a more utopian Germany; there is a note of optimism that is distinctly missing from the works of Grosz and Heartfield and Hausmann. The fact that she was a peripheral rather than central member of Club Dada left her free to experiment and explore her own vision and artistic goals.\textsuperscript{36} But there are other reasons as well that Höch’s work looks so different from that of the others, and Doherty addresses this distinction at length.

The trauma experienced by Grosz and Heartfield, in particular, from their time in the army during World War I, is central to their work. Although neither

\begin{footnotes}

\textsuperscript{35} Lavin, \textit{Cut with the Kitchen Knife}, 46.

\textsuperscript{36} Höch’s affiliation with the Berlin Dadas came primarily through her relationship with Hausmann. It was he who insisted that \textit{Cut with the Kitchen Knife} and a couple of Höch’s other works be included in the 1920 Dada Fair, and he threatened to withdraw his own work if the Club refused. See Boswell, “Hannah Höch: Through the Looking Glass,” 7–8.
\end{footnotes}
served in battle, Grosz’s major trauma apparently came from his dealings with authority figures. He wrote, “I had been bellowed at for so long that I finally developed the courage to bellow back. . . . I defended myself as best I could against vicious stupidity and brutality. . . . I was not defending any ideals or beliefs. I was defending myself.” Höch had been dealing with a different kind of authority her whole life, simply by being a woman, but also in her stormy relationship with Hausmann. However, when it came to her art, she was very much her own woman.

While Höch took advantage of the new freedom afforded to art-making by the Dada attitude and experimented with the creative possibilities of photomontage, Hausmann and the others were locked in a more reactionary mode. Again, this puts Höch more in line with what Schwitters (among others) was doing. This is more evidence, too, that Dada was never a style, never a single event, but rather an environment created when the walls fell away from European culture, and those at the cutting edge in the art world responded to the chaos by eschewing traditional ideas about what constitutes a work of art. Dada forced people to ask many questions, not only about what constitutes a work of art, but what the work of art is; that is, what its function is. Höch’s work, especially *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, functions in

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37. Quoted in Doherty, ““See: We Are All Neurasthenics!”,” 106; originally in George Grosz, *A Little Yes and a Big No: The Autobiography of George Grosz*, trans. Lola Sachs Dorin (New York: Dial Press, 1946), 146. Doherty’s article points up a strong dichotomy between what Höch was doing and what the men in Club Dada were expressing in their works. Part of this seems naturally to be a result of the fact that men and women (generally) experienced the trauma of WWI in quite different ways. The article focuses primarily on the experiences of Heartfield and Grosz in the military, and the trauma that they experienced in an absurdly authoritarian environment. Hausmann never served in the military, although he worked very much in the same style as the others—but with perhaps less emphasis on trauma so much as in reaction to the absurdity of German culture (or even European culture in general) in the war and postwar years. However, Höch (as stated before) seemed much more interested in using photomontage to make pictures dealing with politics and social change (particularly regarding women), but with a greater interest in aesthetic organization than message or propaganda.
multiple ways: aesthetically (formally, that is as a balanced work); as a modernist work, in which high and low art are combined—she uses commercial photography, a “lower” form of art in such a way as to create a work of fine art; in a feminist capacity, given her examination and incorporation of images and ideology surrounding the nascent idea of the New Woman; and as social criticism.

As time went by, other contemporary influences began to show up in her works. The nature of photomontage, with its materials coming right out of the popular press and images of current events, provides an infinite variety of possibilities for both formal exploration and narrative expression. Soon after the Berlin Dadas dispersed into other areas of art and/or politics, Höch’s work—never as overtly political as might seem when one looks more closely—becomes more clearly formal. It is easy to perceive the influence of the Constructivists as well as that of her good friends Schwitters and Arp, and of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. This greater emphasis on formalism was at least partly, if not primarily, a result of the rise of the National Socialist party.

As Nazi power increased and subversion in art became increasingly risky, Höch was forced to make adjustments in order to continue her work, and one can perceive a shift from the specific to the general in her subject matter and titling. This was no mere surrender to political power, though. Rather, Höch took the challenges presented by the circumstances in Germany in the 1930s and found new ways to express herself in her work. In this way it is possible to see that although she was alert to the growing dangers for artists (among others) in Germany, she was no victim. She continued to grow as an artist, even though she was not able to profit from her work
until after the war. But she didn’t quit, nor, it can be argued, did she compromise.

Carolyn Lanchner explains that since Höch’s

exploitation of instantly recognizable imagery in her earlier photomontages [prior to 1930 or so] amounted to a species of reverse advertising (a critique, in effect, of conventional modes of thinking), then she had considerable reason, despite the fact that her work went unexhibited in Germany until after the war, not to subvert openly the cultural and social standards then advanced in the Nazi-controlled mass media.38

Lanchner continues,

The urge to work, however remained constant, and in that kind of double bind, nothing could have been more logical than to shift the thrust of her photomontages from the particular to the general. . . . For the most part, this turn to the general necessarily carried with it a change of subject matter: although nature and landscape are abundantly represented in Höch’s watercolors and paintings throughout her career, they make almost no appearance in the photomontages until the mid-1930s. Their appearance at this point reflects not so much an increased interest in the subject as it does a positive response to the challenge of changing her art without compromising her satisfaction in it.39

Beginning around 1936, Höch’s photomontages underwent another change, one that emphasized form if not more than, then at least as much as, content. Lanchner points to two specific works to illustrate this: The Accident and Made for a Party. (Figures 2.9 and 2.10) It is the former that brings to mind Schwitters’ abstractions, in that one is so distracted by the formal whole that it is difficult to try and decipher the individual parts of which it is constructed. Schwitters often stated that it was his goal that his collages and assemblages be understood as a single entity, and for this reason he strove to remove from his materials most, if not all, clues about their former existence as objects. It seems here that Höch is doing the same thing, with greater


39. Ibid.
intent than ever before. As already discussed, her earlier works often relied on the recognizability of the images she incorporated in them; this added to the narrative quality and allowed for a sort of game to be played between her and her audience. It also added layers to possible interpretations.

Höch’s photomontages continued to evolve over the years because she never stopped paying attention to what was happening in the world, both her own and abroad. Thus there was always fresh material available not only to use as material, but also to stimulate new ideas. She was able to move away from strict narrative, manipulate source materials, and tell a greater political, philosophical, sociological, and artistic truth. By taking photographs from their original contexts and placing them (or portions of them) in new combinations with other images, she altered one truth to tell another one. This was a very exciting development, and the idea caught on in the world of advertising and propaganda, which is at once a natural progression and also terribly ironic (given what the Nazis did with it).

According to Lavin, “As an organizing structure, montage was thought to echo the pace, the multiplicity, the disorientation, the thrill, and of course the fragmentation of modern everyday life.”40 As Lavin also points out, it is important to consider this development in the context of Weimar Germany, where the blending of the commercial and machine aesthetic with fine art ideology indicated a modern attitude, and was not seen as derogatory by the masses, nor as selling out by the artists.41 Lavin devotes the second chapter of her book, “Mass Media, Modernism, and

40. Lavin, Cut with the Kitchen Knife, 47.
41. Ibid., 66.
the Avant-Garde,” to an analysis of art being made at the end of the Weimar period, claiming that “[p]hotomontage no longer connoted revolutionary politics but had become an accepted advertising design tool equated with consumerism and modernity.”\footnote{42} For many artists, this idea of modernity entailed the integration of commercial art and mass media with fine art, in order to both break down old standards deemed corrupt by many, and the democratization of art, so it could be appreciated across classes. It is interesting how, once again, something that was once sneered at or at least underappreciated or misunderstood, or that was seen as dangerously controversial and revolutionary, is often rapidly absorbed into a sense of normalcy.

In 1959, Edouard Roditi visited Höch at her home just outside of Berlin and conducted an interview that is at once as revealing of his own attitudes toward the Berlin Dadas as it is of Höch’s memories of that time in her life.\footnote{43} In describing what they were trying to accomplish with their work, Höch elucidated, “the Dada photomonteur set out to give something entirely unreal all the appearances of something

\footnote{42. Ibid.}

\footnote{43. Edouard Roditi, “Interview with Hannah Höch,” Arts 34 (December 1959): 24–29. Indeed, an inordinate amount of space is given to Roditi’s opining, to the detriment of the “interview.” Still, despite Roditi’s often condescending remarks, Höch was allowed to make many observations and to share important memories and impressions. To his credit, Roditi does offer an astute and helpful summation of the differences between Paris collage, the Merz creations of Kurt Schwitters, and Berlin Dada photomontage: “The collages of the Berlin Dadaists seem to me to be conceived according to principles which are not at all the same as those of the collages of the earlier Paris Cubists, where a piece of newspaper in a painted still life represents a newspaper, or has been inserted for its texture, like any other artist’s material, rather than to create an illusion of the same kind as the illusions of a Dada montage. At the same time, these montages of the early Berlin Dadaists are quite different, in their principles, from the ‘Merz’ compositions of Schwitters, who salvaged the elements of his compositions from the dust bin, the wastepaper basket and the junkyard, creating objects of artistic value out of materials that were considered quite valueless, in fact ‘a thing of beauty and a joy forever’ out of elements that would scarcely be expected ever to suggest beauty or joy. The montages of the Berlin Dadaists represent an extension, in the realm of art, of the mechanical processes of modern photography and typography.” Ibid., 26–27.}
real that had actually been photographed," to which Roditi responded, “One might therefore say that the Dada photo monteur sets out to falsify deliberately the testimony of the camera by creating hallucinations which seem to be machine-made.”

This exchange is provocative and very interesting, because it leads one to question the idea of testimony. For, as the Dadas (and, in fairness, others before them) demonstrate, it is indeed possible to falsify testimony, the “truth” as revealed by the objective lens of the camera. But who is to say that what the monteur has created (and sometimes then photographed so that the assemblage itself then becomes a photograph) is not also the truth? That it is not (cannot be?) a thing that can exist in nature but must be made by human hands, a product of the human imagination and intellect—does this negate its innate truth? At least the truth as understood by the creator? This is evidence, then, of the place that photography deserves to hold in the world of fine art. It is, among other things, surely, yet another medium available to the creative mind as a means of expressing what is often only expressible by means of an object rather than the written word.

Despite the occasional bright exchanges between the two, the tone of the interview is often frustrating. Roditi does not dwell on Höch’s personal relationships (a welcome change from much other scholarship, which so often focuses on Höch’s romantic relationships and their perceived impact on her work), but his description of her preparing coffee and cakes, with fruit from her garden adding to the simple repast, and then his reference to her as a “gentle, gray-haired artist” who had once been a

44. Ibid., 26.
“scandalously subversive young woman in an art world which had flourished in the asphalt jungle of Berlin” somehow manages to undermine her past, her courage, and her continued contributions not only to the field of art-making regarding materials and techniques, but in her attitude about artistic freedom and personal freedom in general. She may have looked ordinary, but she was extraordinary, at a time when it was not only difficult but downright dangerous for anyone, let alone a woman, to be so. Although it has not been the subject of this chapter, it is entirely arguable that her late work remained as subversive as her Dada works. Perhaps even more so, since works such as Cut with the Kitchen Knife were created when she was heavily influenced by the cacophony of male voices dominating Berlin Dada.

Höch is to be lauded not only for continuing in the medium of photomontage after Club Dada disbanded, but for continuing to explore its many possibilities. Although she, and some of the other women associated with Dada, were often treated as “charming and gifted amateurs” by their male colleagues, Höch clearly never saw herself that way. That she continued to live in or near Berlin even after most, if not all, of the other avant-garde artists had fled to foreign countries, also demonstrates that she was a woman determined to live life on her own terms. Finally, that she held onto Dada documents and artworks throughout World War II and in the years that followed, when to have any Communist associations was nearly as dangerous as being “degenerate,” makes clear that Höch understood the importance of what she and the other Dadas had been doing, both artistically and politically. Still, Höch was humble:

45. Ibid., 29.
In the history of every nation there are disgraceful pages, but the crimes committed here remain unique in their magnitude. I often wonder how I managed to survive that dreadful reign of terror. When I now look back, I’m surprised at my own courage or my own irresponsibility in preserving in my own home all the “subversive” Dada art and literature. . . . But it never occurred to me, until it was all over, that I could still be considered a dangerous revolutionary.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 29.
Figure 2.1  George Grosz, *My Germany*, from *Dadaco*, 1920

Figure 2.2  Raoul Hausmann, *The Art Critic*, 1919, lithograph and collage (12.5" x 10")
Figure 2.3  Raoul Hausmann and Johannes Baader, Untitled (dual portrait), 1919–1920, reprint of photomontage on newsprint (original lost) (10” x 6 1/4”)

Figure 2.4  Johannes Baader, Reklame für mich: Dada Milchstrasse (Advertisement for Myself: Dada Milky Way), 1919–1920, collage and photomontage on poster (19 11/16” x 12 13/16”)

Figure 2.5 Hannah Höch, *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands* (Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany), 1919–1920, photomontage and collage with watercolor (44 7/8” x 35 7/16”)

Figure 2.6 Hannah Höch, *Dada-Rundschau* (Dada-Panorama), 1919, photomontage and collage with gouache and watercolor on board (17.2” x 5.25”)
Figure 2.7  Hannah Höch, Der kleine P (The Small P), 1931, photomontage

Figure 2.8  Raoul Hausmann and George Grosz, Dadaphoto, 1920
Figure 2.9  Hannah Hoch, *Der Unfall* (The Accident), 1936, photomontage (12” x 10 1/2”)

Figure 2.10  Hannah Höch, *Gemacht für eine Partei* (Made for a Party), 1936, photomontage (14 3/16” x 7 13/16”)
CHAPTER THREE

KURT SCHWITTERS: WHEN A BUS TICKET ISN'T A BUS TICKET

Art is a spiritual function of man, and aims to deliver him from the chaos of life (from the tragic). Art is free in the use of its means, and is ruled by its own laws and no laws other than its own; as soon as a work is a work of art, it rises far above the class differences between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

~Kurt Schwitters, “Proletarian Art Manifesto,” 1923

Kurt Schwitters was a contemporary of the Dadas, and counted many friends among them, including Hannah Höch. However, he was never a member of any of the Dada groups, primarily because of his refusal to blend politics with aesthetics in his work. His irreverent attitude toward war is made most apparent in an anecdote shared by his close friend, Kate Steinitz. Steinitz, an artist herself, traveled with Schwitters, visited him in his home in Hanover, and together they collaborated on various projects. In her biography of him, Steinitz tells of encountering Schwitters while he was out on an errand, negotiating the sale of five of his guinea pigs in a Hanover pet shop. He then went to a toy store, intending to spend the money he’d just received for the guinea pigs on a set of lead soldiers for his son, Ernst.

Kurt bought a few authentic Greeks and Romans, which were nicely packed for him in small matchboxes of natural-wood color. “Now look,” he said with

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2. Schwitters did not fight in World War I because of his epilepsy, but was given a job at the Wülfel iron works near Hanover toward the end of the war. He left immediately after the war ended. His irreverence regarding authority was regularly demonstrated, as Schmalenbach illustrates: “Called to the colors in 1917, Schwitters served as a private in Hanover from March to June of that year. He was judged unfit for active duty and promptly found himself assigned to paperwork. That his term of service was so brief seems to have been due to his own efforts. Among other things, he made it a habit always to address his superiors as though their rank was one notch higher than it actually was.” Werner Schmalenbach, Kurt Schwitters (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1967), 30.

3. Guinea pigs were Schwitters’ most beloved pets, and he always kept many of them.
a deep sigh, “that’s what becomes of the great war heroes of the history books. They’re stamped out flat, and one can trade a whole bunch of them for five guinea pigs. Then one can put them all away in little boxes!”

As is made clear by the epigraph above, Kurt Schwitters had strong feelings about the function(s) of art, none of which include politics. This was an opinion he voiced or wrote about many times, perhaps most famously when he challenged Richard Huelsenbeck’s ideas on the matter:

In his introduction to the recent *Dada Almanach*, Hülsenbeck writes: “Dada is carrying on a kind of propaganda against culture.” Thus Hülsenadaism is oriented towards politics and against art and against culture. I am tolerant and allow every man his own opinions, but I am compelled to state that such an outlook is alien to Merz. As a matter of principle, Merz aims only at art, because no man can serve two masters.

There are, however, many ways in which to be political. This chapter explores how successfully Schwitters was able to stick with his convictions and keep political material out of his work. That is, at least out of his collages, photomontages, assemblages, paintings, architectural sculpture, and poetry, for he did address the subject in his writings, not only generating a number of relevant essays but also incorporating strong political ideas in his, until quite recently ignored, fairy tales. Because of the astonishing variety of media in which Schwitters worked, it is necessary in this chapter to expand the discussion beyond the boundaries of photomontage. This is justifiable given the unusual nature of the materials Schwitters was


6. A comprehensive collection of Schwitters’ fairy tales and grotesques was published for the first time only very recently, in 2009. They are the most overtly political of all of his creative works. See Kurt Schwitters, *Lucky Hans and Other Merz Fairy Tales (Oddly Modern Fairy Tales)*, trans. Jack Zipes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
using to make most of his art. Although Hausmann and some of the other Berlin Dadas made some sculptures out of nontraditional materials, Schwitters was the only artist in the period who consistently worked with what most people consider rubbish.

Biographer Gwendolyn Webster observes that although Schwitters had an uncanny ability to “transform the banal into the beautiful,” his writings “reveal a different side of his character. Here he unleashed a deluge of bottled-up aggressions, doubts and fears in an uninhibited and sometimes outrageous flow.” Although she doesn’t directly address his fairy tales, this quote holds true for those as well. There is an inherent optimism to his collages and assemblages that is directly attached to his choice and treatment of materials. They seem to go through a cleansing, purging process that his fairy tales do not. Those stories are dark and absurd and perhaps relate to his real experience of the world, whereas his plastic works appear to embody the kind of world he wished for: a place of healing and renewal. After all, he was a romantic.


8. Indeed, Schwitters often washed the bits and pieces of stuff he collected for his artworks before actually incorporating them. But more important was his practice of purging objects of their former meaning, which he discussed in his writings: “What the material signified before its use in the work of art is a matter of indifference so long as it is properly evaluated and given meaning in the work of art. And so I began to construct pictures out of materials I happened to have at hand, such as streetcar tickets, cloakroom checks, bits of wood, wire, twine, bent wheels, tissue paper, tin cans, chips of glass, etc. These things are inserted into the picture either as they are or else modified in accordance with what the picture requires. They lose their individual character, their own *Eigengift* [special essence], by being evaluated against one another, by being *entmaterialisiert* [dematerialized] they become material for the picture.” Kurt Schwitters, quoted in Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters” Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 27. Translation from the English edition of Werner Schamlenbach, *Kurt Schwitters* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1967), 94.

Although he frequently iterated his belief that art and politics must be kept separate, it is unwise to think for a moment that Schwitters was able, or even consciously willing, to keep the social environment out of his work. In other words, although he was unwilling to create works that were deliberately, didactically political, that does not mean that his own personal politics were not expressed in the things he made. His political beliefs were not simply theoretical; he lived them, just as he lived his art. Webster explains,

As he so often wrote, the essence of Merz was the reconciliation of opposites. He constantly extended this principle, whether it meant searching for connections between apparently unrelated arts or simply settling disagreements among friends and relations. He has been called the Dada-Sanitäter, the medical orderly who discovered his own Merz-remedy for the fateful excesses of his age.10

As a result of his many and diverse acquaintances, Schwitters was alert to the assortment of ideas European artists were exploring, and was vitally interested in conducting his own experiments. The Constructivists, for example, had a considerable influence on his work beginning as early as 1920, and it shows. For a few years his collages became more carefully geometrical and the colors more monochromatic.11 Figure 3.1, Das Merzbild, for which his style is named, was created in 1919, and is a good example of his earliest works in his purer Merz fashion. This picture is no longer extant; it is believed to have been destroyed by the Nazis after Schwitters’ work was declared “degenerate.” Das Merzbild was featured in the 1937 Nazi exhibit,
Webster provides a helpful and succinct analysis of how Schwitters was able to reconcile Constructivist political goals with his own aesthetic ones:

Where the Dadaists had been negative, they [the Constructivists] were glowingly and convincingly positive. Merz was in need of refuelling, and inevitably Kurt was injected with something of their burning zeal and their sense of responsibility towards society. Although he often pontificated on the importance of the impartiality of the artist, he could never reconcile himself to an art which had no social aims. With his strong streak of idealism, he found the Constructivists’ principles irresistible. They were international in outlook, strove for a better world, dismissed superficialities and ignored their own needs in the quest for a new order. They valued the group rather than the individual, emphasized the role of communication and did not forget the common man. The fact that they could seldom agree among themselves suited Kurt nicely. It meant that there was sufficient leeway in the movement to acknowledge the work of an outsider like himself.13

The Constructivists’ internationalism was one of their most attractive qualities for Schwitters, and the flexibility that he found there likely had the same appeal as that he experienced among the Dadas. For while he and Huelsenbeck never saw eye to eye, he did have many friends among them, and many admired his Merz works.14 Additionally, he published many Dada works and writings in his Merz magazine, including some by Picabia, Tzara, and Arp, and others such as Constructivists and De Stijl artists van Doesburg, Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitsky, Mondrian, and Tatlin. He traveled broadly and often around Europe, drinking in others’ ideas while generously

12. Discussion of the ironic demise of Das Merzbild is ubiquitous in Schwitters studies. The question marks in the description of this picture in Schwitters’ catalogue raisonné are poignant reminders that no one had anticipated the destiny of this work of art, and so no more conscientious list is available of the materials out of which it had been constructed, or of its dimensions. Karin Orchard and Isabel Schulz, eds., Kurt Schwitters Catalogue raisonné 1, 1905–1922 (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 501.

13. Ibid., 126–27.

14. It has already been noted in the last chapter that he was close to Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann. He also counted among his friends Hans Richter, Hans Arp, Sophie Taueber, and Max Ernst.
pouring out his own. He lectured tirelessly, and affectionate accounts abound of his visits with other artists. Webster notes that, “Apart from those of the Berlin Dada group who disliked Merz and its creator on principle, it is difficult to find any contemporary artist who did not express affection and admiration for Schwitters. He had an ability to get on with everyone.”

Beginning around 1925, Schwitters became more politically outspoken, and this is particularly reflected in his fairy tales. However, he still firmly believed that there could be no such thing as national art, and was fervently against nationalism. He claimed that “Nations result in wars. The point of ‘national art’ is to intensify the solidarity of people who call themselves a nation. National art helps to prepare for war.” He also said, “‘As an abstract artist I stand aside from social and political events, but I am more a part of my time than any politician.’” Schwitters’ refusal to be pulled into one or another political arena left him free to observe more objectively what was going on around him. He would not be blinded by any kind of myopic rhetoric.

This attitude creates an interesting contrast to the nationalism that was inherent at the Bauhaus. Schwitters had heavy associations with the Bauhaus, especially because of its early Expressionist tendencies, Constructivist ideology, and the interest there in blending fine and applied arts. He had become friendly with Theo and Nelly van Doesburg when the couple moved to Berlin in the hopes of Theo

15. Webster, Kurt Merz Schwitters, 73.
16. Ibid., 172.
obtaining a position at the Bauhaus. When that didn’t happen, Theo began teaching his own De Stijl art theory, which eventually would have a strong influence on the Bauhaus. Schwitters and the van Doesburgs collaborated on many projects; with Theo, especially those involving innovations in typography. They all traveled together often, including a memorable trip to Holland that Schwitters commemorated in the first number of his *Merz* magazine. They would conduct Dada evenings, consisting of musical and poetry performances and art displays. Webster elucidates the political connotations of these events, and the quote by Schwitters demonstrates that he was not unaware of them. His reference to the 1923 Holland trip as a “campaign” is especially telling:

“Our appearance in Holland was like a huge, outrageous victory parade. At the same time as the French were occupying the Ruhr with guns and tanks, we were occupying the art world of Holland with Dada. The papers wrote lengthy articles on Dada and short accounts of the Ruhr and reparations. While the French encountered enormous resistance in the Ruhr, Dada encountered none in Holland. . . .”

The campaign, as Kurt insisted on calling it, held another elusive relevance to current events. Holland-Dada evenings were a mirror image of the orchestrated mass meetings that Hitler had been holding in south Germany since 1920. In crass contrast to Nelly’s *Military March for Ants*, Hitler’s standard programme opened with the rousing strains of a brass band . . . While the Dadaists incited their audiences to loosen their mental shackles, Adolf Hitler was bent on mesmerizing his public into mindless, blind conformity.

18. As much as he appreciated what the Bauhaus had to offer, Schwitters was also attracted to the objectivity and discipline of the De Stijl school. Ultimately, though, he rejected the style after experimenting with “strictly rectilinear” compositions. Schmalenbach suggests that such rigid formalism was too limiting for Schwitters, writing, “Schwitters whole and entire is not to be found in these compositions. To him of all people, specialist in used materials that he was, such relentless sobriety of color, form, and manner must in the long run have been alien and, quite simply, boring.” Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, 143–44. Schwitters himself had this to say: “I recall the extraordinary influence the Stijl artists had in Germany, especially on the Bauhaus. Merz falls somewhere between, attempts a mediation, seeks so far as possible to preserve artistic creation within the universal style.” Schwitters, qtd. in Schmalenbach, 144. Originally in *Merz* 6, *Imitatoren watch step!* (October 1923).

19. Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters*, 133; quote is by Schwitters, from the first issue of his *Merz* magazine.
Schwitters made it his business to travel with a large variety of materials, to keep things handy should he be suddenly inspired to Merz something, often to the irritation of his fellow travelers. This is supported in stories by people like Hausmann, Richter, and Werner Graeff, a Bauhaus student with whom Schwitters traveled from Weimar to Jena for a “conference” which turned into a late Dada performance in 1923. Graeff relates a funny story about the sheer volume of stuff—everything from photographs to bits of wastepaper to rolls of chicken wire—that Schwitters insisted carrying on the brief journey because “you never know if you won’t need the stuff all of a sudden.” This was also demonstrated in a wonderful anecdote Richter shares in his memoir, Dada: Art and Anti-Art. Schwitters and his wife, Helma, had gone on a trip with Hausmann and Höch, and the two couples were briefly separated while looking for lodgings. Hausmann recalls:

We came back. Under an apple-green evening sky, against a high black embankment, burned a single feeble street-light. There stood a statue; it was a woman with her arms stretched out in front of her and draped with shirts and underclothes. She stood there like Lot’s pillar of salt, while on the ground knelt a man, surrounded by shoes and articles of clothing, before him a suitcase full of papers, like the intestines of a slaughtered animal.

He was doing something to a piece of cardboard with scissors and a tube of adhesive. The two people were Kurt and Helma Schwitters. The picture is one I shall never forget: these two figures in the great dark Nothingness, totally absorbed in themselves.

As I approached I asked, “Kurt, what are you doing?”

Kurt looked up and replied, “It occurred to me that collage 30 B 1 needs a little piece of blue paper in the lower left-hand corner. I shan’t be a moment.”

20. Webster, Kurt Merz Schwitters, 125.

Clearly, he worked hard to stay ready should inspiration come. He was obviously always in creative mode, and so needed his myriad materials at hand. Merz, among its many other qualities, is portable—albeit cumbersome—art.

Schwitters once observed that “No age knows itself well enough to recognize what is of lasting value in it.” Although this statement can be perceived as very general, it speaks quite well to his use of discarded materials in his works, whether he chose to reuse bus tickets, pram wheels, or phrases tossed casually about in conversations overheard. These throw-away items might be useless to those who are through with them, but they can have value to those who come upon them later on. Merz art reinforces Schwitters’ philosophy, and indeed, it often appears (at least after 1918 or so, and increasingly thereafter) that Schwitters’ embrace of the idea of the gesamtkunstwerk involved not only a post-modern attitude toward art in general (that is, a rejection of the boundaries between art forms), but, again, toward an entire life philosophy.

The idea that breaks with conventional aesthetic form can have profound political implications is illustrated in the following passage by Stefan Themerson from his fascinating essay, "Kurt Schwitters on a time-chart," and it is worth quoting at length:

To us, today, it may perhaps seem that the act . . . of making a picture by putting together two or three innocent objects, such as: A Railway Ticket & A Flower & A bit of Wood, is an innocent aesthetic affair. Well, it is not so at all: Tickets belong to Railway Companies (or to the State), Flowers to Gardeners, Bits of Wood to Timber Merchants. If you mix these things you are making havoc of the Classification System on which the Regime is

established; you are carrying people’s minds away from the Customary Modes of Thought, and people’s Customary Modes of thought are the very Foundation of Order . . . and, therefore, if you meddle with the Customary Modes of Thought, then . . . you are (whether you want it or not) in the very bowels of Political Changes. Whether he wanted it or not, whether he knew it or not, Kurt Schwitters was in the very bowels of Political Changes. Adolf Hitler knew it. He knew that putting two innocent things together is not an innocent aesthetic affair. And that was why Kurt Schwitters was thrown out of Germany. 23

Themerson’s time-chart/essay demonstrates in a creative fashion (that doubtless would have delighted Schwitters) something that is true not only of Schwitters’ body of work, 24 but also that of Höch and Heartfield and any other of the avant-garde artists in the post-World War I era who created art using non-traditional materials. Such an act at that time was inherently transgressive, regardless of the content of the work.

Tristan Tzara, a friend to Schwitters and one of the signatories of Schwitters’ “Proletarian Art Manifesto” 25 quoted in the epigraph of this chapter, had this to say about collage: “Papier collé, in all its different aspects, marks in the evolution of painting the most poetic moment, the most revolutionary, the touching flight toward the most viable hypotheses, a greater intimacy with daily truths, the insurmountable

23. Stefan Themerson, "Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart," Typographica 16 (December 1967): 30. Emphasis in the original. See Appendix D for the majority of this essay, which is an illuminating analysis of the political aspects of Schwitters’ work. Although the chart itself has not been reproduced, most of the text has been made available, and Themerson presents a convincing argument that Schwitters’ work was unavoidably and deliberately political—just not concerning . . . politics.

24. Excepting his painting. Schwitters’ landscapes and formal portraits are quite traditional, in a German Romantic or even Expressionist way. He was never in trouble for those kinds of works. It was his “abstractions,” as he called them, his collages, photomontages, and assemblages, that caused all the trouble with the Nazis and that resulted in his work being declared “degenerate.”

25. The others were Theo van Doesburg, Hans Arp, and Christoph Spengemann.
affirmation of the temporary, and of temporal themes, the supremacy of the idea.”

Tzara himself was a poet, and he understood Schwitters quite well. Collage, as well as the closely related practice of assemblage, was the perfect medium for someone like Schwitters, who believed so strongly in freedom when it came to art-making. In fact, he wrote, “Merz stands for freedom from all fetters, for the sake of artistic creation. Freedom is not a lack of restraint, but the product of strict artistic discipline . . . Every artist must be allowed to mold a picture out of nothing but blotting paper for example, provided he is capable of molding a picture.”

Collage provided the perfect working space for Schwitters, who was deeply interested in eliminating the line between high and low art, as Donald Kuspit explains:

In collage we find abstract elements [that is, color and line understood as the “primary artistic constituents”] as material fragments—elements of a code of abstractions that no longer perform the abstractive function but exist as entities in their own right. These fragments of art have equal status with fragments of life in the collage; they are as concrete, for the purposes of becoming, as life. They have no privileged position in the process of artistic becoming, just as the fragments of life (the traditional art model) do not constitute a privileged source or root of art. . . . The collage replaces privilege with equivalence, definitions of artistic being with deconstructions of artistic becoming, unity with energy. The field of the work of art reveals itself more as determined by subjective work than as determined by a preconception of art as a certain kind of object, whether life-referencing or self-reflexive.


The “fragments of life” for Schwitters consist of bus tickets, labels, broken toys, etc., that rest side-by-side with the daubs of paint and drawn lines, all equally valued participants in the art of collage. Schwitters’ democratic practice of treating these elements as equals within his pictures also demonstrates his “impatience with the line that separated art from life.”

Kuspit describes the role of the collage artist as the person responsible for choosing each fragment, arguing that the seemingly random arrangement of them “forces us to turn from the fragments to the attention that selected them, individuality they acquire by being brought together by a particular kind of attention. . . . Why they might be stimulating depends on that attention and individuality.” The materials that make up the collage ordinarily have nothing to do with each other in their original contexts. They are pieces of things taken from other “wholes” and combined to make a new whole, whose meaning is derived based on the choices the artist made. The fragments are newly relative to one another specifically because an individual reconceived them that way. When considering a collage, then, one is naturally inclined to think about the conscious choices made by the artist, why he or she decided to use specific pieces in specific ways. As has been discussed, this can be reflected in both aesthetic and political choices.

Kuspit goes on to analyze the tension between objectivity and subjectivity in collage. The subjectivity in question is that of the artist, who in choosing fragments of objects attempts to set aside all sense of his or her own subjective understanding or

“prehension” of those objects in order to “apprehend” them in an entirely fresh way, devoid of preconceived notions. Kuspit explains, “Objectivity is no longer a categorical imperative, but can be creatively conceived.” In light of this, it is at once necessary to understand Schwitters the man and Schwitters the artist in order to understand what he was about in his work. He writes of making abstractions, and this notion of freedom of choice is very much a part of the process. He wanted to use materials based on purely instinctive choosing, not choosing burdened by didacticism or fraught associations. At least, this is arguable for much of his work. At the same time, the repeated use of Anna Blume—either the words or some image that is supposed to represent her—and the assembling of objects which are not completely divested of their more traditional meaning (such as those used in his Construction for Noble Ladies) do not fall within this mindset. (Figure 3.2) Still, Schwitters was always free to choose between making more literal or more abstract works. He didn’t seem to be hemmed in by any single set of ideals, which explains his choosing to paint portraits for money, and landscapes in order to replenish his soul.

Schwitters repeatedly articulated his rejection of art used for political purposes; his concerns were almost without fail focused on aesthetics and creative freedom. Of course, to choose not to be political is still a political choice, and Schwitters’ choice was especially risky, not only because of his rejection of Nazism, but because of the kinds of art Nazis preferred—that is, didactic and nationalistic. To choose creative freedom speaks volumes in that environment. His refusal to compromise, to incorporate anything overtly political into his work, also kept him separate from the

Dadas he so admired and promoted, but this didn’t stop him, either. In this way Schwitters was very much like Nietzsche’s *Ubermensch*—he followed his own path.\(^{32}\) Although it is unclear how much he read of Nietzsche’s work, Schwitters was familiar with the idea of creation through destruction, even taking it quite literally, destroying the old meanings of his materials before using them to create new art.

In choosing his collage and assemblage materials, it was usually the formal aspects of the old that were most important—not what they were originally made for, but their very materiality. At the same time, not only were these ready-made materials, but they had certain values already attached—that at one time these things were important enough to require the effort to make them. Importantly, Schwitters was not using them as signifiers in the way that Picasso and Braque were. For example, in a picture by Schwitters, a bit of newspaper was not there to represent a newspaper, but worked instead to add texture or pattern as a complement to the other forms in the assemblage.\(^ {33}\) What is old, then, needn’t be completely lost, but can instead be remade, re-created. Old materials, like old ideas, have value already attached and that understanding, that it was once considered important and had a function, also carries forward. Each of the parts that make up the whole of his collages, photomontages, and assemblages has the potential to resonate with those who encounter them, so that each person’s experience of the art is different. Additionally, as time passes the ideas and priorities originally attached to these

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32. Nietzsche’s ideas were definitely being discussed among the Dadas, and given his curious nature and prodigious interest in new ideas, it is safe to believe that Schwitters was aware of Nietzsche’s theories on art.

33. That said, sometimes the words, numbers, or images printed on the paper do function as signifiers. Still, that is quite rare, as Schwitters did not typically resort to that kind of realism to make a point.
various components change or are lost, symbolic meanings fall away, and so the meaning(s) in these works alter. What is important is that these ideas existed in the first place. Whatever else they may be, Schwitters' works are a testament to the mutability of the human spirit and experience.

Kuspit appears to be writing specifically about Schwitters when he says,

Collage makes poetry with the prosaic fragments of dailiness. The poetry is a matter not just of recognizing the legitimacy of choosing one's own context of life from the universal dailiness and thereby in some sense escaping it, but of not getting locked into or trapped by this context. . . . The essential playfulness of the collage is a direct acknowledgment of the relativity of individuality in the world, as well as a way of expanding that world to include it, and of expanding individuality to include the world.34

This last sentence is particularly relevant to Schwitters' love of traveling and his (as well as the Dadas') rejection of extreme nationalism and embrace of transnationalism. It also is in keeping with the fact that Schwitters remained essentially himself, with the same artistic and personal goals, regardless of his location—or dislocation.

By the end of World War I, Germany was lacking a sense of unity, a sense of itself as a whole entity, a problem that had plagued the country for generations. This is simply part of its history, and naturally Schwitters was aware of it. One of the reasons the Dadas were so agitated was because of their awareness of the inequalities and skewed priorities of culture in general, not just in Germany but everywhere. They had no tolerance for corruption, and pointed it out and skewered it mercilessly at every turn. But Schwitters was not without mercy. He saw the absurdity of the situation (in Germany and beyond, since he traveled so much), and parodied it without irony. This is particularly noticeable in his fairy tales. He wrote what he saw,

how he perceived what was going on around him—not as fantasy but as reality. His
dismay was real. He illustrated it, and forced his audience to confront the situation.
But again, that is in his writing. Such overt political criticism in his stories and essays
makes his collages and assemblages appear even more utopian, then. For within each
frame he brought together elements from every part of culture, giving them—those
pieces—equal parity within his own constructed borders. To him, it could be done.

Stephen C. Foster’s essay, "Merz: A Transactional Model for Culture,”
emphasizes the objective nature of Schwitters works, writing,

Schwitters was attentive to concepts of culture per se, as were few artists in his
period. Rarely prescriptive, Schwitters was interested in locating the causes
rather than the symptoms of cultural deterioration and dysfunctions. . . .
Schwitters’s importance lay in his profoundly innovative use of art as an
instrument for examining and analyzing the very facts of "culture” and
“culturing.” “Culture” became the content of his work, and “culturing” became
the means of formally achieving it.35

Foster continues, discussing Schwitters’ interest in “establishing parity” in social
structure and cultural constructs, arguing that “The ‘completeness,’ ‘wholeness,’ or
‘totality’ of Schwitters’s work is to be sought in his attempt to provide a single
structure for winning such a parity, not merely in the work’s aesthetic or stylistic
integrity.”36 Clearly then, Schwitters was political, but this isn’t the most important
point being made here. Schwitters’ interest in “establishing parity” by comingling
elements of high art (oil paint, for example) with rubbish or kitsch in order to at least

35. Stephen C. Foster, “Merz: A Transactional Model for Culture,” in Stephen C. Foster, ed. Crisis and
the Arts: The History of Dada, Volume 3, Dada: Cologne Hanover, (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1997),
103.

36. Ibid., 104.
metaphorically bring all parts of German culture together as equal parts of the whole makes a profoundly political statement.

According to Foster, then, it is a mistake to consider Schwitters’ works strictly as formal objects. They are much more than the products of making for making’s sake. They have deeper meanings not only for art, but for culture. It is important to remember how much Schwitters was a part of wherever he was. He immersed himself in everything, and regardless of where he was, he was determined to join together objects, textures, ideas, that did not always rest comfortably near each other—but could.

In his “Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart,” Themerson recalls a discussion that occurred after he asked students at Cambridge University, “‘Do you think that this renewed interest [in 1967] in dada and Schwitters means that there is a similarity between the sixties and the twenties? They challenged the problems of their time, do you think their methods can serve you for challenging the problems of your time?, and what are those?, and do you want to challenge them?’”37 The students answered that although anti-art and personal protest in the art arena are “‘finished,’” Schwitters’ art has endured better than collage by other Dadas because his agenda was aesthetic as well as political; “‘he shows love and respect for materials where they show ONLY protest.’” The students stressed “‘his extremely personal choice of materials.’”38 Perhaps this is why there is some misunderstanding about Schwitters’ collages and assemblages today. Since they are no longer viewed within their original context, they are

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38. Ibid.
appreciated much more for the aesthetic qualities—on which he never compromised—than for their potentially more complex meaning. His work is beautiful in its formal organization and also in the boldness inherent in its originality. That originality forced artists and others to reconsider what had potential as art-making material, so it was revolutionary in artistic circles, too. Still, as Themerson so eloquently points out, it also had heavy political overtones because of the unexpected juxtapositions of myriad types of materials.

The question is, was that intentional? But even if it was, or if instead it was more subconscious, what difference does it make? This kind of meaning can still be read into it, even though what has endured is the aesthetic quality. The art stands as art even without the political connotations, and this is meaningful because it demonstrates that while art can be both aesthetic and political, it needn’t be both, and indeed, too heavy an emphasis on politics (for example—but any agenda might do) risks turning art eventually to ephemera. This in turn forces one to question the very nature of art in the first place: how it functions, or should function. Schwitters’ art can never, then, become unimportant or passé to art historians or students of art (at least), because it still forces one to question what art is for in the first place. Themerson sums up all of this quite neatly: “It seems that those works of art, by many artists, in which the fact of their being an aesthetic achievement overpowered the fact of their being an event, survived the time-corrosion better.”

Let us return for a moment to the question of the intentionality of Schwitters’ arrangements. Foster consistently makes such claims as, “Schwitters was not in-

39. Ibid.
terested in a monolithic kind of reality, but rather a unified means of perceiving and achieving realities,”

or, “Schwitters’s rejection of his period rested on his conviction that what was generally accepted as knowledge (in the arts and elsewhere) was socially based and that decisions about what was acceptable or unacceptable as knowledge were made according to the exigencies and conveniences of reigning sociopolitical ‘interests.’” It is not that Foster is espousing anything that appears inconsistent with what scholars have been writing about Schwitters for years, but that he frequently writes as though he is absolutely certain what Schwitters’ intentions were. This raises the question of whether it even matters if this is what Schwitters was thinking. At the risk of oversimplifying the issue, it is difficult to avoid asking—can anyone really know anything like that for certain? And does it matter?

What matters more is that in contemplating Schwitters’ works now, it is possible to pull these kinds of ideas from them, regardless of whether it was what Schwitters had intended. Indeed, Foster is criticizing other scholars who have claimed to know Schwitters’ motivations and beliefs, arguing that they have completely misread or underestimated what Schwitters was really trying to intimate. Granted, Foster does refer to his own ideas as a thesis, but that only reinforces my point. In the end it is still impossible to know what is the “correct” interpretation. What is most significant is that people still try. The sad truth is, whatever Schwitters intended is second in importance to what scholars today find in his work. And given the kinds of ideas Schwitters expressed regarding the future impact of his work, it is demonstrable


41. Ibid.
that he knew this.\textsuperscript{42} This speaks to the continuing vitality of his art, and to the distinction between good art and great art. Great art continues to stimulate, not simply to mark a time and place—a single event.

Coming back to “event” art now, Themerson argues that it is specifically because Schwitters’ art is not event-oriented, or perhaps dependent or bent on emphasizing or marking events, that it has withstood the test of time that has dated other Dada art. But Foster writes about “event art” in an entirely different way—at least concerning Schwitters. He argues that the event which concerns Schwitters is not the rebuilding of a unified Germany or of remaking the idea of art, but the restructuring of culture itself. Again, not just German culture, but all of the factors of culture, a kind of reorganizing that would make every component of culture equally valuable. Foster’s reading of Schwitters’ work—the written and the plastic—is that “Schwitters was more interested in establishing, unprescriptively (hence his disapproval of expression in art), a uniform basis for the perception and cognition of all levels of culture.”\textsuperscript{43} He continues,

\begin{quote}
    it is worth emphasizing that when Schwitters claimed that forming was all-important, he was not, as is too often maintained, offering justification for a “process”-oriented art. . . . The overriding purpose of Schwitters’s art was the establishment of operational “cognitive languages” for negotiating culture. Finding their common stock in the nature of structure (or structure in nature),
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} Schmalenbach asserts that “Schwitters set out by no means to revolutionize art, only to enrich it by opening up new ranges of possibility. ‘When, along with pictures painted entirely with oil paint, I also produced these Merz-pictures, I did not . . . intend to demonstrate that from now own pictures could only be made out of junk; in them I merely made exclusive use of materials which other artists, such as Picasso, had employed only in conjunction with other materials. . . . Now, if I have been successful with these compositions. . . . I believe I have somewhat enlarged the domain of art, without thereby endangering the standing of great works of art in any age.’” Schmalenbach, \textit{Kurt Schwitters}, 96. Schwitters quote is from an unpublished “Merz” document, 1926.

\textsuperscript{43} Stephen C. Foster, “Merz: A Transactional Model for Culture,” in \textit{Crisis and the Arts}, 104.
they were, at one and the same time, capable of particularity and universality.⁴⁴

It wasn’t just about the act of making, then, but about taking action of any kind. Foster writes, “The ‘completeness,’ ‘wholeness,’ or ‘totality’ of Schwitters’s work is to be sought in his attempt to provide a single structure for winning . . . parity [between cultural constructs], not merely in the work’s aesthetic or stylistic integrity.”⁴⁵ The event, then, is not specific to the 1910s and ’20s, but is the tackling of the “problem” of culture altogether. Foster argues that Schwitters was attempting to create a “structure for cultural cognition and an unbroken logic and its realization from level to level of culture,” and that “it is Schwitters’s works that constitute the ‘transactions’ of these situations.”⁴⁶ So saying that Schwitters’ work is about process, about doing, suggests that it is not strictly about making art, but about making changes, creating not a work of art per se, but a work of life, a way of integrating all of the aspects of culture into a whole in which each component is just as valuable as any other.

Dorothea Dietrich takes on this subject as well:

As Schwitters’s deconstruction of an accepted grammar also disrupts common viewing or reading habits, the consumer of the Merz work of art is meant to become an active participant in the (re)construction of meaning. As Schwitters put it: “Decide for yourself where the poem stops and the frame begins.” Redemption thus functions on several different planes: of the material itself (as a manifestation of the anti-materialism typical of expressionist and certain postexpressionist art that still adhered to the tenets of Lebensphilosophie), and of the creator (both the artist and reader/spectator) who

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⁴⁴. Ibid., 104–105.

⁴⁵. Ibid.

⁴⁶. Ibid., 105.
initiates the processes of Entformung [dissociation] (and Formung) each time anew in the deciphering of the text.\textsuperscript{47}

This goes to the point brought up a moment ago about who decides what Schwitters’ work means. We have it in his own words that he expected (or hoped) that each person would make anew whatever meaning could be derived in his work. Everyone, regardless of background, was/is free to experience what is before him or her in his or her own way. Again, this is why his work continues to resonate, for Schwitters really did want to make art for the public, for anyone, which was part of his culture-repairing? -rewriting? -redemption? process.

Dietrich gives a poignant reading of Bild mit Raumgewächsen/Bild mit zwei kleinen Hunden (Picture with Spatial Growth/Picture with Two Small Dogs), 1920/1939. (Figure 3.3) Schwitters first worked on it in 1920, and then had Helma send it to him in Lysaker, Norway, after he had moved there in 1939 to escape from Nazi persecution.\textsuperscript{48} There he revisited the collage and changed it. Although it is difficult to see exactly what changes he made because we don’t know what it looked like before the reworking (this is according to both Dietrich and (according to her) John Elderfield), the end result is still moving.

From the perspective of Schwitters’s emulation of the concepts of Lebensphilosophie, . . . transformation and growth [are] now the primary concerns. Not only does Schwitters think of artistic creation as an ongoing process without a clear beginning and end, but the very design of the assemblage itself and the materials incorporated into this composition highlight notions of trace,


\textsuperscript{48} Their son, Ernst, accompanied his father. Ernst was seventeen at the time, and was fleeing induction into the Hitler Youth.
subjectivity, and memory, in short, of Erlebnis (experience). . . . In this work, Schwitters leads the viewer from evocative allusions to desire . . . along a trajectory that ends in an explosive dispersal of papers in the upper left.\textsuperscript{49}

This work evokes a feeling of loneliness and homesickness. He misses Helma. Whatever else one might say about Schwitters’ art—his aesthetics, politics, transnationalism, Dada mentality, etc.—it is clear that he also put himself in his work. He does demonstrate Lebensphilosophie. But the work is not merely autobiographical, nor is it self-indulgent. Although it is rife with Erlebnis of the most personal nature, it is also a serious picture, serious as a demonstration of Schwitters’ philosophy about art-making in general, in which

themes of destruction and construction are enacted throughout in each separate pictorial event . . . [and] in which growth is not merely seen as a physiological phenomenon, but as a process of unfolding that builds on the sediment of past activities, places visited, people met, and books read. . . . Schwitters’s strong composition emphasizes the formal properties of design, yet beneath the visual geometry, he deposited private memories and desires.\textsuperscript{50}

Dietrich then goes on to provide Schwitters’ own words about what he was striving to accomplish with Merz: “‘Merz means the creation of connection, preferably between all things in the world.’” And “‘The goal of Merz is to level differences and to set new emphases.’”\textsuperscript{51} Both of these quotes apply to his artwork, but they also apply to his Weltanschauung (world view).

Dietrich’s close reading of this particular work emphasizes the flexible nature of Schwitters’ art-making practice, and reinforces stories told by friends about his

\textsuperscript{49} Dietrich, “Merz and the Longing for Wholeness,” 123–25.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 125. The first quote is taken from Lach, “Merz” (1924), in Schwitters: Das literarische Werk 5:187; the second from Lach, “Die Bedeutung des Merzgedankens in der Welt” (1923), ibid., 5:134. Translations by Dietrich.
willingness to interrupt whatever else might be going on in order to work on something whenever and wherever inspiration struck. Even the nature of his own custom-made glue is relevant: he designed it himself to have a long drying-time so that he could move the items in his collages and assemblages around for quite a while.\textsuperscript{52} Kitsch also makes an appearance in some of his works, and Dietrich asserts that,

Schwitters’s use of kitsch objects, as well as feathers, twigs, flowers, and other tokens of the natural world, together with his desire to establish unexpected connections between unrelated things, can now be seen as an attempt to create a particular response in the viewer. Schwitters hopes that Merz will create a brief disequilibrium, sufficiently sustained to promote a change in the dominant mode of perception and to inject a sense of wonder into the relation to the object world, but will ultimately lead to a new equilibrium.\textsuperscript{53}

A utopian romantic he may have been, yet his work never descends to sentimentality; his materials are too prosaic for that, and that is the key, what saves him from being a forgettable, self-indulgent artist. He used the ordinary, the dirty, the rejected bits of society—or those “low-brow” kitschy items, and in so doing continues to demonstrate that anything can be transformed. Schwitters was very much a man of his time, well-informed about the most current trends in philosophy and art-making. He developed and maintained friendships with many of the most active thinkers and artists of his time, absorbed their ideas and blended them with his own, and was able to create in an entirely original way. He embodied synthesis. Nothing is permanent; all is in a state of flux. Much like existentialism, these ideas are at once terrifying and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Dietrich, “Merz and the Longing for Wholeness,” in Foster, ed. \textit{Crisis and the Arts}, 124.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 126–27.
\end{itemize}
full of possibility, which is precisely the effect of much of Schwitters’ abstract works, and precisely why he was so dangerous to the Nazi regime.
Figure 3.1  Kurt Schwitters, *Das Merzbild*, 1919, oil, paper, wire grating, barbed wire(?), cord and metal on wood (?), nailed, dimensions unknown

Figure 3.2  Kurt Schwitters, *Merz 39 Russbild* (Russian Picture), 1920, cut-and-pasted colored and printed papers, and cardstock with pencil on colored paper with cardstock border (12 3/4" x 9 1/2")
Figure 3.3  Kurt Schwitters, *Merz Er (Mz He)*, 1922, paper on paper (12" x 9"")

Figure 3.4  Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild 10: A Konstruktion für Edle Frauen* (Merzpicture 10: A Construction for Noble Ladies), 1919, wood, metal, tin funnel, leather, cork, paper, oil, and gouache on paper on wood (39 3/4" x 32 7/8"
Figure 3.5 Kurt Schwitters, *Bild mit Raumgewachsen/Bild mit zwei kleinen Hunden* (Picture with Spatial Growth/Picture with Two Small Dogs), 1920 and 1939, oil, paper, cardboard, wood, ceramic and metal on cardboard, hair, and other materials nailed on wood (38.2” x 27.2”)

CHAPTER FOUR

MARTHA ROSLER: UNMASKING THE TRUTH

When photography has . . . emancipated itself from physiognomic, political, scientific interests—that is when it becomes “creative. . . .” The “creative” principle in photography is its surrender to fashion. Its motto: the world is beautiful. In it is unmasked photography, which raises every tin can into the realm of the All but cannot grasp any of the human connections that it enters into, and which, even in its most dreamy subject, is more a function of its merchandisability than of its discovery. Because, however, the true face of this photographic creativity is advertising or association; therefore its correct opposite is unmasking or construction. For the situation, Brecht says, is complicated by the fact that less than ever does a simple reproduction of reality express something about reality.

“Walter Benjamin, “Short History of Photography”"n

Benjamin wrote this essay in 1931, more than thirty years before Martha Rosler would begin her “Bringing the War Home” series of photomontages (1967–1972, and 2003–2008), so it might seem natural that he would be suspicious of photography used for artistic rather than practical purposes. However, he wrote this after Dada artists such as Höch and Heartfield had been making photomontage works for about a decade. In fact, Benjamin actually quotes Tristan Tzara on the same page from which this epigraph was taken, so he was clearly aware of their work at that time. Höch and Heartfield used photographs in their montages in much the way that Benjamin would later approve: they did not rely on the photographs to depict reality, but rather cut them up and combined them in new creations that dared to depict a new “truth.”


2. “‘When everything that called itself art grew palsied, that photographer ignited his thousand-candle-power lamp and step by step the light sensitive paper absorbed the blackness of a few useful objects. He discovered the carrying power of a tender delicate untouched flash, which was more important than all the constellations given us to soothe our sight.’” Tristan Tzara, 1922, qtd. in ibid.
In the essay cited above, Benjamin reiterates Brecht’s observation about the inability of a photograph to reproduce reality, and Rosler references that same observation in her 2004 essay, “Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations: Some Considerations:”

If we want to call up hopeful or positive uses of manipulated images, we must choose images in which manipulation is itself apparent, and not just as a form of artistic reflexivity but as a way to make a larger point about the truth value of photographs and the illusionistic elements in the surface of (and even the definition of) “reality.” I don’t mean a generalized or universal point alone, but ones about particular, concrete situations and events. . . . Here we must make the requisite bow to Brecht’s remark about the photo of the exterior of the Krupp works not attesting to the conditions of slavery within. 3

With this in mind, Rosler has made a number of photomontages over the course of her career, usually in series, that incorporate mass-produced photographs altered and recombined in order to represent social truths and generate political awareness.

As has already been discussed in the preceding chapters, photomontage is particularly suitable for creating political art because rather than being primarily concerned with such matters as materials, styles, and techniques, viewers “are more likely to relate the image back to the events that are shown.” 4 That is, the narrative remains the focus, and the clues as to what the arrangement of the components means are right before one’s eyes. Each individual element has its own set of meanings already attached, and so viewers are at first glance met with a collection of images with which they are likely already familiar, though in another context, such as illustrations or advertisements from magazines or newspapers. It is interesting to note


that, as was discussed in Chapter Three, Schwitters worked more in collage and assemblage than in the purer photomontage of Höch and Heartfield, and thereby endeavored to keep his works apolitical.5 He also strove to divest his materials of their original associations in order that they be received as formal elements.

Although Rosler uses the same kinds of source materials as her predecessors, the pictures in the “Bringing the War Home” series look quite different from theirs. They do not have the “close-up” effect of Heartfield’s, the whimsy or surrealistic fantasy of Höch’s, nor are they concerned with aesthetic arrangement in the same way as Schwitters’. At the same time, however, they are blatantly political in the same way as Heartfield’s. And she allows her edges to show in order to remind viewers that the images have been cut from mass-publications, although in a much subtler way than Höch, who also wanted her audience to know that hers were constructed images. Too, Rosler’s photomontages are set in specific contexts, depicting American involvement in the Vietnam War and in the recent wars in the Middle East, just as Heartfield’s works were unmistakably made between approximately 1920 and 1940. Rosler’s pictures have none of the abstract nature of those by Höch and Schwitters. Although “Bringing the War Home” does reference specific events, the real criticism in these works is directed at the connection between capitalism and imperialistic war.

Rosler’s pictures are also not as declamatory as Heartfield’s, or those by the other Berlin Dadas, for that matter. Her message is delivered more subtly, although

5. Schwitters did incorporate mass-produced images and quite a bit of printed text in his works, but they were never the primary focus. In the case of most of his works, he was more interested in the formal rather than narrative possibilities of these bits.
not to a degree that most people cannot decipher the connections in a reasonable amount of time. Because these connections are not obvious at first, however, this is not the kind of art one can cruise by casually.

Benjamin rightly observed one of the most powerful aspects of photomontage as a vehicle for political art when he remarked that “‘montage interrupts the context into which it is inserted.’”\(^6\) The effect is all the more jarring because of that interruption which, like a public service announcement, pulls the attention away from immediate concerns and toward those with broader implications. This is precisely how Rosler designs her pictures. She makes two primary decisions in order to do this most effectively: First she must choose her initial narrative, that which will be interrupted; and then she must decide what is worthy of being the interruptor. In “Bringing the War Home,” sometimes the narrative is set within a comfortable suburban home, the serenity and orderliness of which is then interrupted by the appearance of soldiers or casualties; sometimes the space is a battleground that is invaded by well-dressed “corporate soldiers” or middle-class housewives. (Figures 4.1–4.4)

In removing images from their original contexts and re-presenting them in her photomontages, Rosler frees the images from being tools for “advertising and association” (as dictated by the sources that originally published them) and employs them to “unmask” reality. She is highly critical of other artists who do not take full advantage of this kind of material in order to say something meaningful, however.

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taking issue with the lack of analysis or social criticism by artists who appropriate photographic imagery. According to Rosler, it is one thing to remove an image from its original context and insert it into a new one, but some analysis must happen as well; more needs to be said. There are also pitfalls to be avoided, as she later clarifies: “Appropriation sharply depends on context to provide the critical movement—generally . . . through irony. Appropriative strategies do not in principle exclude either analysis or synthesis . . . But replicating oppressive forms, whether by quoting them directly or through the fashioning of simulacra, may replicate oppressiveness.”

It is that new frame that contextualizes the image in its new environment and at the same time reminds the viewer of where it originated in the first place. Such irony is not enough, though. The quoted material must appear jarring in its new surroundings, true, but there must be something else present that points to an aspect of the appropriated image that is new, or that encourages some reconsideration that approaches the newly created scene in a more thoughtful way. For example, in Rosler’s 1967 picture, Balloons (Figure 4.2), a photograph of a Vietnamese woman carrying a dead baby has been montaged upon a photograph of the interior of pristine suburban home. The woman’s mere presence in this space is disorienting, but even more important is the question of why it is disorienting. After all, she is a woman with a child, probably not unlike the resident of the home, which is of course part of what Rosler is implying. But some viewers, especially those seeing this image around the time that it was created, would likely have recognized this picture from Life magazine. They would know that not only is this not the woman’s house, but that she

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7. Ibid., 140.
is no longer even in her own country. Seeing her complete dislocation from home amplifies the anguish and confusion in her expression, which in turn (it is Rosler’s hope) amplifies feelings of compassion in the viewer. But still the purpose of this image is not fulfilled, for beyond empathizing with this woman’s tragedy the viewer is expected realize just how different this woman’s lived experience is from that of whoever owns the house. That point is brutally driven home when taking this work’s title into consideration. A cluster of balloons has been pasted in near the center of the picture, but in a space recognized as the furthest corner of the living room. They are not immediately apparent. Once they are noticed, though, the effect is devastating. Balloons, after all, are most often associated with celebrations, especially children’s birthday parties. The only child depicted in this picture, however, will not be celebrating any birthdays.

The seriousness of her intent is the major difference between what Rosler was doing with her appropriation of images in the “Bringing the War Home” series, and the more emblematic appropriation inherent in Pop art. Rosler has written and talked prodigiously about Pop art, and it is clear she appreciates its light-heartedness and doesn’t expect too much from it as a form of cultural criticism beyond its demonstration of artists’ understanding of art as commodity. At the same time, however, she rejects the idea that Pop was completely apolitical, regardless of practitioners who claimed otherwise. In a 2008 interview with Iwona Blazwick, Rosler remarked,
“Clearly Pop was about the nature of the world, and the social world that’s its subject, and therefore it could hardly refrain from being ‘political.’”

In that same interview, Rosler addressed her montage methodology, acknowledging its Dada roots, and then pointing directly to the influence of Max Ernst. When Blazwick observed that Rosler’s work is quite different from Dada collage, Rosler responded,

Yet, it’s a direct outgrowth of Dada—actually Surrealism; Max Ernst was my first model on this and a Californian artist named Jess who worked with what subsequently we would call clip art and made them into elaborate tableaux. What interested me about those practices, as opposed to the Dada photomontage . . . was the rational space—they weren’t flying off at all angles.

Like Rosler, Jess—a proto-Pop artist who began making a name for himself in 1950’s San Francisco—created works “about remaking the existing world into something richer and stranger.”


9. Ibid., 2–3.


Rosler also discussed her ambivalence about Pop art in an interview with Benjamin Buchloh, during which she recalled a conversation with her friend, the poet David Antin, regarding Pop art’s legitimacy:

I was asking, in effect, what about Oldenburg, Rosenquist, Warhol? David replied, abstract expressionism is dead—it’s played out, it’s boring; there’s nothing left. I asked myself over and over, how does an artist develop a style and how does an artist change that style—How can you ever stop doing one thing and start doing something entirely different? Antin’s reply brought home that not only do styles change but the entire paradigm changes. . . . It was like someone opening a door I didn’t know existed. . . . Although I continued to paint abstractions, pop pointed me toward direct use of mass-culture imagery, the things that had intrigued me in old magazines, cheap advertising, and so on. . . . collage was obviously the medium of the twentieth century.

Rosler began using the tools of Pop to make decidedly un-Pop works; her photomontages have none of the cool distance of Warhol’s soup cans and Brillo boxes. And although she is an admirer of Wesselmann’s work, hers is much more serious in intent, much more critical in its narrative. Still, her materials were gleaned from Life and House Beautiful (for the “Bringing the War Home” works), as well as other magazines and newspapers and, as already mentioned, she often creates works in series—seriality being another favored practice among Pop artists.11 As was mentioned at the end of Chapter One, Rosler also acknowledges the influence of Heartfield, too. It is easy enough to see his influence, but when asked by Buchloh why she cites American FSA photographers instead of Heartfield as more directly influential in her work, Rosler replied, “it seemed more important to work with indigenous or local traditions”:

The American left has always been divided about whether to love or hate the USA. The fact is that wholesale cultural import is cruel, dishonoring the work of people who came before you. I thought it was important to reclaim important but abandoned practices, to show that others had gone before. I was, after all, making an argument about a native tradition [she is referring here to her series, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems], not about Soviet or German prewar work.12

Still, in choosing photomontage for her political works Rosler is in good company. Alexander Alberro lists American and British Pop artists who also employed it, 11. In addition to the “Bringing the War Home” series, Rosler has created other series, such as the photographic study, The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems (1974–75), and Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain, a collection of photomontages she was working on during the same period as the Vietnam works. She is quick to point out that her primary influences for these kinds of work are documentary photographers such as Walker Evans and, perhaps especially, Hilla and Bernd Becher, rather than, for example, Ed Ruscha. She rejected the sentimentalizing aspects of work of the FSA photographers, and as already mentioned, the cooler detachment of Ruscha, preferring to create direct and unsentimental narratives. Rosler discusses all of this in considerable detail in her interview with Buchloh, op. cit.

12. Buchloh, 43–44.
notes several earlier practitioners already mentioned, and then goes on to describe what is unique about Rosler’s particular methodology, that in addition to “the sharp political critique. . . . Rosler’s principle of montage also required the creation of the illusion of a coherent new physical space, simplifying and rationalizing the images’ structure and lowering the emotional temperature from hot to cool.”

This reference to space points to the most effective aspect of “Bringing the War Home”: viewers are at once faced with two disparate but familiar sets of images combined in an uncomfortably realistic way. The resulting pictures are both realistic and surrealistic. In this series, Rosler wants the connection between “war” and “home” to be obvious, and so she avoids incorporating clues such as obviously skewed proportions that would remind her audience they are looking at images that have been crafted. In this regard they are quite different from Höch’s works, in which Höch deliberately left the cut edges exposed in order to bring attention to the fact that hers were collaged pictures. Careful scrutiny of Rosler’s montages reveals evidence that the pictures have been taken from print sources, and that is of course an important part of Rosler’s point—that these are images that have been broadly disseminated—but it is not paramount. And, again, although Heartfield’s influence is indisputable, Rosler’s works emphasize “place” as much as politics, which is of central significance for her and was not a factor at all (beyond the obvious references to Nazi Germany) for Heartfield. Heartfield was more concerned with emphasizing corrupt leadership and its consequences.

By the same token, Rosler takes issue with the distortion of facts that she perceives in the way the media deals with (or doesn’t) controversial social concerns, which echoes Benjamin’s and Brecht’s arguments regarding how reality is (mis)-represented in photographs. Silvia Eiblmayr discusses how this relates to “Bringing the War Home” (prior to the addition of the Gulf War pictures):

Rosler from her early works on has practiced a specific critique of the media, thereby undermining the documentary “truth” of photography. . . . By combining two different media genres . . . in the series “Bringing the War Home,” war photography and the photography of life-style journals, Rosler creates a “de-suturing” effect of sudden displacement, of a visual “error.” Formally speaking, she is not fabricating an “anti-pop” image but one that is very near, perhaps even too near, to the “normal” fiction of the media . . . Rosler not only reframes America’s dialectics of consciousness and denial (about the on-going war in Vietnam, violence, and sexuality); She [sic] also uses the image to reveal the implicated relations between life style and the art world.14

Although Rosler’s work is much more consistently political than one could accuse American Pop art of being, it still addresses issues of consumerism and art as commodity that interested Pop artists. But rather than celebrating the former and lampooning the latter, Rosler is heavily critical. Both Rosler and the Pop artists are also interested in Realism, although with different ends in mind. For artists such as Warhol and Wesselmann, for example, Realism involves the elevation of everyday consumer products as works of art. Rosler’s Realism, however, is closer to Social Realism as practiced by the FSA photographers15 and, given her sharp political edge,

14. Silvia Eiblmayr, “Martha Rosler’s Characters,” in ibid., 158. Regarding the “relations between life style and the art world,” Eiblmayr mentions Rosler’s House Beautiful (Giacometti), from “Bringing the War Home.” (Fig. 5)

15. Rosler’s relationship with the FSA photographers is complex and often seems contradictory, as is obvious in the different references to them throughout this chapter. She appreciated the specificity of their work, that they photographed “these” people in “this” place, providing important markers for
that of such Ashcan School artists as John Sloan, particularly his illustrations in the Socialist publication, *The Masses*. Rosler’s blended pictures of middle-class home interiors and documentary-style war photographs, with assiduously matched scale so these images sit side-by-side in entirely (optically) believable ways, results in effects so real as to be sur-real, creating a visual symmetry that allows engaged viewers to make the necessary connections between text and context.

Clearly, Rosler is at heart an activist. As a young artist in the sixties, she rejected the flat commercialism of Pop art in the belief that art can (although not necessarily must) function as an instrument to bring awareness to the public outside the usual art-world set. When she finished the Vietnam War portion of “Bringing the War Home” in 1972, she chose to disseminate the works through the “underground press,” believing that displaying them in a gallery or museum setting “verged on obscene.”16 She also often included slides of them when lecturing art students, arguing that “talking to artists in the process of defining a practice is critically important.”17

The original set of twenty photomontages in the series was created between 1967 and 1972, but they were not exhibited in an art gallery until 1991, coincident with the Persian Gulf War. Later, beginning in 2003–2004, Rosler added to the series, this time incorporating images from the wars with Iraq and Afghanistan, including photographs from the infamous incidents at Abu Ghraib prison. The same year that

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social circumstances in the 1930s and ’40s. What she takes exception to is the sometimes overly sentimental depiction of the poor, which she finds exploitative rather than objective.


17. Ibid.
she began work on the Iraq/Afghanistan photomontages, historian Howard Zinn, quoting Picasso, wrote, “Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.”\(^1\) Zinn then observed what is at the heart of Rosler’s work,\(^2\) and at the heart of many artists who incorporate photographs in their own work: “Art moves away from reality and invents something that may be ultimately more accurate about the world than what a photograph can depict.”\(^3\) Once again, one is reminded of Brecht and Benjamin. In his slim volume of essays, *Artists in Times of War*, Zinn argues that the rôle of the artist is to transcend patriotic rhetoric, “to think outside the boundaries of permissible thought and dare to say things that no one else will say.”\(^4\) Rosler joins a long history of artists who have dared to do just that, with Goya and Daumier as early examples.

Even before the more contemporary works were added to “Bringing the War Home,” the original set still remained quite relevant. As Wallis noted in his review of the 1991–92 exhibit at the Simon Watson Gallery in New York,

The figures [of American soldiers, Vietnamese soldiers, and Vietnamese civilian casualties] rise up like ghosts in architectural settings rich in the trappings of consumer security. . . . This startling juxtaposition brings two

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19. It is important to note here that Zinn did not mention Rosler (or any specific artist, for that matter) in the essay. However, he did see an exhibition of this series at the Worcester Art Museum in Worcester, Massachusetts. The exhibit was there from September 22, 2007 until January 13, 2008, and Zinn gave a presentation there about the series on November 11, 2007—Veterans’ Day. Although his book predates the later additions to “Bringing the War Home,” it is clear from Zinn’s remarks both in the book and at the museum that their thinking is closely aligned regarding artists and war. The audio file of this speech is available on the Museum’s web site: http://www.worcesterart.org/Information/Audio/howard_zinn.mp3


different political realities crashing together but also suggests that they might be linked in ways that are not immediately discernible.\(^\text{22}\)

This is consistent with Rosler’s argument that art—that is, High Art—cannot be deliberately didactic, which then makes it propaganda, nor should its message be too obscure for most viewers to glean after reasonable consideration.

A significant challenge activist artists face is creating art that doesn’t come across as shrill and preachy, which then risks being dismissed by viewers who don’t wish to be told what to think. Rosler is aware of this potentiality, and explained to Buchloh, “One of the things I have never wanted to do, and I hope I never have done, is to tell people what to do. I’d rather be saying, ‘Here is the problem—why don’t you come up with a solution.’”\(^\text{23}\) In other words, her work is meant to be more dialogical than dogmatic. Many would argue that this is precisely the way activist artists should approach their work; it is the key difference between propaganda and anything that even hopes to be considered fine art. In another interview, this one with Alan Gilbert, Rosler remarked, “Art is capable of enunciating a clear position on urgent social matters about which people have been working hard to develop and formulate cogent positions. . . . Art does not create social movements, although it may give them a voice and propel them forward.”\(^\text{24}\)

Rosler deliberately combined famous pictures published in *Life* magazine—pictures that viewers would easily associate with the Vietnam War—with pictures

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23. Buchloh, 46.

taken out of *House Beautiful* magazine because “it was a kind of work that represented a political response to political circumstances.”

She was as specific about the controversy surrounding the Vietnam War as she would later be when she added the Iraq/Afghanistan photos to the series. As Wallis astutely observed, “A contemporary reading of these images makes clear that they are not simply antiwar statements but a subtle way of demonstrating the web of connections between distant wars of conquest and the more subtle and ongoing class war at home.”

Evans and Gohl’s discussion in their book, *Photomontage: A Political Weapon*, reinforces that this broader reading of the Rosler’s montages is “consistent with Heartfield’s view of agit-prop—the need to produce art with immediate and long-term political relevance.”

Rosler understands that art and image alone cannot effect change, but she believes they can at least provide graphic evidence that problems exist and also, if the work is effectively critical and not just declamatory, that solutions are possible. At the same time, she cares much more than the Dadas did about creating art that would not be rejected as merely propaganda, writing,

“The lie of official culture is that socially invested art is sullied, deficient in its conception, deformed in its gestation, brutalized by the conditions of its birth, and abused in its lifetime. To rescue ourselves from this damaging fiction surely requires a new emancipation from market relations, and it demands a rethinking of all the facets of the production of art within culture. . . . We must inventively expand our control over production and showing, and we


26. Wallis, 107. He is referencing only the earlier Vietnam era works, but the argument holds for the later additions, as well. Clearly this is why Rosler chose to expand the original collection rather than create a whole new series. Part of her point was that the same political environment(s) present during the Vietnam War persisted into the twenty-first century.

must simultaneously widen our opportunities to work with and for people outside the audiences for high art, not as annunciatory angels bearing the way of thought of the haute monde, but to rupture the false boundaries between ways of thinking about art and ways of actively changing the world.28

One of Rosler’s chief concerns in this particular essay is that too often artists create works whose success is at the mercy of the buying public, to the frustrating effect that art continues to be treated as a commodity rather than as a vehicle of expression (for example). Part of this problem is reinforced by the persistent belief that works that have a useful function are not purely conceived.29 She looks back to Arnold Hauser’s assertion in his The Social History of Art that “the doctrine of art’s uselessness was the result of the fear of the upper classes after the French Revolution that they would lose control of art.”30 In the case of such critical artists as have already been discussed, including Rosler, they were right to be concerned.

Adding to the original series was a deliberate, if difficult, choice on Rosler’s part:

In 2003, while I was casting about for a way to address, within my art, the war we were launching, I realized that it seemed to make the most sense, finally, to return to a form of expression I had used back then [simple photomontage, as in the Vietnam series]. . . . I regarded this mode of expression as a “meta-form,” in which the very return to this form, which I had not used in a long time, would itself signify a certain ‘retro’ or retardataire element in the war itself.31


29. In the case of “Bringing the War Home,” that function is to enlighten the viewing public, regardless of their ability to pay to own one of these works.


31. Ibid., 198.
To most, Rosler’s point is obvious, and she has found many supporters among the critics. At the same time, Rosler does emphasize some different ideas and use different tactics within the series, between periods. For example, the Vietnam montages tend to illustrate the “us versus them” dichotomy more strongly than the later works, while the inclusion of the newer montages not only also explores that dynamic, but serves to drive home her point about the lack of changes (at least regarding an imperialistic attitude) in American war practices. Also, the Vietnam works were primarily disseminated to the broader, non-art, public via flyers and underground publications, while for the later montages Rosler took advantage of art publications and galleries to publicize the whole series.

In her contribution to the recent book, What is Radical Politics Today?, Dora Apel looks closely at Rosler’s 2004 additions, particularly her incorporation of fashion imagery. The inclusion of models dressed in glamorous clothing set sometimes within upper-middle-class interiors or other times imposed on a war-torn landscape can be equally jarring. Both kinds of images indicate narcissistic concerns combined with an obliviousness to their surroundings. (Figures 4.3 and 4.5) Apel discusses Invasion at some length. She describes the young men, all identically coiffed and clad in Dolce & Gabbana and transplanted into a battleground they are somehow able to blithely ignore, as an “army of Harvard lawyers or investment bankers . . . the next generation of the corporate elite, the drones of capitalism, the occupying army that

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32. Dora Apel, “Iraq, Trauma and Dissent in Visual Culture,” What is Radical Politics Today? ed. Jonathan Pugh (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Apel also examines a video project by Krzysztof Wodiczko and the guerilla street performances of Iraq Veterans Against the War. The latter brings to mind the Happenings of the 1960s, although the performances are much grittier (indeed, often frightening for their surprised audiences) than the generally light-hearted and frequently absurd Happenings.
stands behind the working-class grunts in fatigues.”33 She then refers to Rosler’s ability to “[create] a seamless cinematic space,” an observation that immediately brings to mind Benjamin’s observation that Dadaist montages “attempted to create by pictorial—and literary—means the effects which the public today seeks in film.”34 Once again, Rosler’s roots are showing.

It is this subgroup within the later additions that are more reminiscent of American Pop works (disregarding the grimmer aspects of these photomontages). However, rather than emulating Pop’s cool disinterested presentation of consumer products as worthy of a place in the art gallery, Rosler works incorporate such imagery in order to arouse very interested responses. The emphasis moves from “here is this object” to “here is what it can mean.” This of course evokes memory of Dada works, but it is plain that Rosler has also been heavily influenced by Pop’s emphasis on commercial products. Apel argues that, just as Benjamin once referred to Dada as “an instrument of ballistics,”35 Rosler wants to “provoke the viewer through the uncanny juxtapositions that make visible the dissolving divide between war and the domestic. In Rosler’s images, war not only enters the home through every visible window and screen, but its presence suggests that middle-class privilege in America precisely depends on American imperialism abroad.”36

33. Apel, “Iraq, Trauma and Dissent,” 94–95.


35. Ibid., 238.

36. Apel, “Iraq, Trauma and Dissent,” 93.
Though her source material comes from mass publications and there is a distinctly American flavor to the works with their emphasis on both consumerism and political disconnect, these montages are ultimately a far cry from American Pop. While 1960s' American Pop seemed to emphasize the surface of things in a more emblematic way, Rosler’s work runs deep; the surface of each montage in her “Bringing the War Home” series is permeable. Rosler refers to the American political art environment following World War II through the mid-1960s as “a dry period . . . during which the art world slammed shut to even mildly socially invested work.”

Things were different in the European Pop scene, and it is there one must look in order to find the closest connection between Rosler’s unflinchingly political works and more general, international, Pop art practice. Not to British Pop, which is more whimsical, nor to French Nouveau Realisme, which is more almost surrealistic and engaged with materiality, though. Rosler’s work is closer in spirit to that of the Narrative Figurists, especially Bernard Rancillac.

In her 2010 book about the Narrative Figurists, Sarah Wilson addresses some of the reasons why these artists have largely been neglected until quite recently. Citing an analysis by art critic Pierre Gaudibert, she writes, “The promotion of Narrative Figuration in an international arena confronted problems not merely of language or symbolic content . . . but of values: values not only political but also innately hostile to careerism and the commercial art market, which in France was in

37. Rosler, “For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life,” in Decoys and Disruptions, 26. Naturally this includes Pop art. It is easy enough to follow her argument, for American art had indeed first turned its focus inward, with the Abstract Expressionists, and then only to the surface of the outside world, to the commercial aspects of culture that were experiencing their own boom.
crisis.” Wilson continues her explanation, still citing Gaudibert’s essay: “A later passage evokes the suspicion, even repulsion, with which intellectuals of the left regarded commerce, money and profit. . . . Astonishing as it may seem today, this refusal to collude with the art market . . . is one of the outstanding reasons for the intransigence and exceptional character of the movement in its early years.” This shared attitude of reluctance to rely on the art market in order to disseminate political works (along with the overtly political tone of those works) keeps Rosler philosophically aligned with the Narrative Figurists, as does her refusal to completely surrender to the increasing commodification of art.

Rosler also shared with these artists a similar attitude toward photography (documentary and otherwise), as evidenced by Rancillac’s declaration,

We believe in absolutely everything the moment a photo has been taken. Hence its force of persuasion . . . voluntarily or not, the photo always lies. It is passionately interesting to unmask the liar. Giving his image back to him, you can make him say the opposite. And putting together two or three images which exist naively as neighbours in the same magazine, you can explode the whole system . . .

38. Sarah Wilson, The Visual World of French Theory Figurations (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 17. Wilson quotes a passage from an essay by Pierre Gaudibert here which she then references again: Pierre Gaudibert, “Des années 60,” in Henri Cucéo and Pierre Gaudibert, L’Arène de l’art (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 148. “A certain self-criticism, neither contrition nor masochism, leads us to see that blaming the lack of economic support is not enough to explain a position of retreat: neither the artists nor their different partners travelled beyond France’s frontiers or made visits abroad for professional reasons, nor were they good at languages, particularly English.” (Wilson’s translation from the original source.)


40. A reminder here that the Vietnam montages were largely unseen in the fine art arena until the 1991 retrospective mentioned above. Importantly, even though the war images were recognizably from Vietnam, viewers and critics easily made the expected connections between that war and the Persian Gulf War.

She might have written these very words herself. Rosler’s unexpected and usually seamless juxtapositions compel viewers to question representations ordinarily taken for granted as simple advertisements for consumer goods or news of war happening “over there,” to make connections between two or more ostensibly unrelated types of pictures — gritty documentary and glitzy advertisement, to force consideration of price versus cost.

Rancillac also altered magazine advertisements by adding in unexpected images. In his 1965 “Les Belles Demeures” works, he stuck transfers of Disney characters onto pictures of “Ideal Homes,” a commentary on the invasion of American culture into France, something that was not very welcome by many French artists.\(^4^2\) As Wilson so eloquently elucidates, “the children’s stick-on transfers (décalcomanies) interrupt any desire-filled introjection into the images on the viewer’s part. Cultural invasions, like rude gesticulations, they create an ‘alienation effect.’”\(^4^3\)

A further parallel, this one more socio-political than strictly art related, is apparent, as Wilson notes the “schizophrenia of a country where a burgeoning consumer society co-existed with a crescendo of protest against the Algerian War” in the early 1960s.\(^4^4\) This was, of course, the same kind of schizophrenia being experienced in American attitudes toward the Vietnam War in the later sixties and

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\(^{4^2}\) This was particularly true of the Narrative Figurists, whose works were eclipsed by those of the enormously popular American artists Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and James Rosenquist that were being exhibited at various European venues. Rancillac actually helped hang the panels of Rosenquist’s \(F-111\) at the Sonnabend Gallery (a show resulting from the collaboration of Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend). See Wilson, esp. chapter 2, “Bourdieu, Rancillac: ‘The Image of the Image,’” in ibid., 64–97.

\(^{4^3}\) Ibid., 77.

\(^{4^4}\) Ibid., 78.
continuing now with the war in the Middle East, both of which are evinced in Rosler’s work.

There is arguably no greater evidence of Rosler’s indictment of American imperialism than the subset of montages in the 2004 additions that “bring home” the culprits and victims of the notorious crimes perpetrated at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad in 2003–2004. Rosler does this most vividly by transplanting PFC Lynndie England and the Iraqi “detainee” she holds at the end of a leash from the prison where the (amateur) photo was originally taken to well-appointed kitchen, where the naked and humiliated man is mercifully given some bit of privacy, hidden behind a large island stove. (Figure 4.6) There is no need for Rosler to show him; the image is iconic. This same montage also contains the subtler incorporation of other pictures taken at the prison, and the viewer must look very carefully before eventually spotting another well-known image, this time of an Iraqi prisoner robed and hooded in black, perilously perched on a small box and holding live wires in his hands. In fact, it appears more than once.

Clearly Rosler is not afraid to incorporate controversial images in her work in order to make her point, and she is often vexed by other artists that she feels are not as critical as they could be when making their own works. Although they also appropriate imagery and text from popular culture in creating increasingly political

45. I have chosen not to include any images of these events; even seven years after the photographs were made public, they are ubiquitous. The topic of the political impact and more general reception of these photographs is treated in a number of sources, and political, journalistic, and art historical analysts continue to study their effects. While they are not mentioned in Apel’s “Iraq, Trauma, and Dissent,” she does discuss them in “Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib,” Art Journal 64 (Summer 2005): 88–100. See also Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, “The Abu Ghraib Torture Photographs: News Frames, Visual Culture, and the Power of Images,” Journal 9, no. 1 (2008): 5–30.
and message-oriented works, Rosler accuses them of sacrificing message for aesthetics, resulting in work that is “[e]pigrammatic and rhythmic . . .” She continues, “the work’s effect is to tend to foreclose thought rather than stimulate it, to replace criticism and analysis with sloganeering. No one, neither critic nor viewer, has to do the hard work of understanding the social relations alluded to in the work.”

Here then is the crux of the problem: Artworks become allusive but not analytical; they reference but, according to Rosler, lack critical substance. It is one thing to point to an issue and draw attention to it, to pull a disturbing image from its original context and highlight it with provocative text, but another altogether to actually say something about it. Without creating a meaningful frame around it, something that recontextualizes the image and accompanying text in a critical rather than simply declamatory way, the work risks being limited to an isolated, finite visual experience. Meaning must be created.

Rosler did this with her collages from the Vietnam era, and she certainly did it again, even more powerfully, in her later additions, especially the images she pulled and included from Abu Ghraib. The photographs themselves are plain demonstrations of the depths to which people can fall, but what makes these images more

46. Rosler, “Notes on Quotes,” 141–42. Although Rosler never names any specific artists, Barbara Kruger immediately come to mind. Of course it is entirely arguable that the allusive quality in Kruger’s work is substantial enough to inspire thoughtful reactions among viewers without being overtly didactic, although Rosler argues otherwise: “Appropriation sharply depends on context to provide the critical movement—generally . . . through irony. Appropriative strategies do not in principle exclude analysis or synthesis (but the ones currently receiving the most attention tend to do so). But replicating oppressive forms, whether by quoting them directly or through the fashioning of simulacra, may replicate oppressiveness. Further, the works at issue imply a totalizing or systemic critique. Implicating a whole system is logically unsatisfactory; if an assertion encompasses an entire universe, there is no vantage point outside from which to make or understand the critique. Thus, I will argue that using the language of advertising or melodrama or a simulated series of ‘cultural unconscious’ utterances in fact leaves their systems uncriticized and reproduces their power-seeking and anxiety-provoking gambits far too well.” Ibid., 140.
meaningful, really drives home a specific point—is that the works are not some
general criticism of people being cruel, but depict specific situations where people are
cruel and yet remain oblivious to the human cost of their actions. Looking at Rosler’s
artworks is not a matter of simply seeing these horrible images in some finite way.
Instead, they require contemplation; the juxtapositions are specific and thought
follows thought, insight follows insight. It is not a pleasant experience, but it is
rewarding to the degree that it can lead to greater social consciousness.

Can these works change the world? No, or at least not much. Can they change
the problem? Probably not. But they can at least give people pause, and they can make
it more uncomfortable to ignore many of the questions that must arise (that is, need
to arise) regarding, at least on the surface, U.S. involvement in foreign countries
where we have an economic interest. And that is the key; beyond the “easy”
observation that people can be exploitive and cruel when dealing with the “enemy,”
the issues Rosler raises in the recontextualization of the Abu Ghraib photos deal more
generally with American capitalism and exploitive practices. She deals not only with
dirty hands, but dirty conscience.

It is true that much socially critical art is often villanized as manipulative and
agenda-driven, but it is just easily asserted—indeed, it is obvious—that art abounds
that is subversively critical. However, this is actually part of Rosler’s point. The
broader audience the more likely it will contain people who are not used to having to
decode the subversive aspects of these kinds of works, and she wants her work to be
accessible to as many people as possible. Therefore, as she has argued, artists must be
free to make their points more overt without having such works denigrated as too
narrative and therefore not sophisticated enough to be considered “Fine,” or even “Art.” Even just a few moments’ contemplation of any of Rosler’s “Bringing the War Home” images makes clear to most people that there is something at least uncomfortable about the coexistence of luxury and suffering within the same frame. Such perceptions hopefully then lead to a consideration of the broader implications of such troubling juxtapositions.

What keeps these works, and the works of other socially critical artists, from being propaganda is that they invite questions rather than simply providing answers, a key distinction between World War II recruitment posters, for example, and works by such artists as Goya, Daumier, the Dadas, Picasso, the Neue Sachlichkeit, and others of their ilk.

Regarding artists as activists and/or catalysts of change, Rosler claims:

I never believed that art transforms society . . . social change depends on social movements, and all that artists can do is be a partner to a kind of concentrator of ideological currents. I do see myself in that role if possible, but I certainly do not see artists as literally leading. I think it’s important because on the one hand artists are belittled for an unfulfillable messianism, and on the other they are chastised for abandoning utopianism. We may have a messianic propensity, we may suffer from utopianism, but still it would be a mistake to believe our own press. I would like to be a part of whatever it is that people are doing to move us to a better place than this one.47

Political scientist Timothy J. Lukes discusses the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of four different categories of political art: that of its audience, directed at its audience, that goes above the audience, or is beyond its audience.48 In considering these

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48. Timothy J. Lukes, “Prepositional Phases: The Political Effects of Art on Audience,” International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science politique 12 (Jan. 1991): 67–86. Lukes admits that he deliberately has simplified these four categories, and that he is trying to create a new paradigm through which to analyze the goals and effectiveness of political art. Briefly, he links each of these types with
categories, it is clear that Rosler’s “Bringing the War Home” series (as well as the rest of her political efforts) are both “of” her audience—that is, inspired by what Rosler perceives as their lived reality—and also “at” them: the work is deliberately didactic. With this in mind, Rosler must walk a very delicate line. Although she originally created the series (the Vietnam-era montages) not for the art realm but for display in underground publications, to be used as anti-war messages, she was determined that the pictures not be mistaken as simple propaganda. She didn’t want to tell people exactly what to think, but rather hoped they would question just how the American presence in Vietnam might be interpreted and understood.

Lukes points out, however, that art of its audience runs the risk of “severely hamper[ing] its political efficacy. On the on hand, if it is too blatant and immediate in its distillation of desirable and undesirable social traits, it is timebound, dull, uninspirational, and superficial.”49 Such tendentiousness can be fine as long as the principles being criticized can be understood as ongoing and worthy of discussion beyond the time limit of the event(s) that inspired the work in the first place. Picasso’s Guernica is a perfect example of this.

As was discussed in Chapter One, although the painting was inspired (and even named for) the events that took place in the village of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, the themes and imagery remain potent and profoundly affective.

49. Lukes, “Prepositional Phases,” 79.
reminders of the costs of war on civilian populations. Viewers are reminded of this again, for example, in Rosler's _Balloons_. (Figure 4.2) Picasso and Rosler had different goals in mind for their respective projects, but there are similarities in their effects.

Lukes goes on to describe the paradox that can occur when artists creating politically charged works that rely on specific events diverge “from pure tendentiousness in order to partake in art’s ‘special’ qualities, for what is immediately sacrificed is the ability to control audience response with the desired specificity.” In Rosler’s case, rather than creating a new series for the Gulf War works, she chose to add new photomontages to the Vietnam War group, thereby expanding the “Bringing the War Home” collection with images of both wars brought together under a single, unifying title. Her deliberate act, effectively citing her own original sources, allows Rosler to bring home the idea that, at least where imperialism and war are concerned, not enough has changed.

50. Ibid.
Figure 4.1  Martha Rosler, *Red Stripe Kitchen*, 1967–72, photomontage (24” x 20”)

Figure 4.2  Martha Rosler, *Balloons*, 1967-1972, photomontage (24” x 20”)

Figure 4.3  Martha Rosler, *Invasion*, 2008, photomontage (30 3/8” x 54”)

Figure 4.4  Martha Rosler, *Saddam's Palace (Febreze)*, 2004, photomontage (20” x 24”)

Figure 4.5  Martha Rosler, *Photo-Op*, 2004, photomontage (20” x 24”)

Figure 4.6  Martha Rosler, *Election (Lynndie)*, 2004, photomontage (24” x 20”)

CONCLUSION

Kurt Schwitters once said, “A lyrical poem is by no means a railway schedule.” There are many ways to approach this little idea, and one can certainly make a connection here with art and politics. The first is a creative expression, an idea that resonates in some deep, often ineffable way; it travels unaided across time and space, with little or no explanation necessary to evoke a response. On the other hand, politics are indeed like a railway schedule: identified with a specific time and place, marking the course between a beginning and an end.

In looking at the variety of subjects Heartfield, Höch, Schwitters, Rosler, and the other artists mentioned in this thesis have chosen to explore in their work, it is possible to detect fluctuations regarding ideas of just what art is for. For example, should it be didactic, historical, socially conscientious, completely objective, reflective of a specific time and place in a “warts and all” kind of way? Should it rely more on nature or abstraction? Should it reflect the artist or the time? Should it look back or ahead? Should it show the ideal, remind us of our flawed humanity, or encourage us to be greater than we are? Should it show us at our best, or our worst? None of these questions, of course, are new. Indeed, they have been the bread-and-butter of art historical practice since at least the nineteenth century. Each of the artists discussed in this thesis has contended with many of these questions in his or her own way, and the various art and social historians and theorists who have been cited demonstrate that

those same questions do in fact continue to drive the practice of art history and criticism.

This thesis has examined how these specific artists have developed and used photomontage to illustrate political truths (or, “truths”) during periods of considerable strife. It also demonstrates that Heartfield, Höch, and Schwitters saw the necessity of creating a new mode of expression that was not tied by tradition to the political institutions they were challenging. Rosler, on the other hand, recognized that photomontage was the best vehicle for her own project based on the success of those artists who had used it before. She adopted their methodology, and also incorporated contemporary influences in order to further explore the expressive and narrative possibilities of the medium.

Heartfield and Höch, along with their colleagues, began by creating works that looked quite similar. But eventually each of them went on to develop photomontage in very different ways, with Heartfield’s works remaining deeply political and Höch’s becoming increasingly aesthetic. This last distinction makes it possible to understand why it is appropriate to include Schwitters in this discussion in terms of his boundless creativity in photomontage and the closely related media of collage and assemblage. At the same time, as Themerson effectively argues, Schwitters’ persistence in creating his own “degenerate” kind of art despite pressure from the Nazis to desist was profoundly political. Finally, Rosler’s powerful series, “Bringing the War Home,” ably demonstrates that photomontage remains a potent tool when dealing with

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2. Although his work outside of the plastic arts has not been the subject of this endeavor, it is important to mention that his innovation was not confined to the media already mentioned, but included wonderfully successful experiments in typography, graphic design and publishing, short stories and grotesques, visual and sound poetry, and design work for Dada performances.
political subject matter. Photomontage allows artists to reframe images in such a way that those images often turn in on themselves and reveal something in their transformation that could not have been anticipated when they appeared in their original contexts.
John Heartfield today knows how to salute beauty. He knows how to create those images which are the very beauty of our age since they represent the cry of the people—the representation of the people’s struggle against the brown hangman with his craw crammed with gold pieces. He knows how to create these realistic images of our life and struggle arresting and gripping for millions of people who themselves are a part of that life and struggle. His art is art in Lenin’s sense for it is a weapon in the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat.

John Heartfield today knows how to salute beauty. Because he speaks for the countless oppressed people throughout the world, and this without depreciating for a moment the magnificent tone of his voice, without debasing the majestic poetry of his tremendous imagination. Without diminishing the quality of his work. Master of a technique entirely of his own invention, a technique which uses for its palette the whole range of impressions from the world of actuality; never imposing a rein on his spirit, blending his figures at will, he knows no signpost other than dialectical materialism, none other than the reality of the historical process, which he, filled with the anger of battle, translates into black and white.¹

APPENDIX B

LECTURE ON PHOTOMONTAGE, RAOUl HAUSMANN¹

Amid divergent opinions, it is often claimed that photomontage is practicable only in two forms: that of political propaganda and that of commercial advertising. The first photomontagists, the dadas, departed from the point of view, incontestable for them, that the painting of the war period, postfuturist expressionism, had failed because of its non-objectivity and its absence of convictions, and that not only painting but all the arts and their techniques needed a fundamental revolutionary change in order to remain relevant to the life of their times. The members of the Dada Club were naturally not interested in elaborating new esthetic rules according to which art should be executed. In the first place, they were concerned with the enticing aptitudes of new material and through it, with the renewal of forms, of fresh content. Dada, which was a kind of cultural criticism, stopped at NOTHING! And it is correct that an eminent number of the first photomontages was [sic] as revolutionary as its content, its form as subversive as the application of photographs and printed texts which together are transformed into static film. The Dadas, having invented the static poem, simultaneous and purely phonetic, then applied the same principles to pictorial expression. They were the first to use photography as a creative material, at the service of very different structures, often eccentric and with antagonistic significance, a new entity which wrenched from the chaos of the war and the revolution an intentionally new optical reflection; they knew that a propagandistic power was

included in this method, and that contemporary life was not audacious enough to develop and absorb it.

Things have changed a great deal since then. The current exhibition at the Art Library shows this, and it shows the importance of photomontage in the USSR as a means of propaganda. Moreover, it demonstrates that the value of this propagandist effect is largely recognized by economics. That is seen (visible, obvious) in every cinema prospectus, unimaginable without photomontage, as though it were an unwritten law.

Today, however, some people argue that in our period of neorealism or even fadism, the photomontage is already outdated, and holds little possibility for further development. One can reply to this that the simple photograph is even older, and that nevertheless new men appear to captivate us with unexpected points of view on the world surrounding us. The number of modern photographs is large and growing daily, but for all that, one finds their different styles neither more nor less modern.

The realm of photomontage is so vast that it lends itself to as many possibilities as there are different environments. From the sociological structure of the milieu to the psychological superconstructions resulting from it, the milieu changes itself daily. The possibilities of photomontage are not limited by the discipline of its formal means, by revision of its expressive radius.

The photomontage in its primitive form was an explosion of viewpoints and an intervortex of azimuths. Moving further in its complexity than Futurist painting, it has, meanwhile, undergone an evolution one could call constructive. The perception that the optical element offers extremely varied possibilities has been imposed
everywhere. The photomontage allows the elaboration of the most dialectical formulas, because of its opposing structures and dimensions, for example, the roughness and smoothness of the aerial view and of the foreground, of perspective and flat level. The technique of photomontage is visibly simplified in proportion to its range of application. Its domain is especially applicable to political propaganda and commercial advertising. The necessary clarity required by political or commercial slogans has increasing influence on its means of counterbalancing the most obvious contrasts, and from the beginning will remove capricious elements from the dialectical momentum of forms peculiar to the photomontage, will assure it of a fortunate and prolonged survival.

In the future, photomontage, the precision of materials, the legibility of objects, the precision of plastic notions, will play the greatest role. Apparently no one has considered the statistical photomontage, mentioned here, as a new form. It can be claimed that the photomontage can contribute as much to the development of our vision, of our consciousness of optical, psychological, and social structures, in an extraordinary sense, as photography or film; and that it can do so by the exactitude of its data, where content, form, meaning and appearance become one.
There is no art that relates to one particular class of men, and if there were, it would be of no importance to life.

To those who want to create a proletarian art, we ask the question: “What is proletarian art?” Is it an art created by the proletarians themselves? Or an art at the service of the proletariat alone? Or an art intended to arouse proletarian (revolutionary) instincts? There is no art created by proletarians because a proletarian who creates art is no longer a proletarian but an artist. An artist is neither proletarian nor bourgeois, and what he creates does not belong either to the proletariat or to the bourgeoisie, but to everyone. Art is a spiritual function of man, and aims to deliver him from the chaos of life (from the tragic). Art is free in the use of its means, and is ruled by its own laws and no laws other than its own; as soon as a work is a work of art, it rises far above the class differences between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

If art were to serve the proletariat exclusively, despite the fact that the proletariat is contaminated by bourgeois taste, this art would be as limited as an art specifically aimed at the bourgeoisie. Such an art would not be universal, and would not have its roots in universal national feeling, but in considerations that were individual, social, and limited in time and space. If art were to arouse instincts of a proletarian nature, it would simply use the same means as religious or nationalist art. Banal though it may seem, there is in fact no real difference between painting a Red Army led by Trotsky,

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or an imperial army led by Napoleon. The value of a painting as a work of art has nothing to do with arousing proletarian or patriotic sentiments. From the point of view of art, they are both fraudulent.

The only duty of art is to arouse by its own means the creative forces of mankind, it aim is the maturity of mankind, not of the proletariat or the bourgeoisie. Only lesser talents are driven, by lack of culture or narrowness of vision, to produce in a limited way something like proletarian art (politics in painting). The true artist turns his back on the specific field of social organizations.

The art that we want is neither proletarian nor bourgeois, because it needs to deploy a large amount of energy in order to influence the whole of a culture, rather than allowing itself to be influenced by social relations.

The proletariat is a condition in life that ought to be outdated, the bourgeoisie is a condition in life that ought to be outdated. But the proletarians who imitate the cult of the Bourgeoisie with their cult of the Proletariat are precisely those who are supporting this decaying bourgeois culture, without being aware that they are doing so: to the detriment of art and the detriment of culture.

With their conservative attachment to old forms of expression that have had their day, and with their absolutely incomprehensible disgust for the new art, they prolong the life of what, if their manifestoes are to be believed, they are supposed to be fighting against: bourgeois culture. And so ultimately we see bourgeois sentimentalism and bourgeois romanticism, despite the perseverance of radical artists in their efforts to put an end to them, living on and even being cultivated and supported again. Today Communism is already just as bourgeois a cause as democratic
socialism, that is to say, the capitalist formula. The bourgeoisie uses the apparatus of
Communism—which is not an invention of the proletariat but of the bourgeoisie—with a view to renewing its decaying culture (Russia). In consequence, the proletarian artist is fighting neither for art nor for the new life to come, but for the bourgeoisie. A proletarian work of art is nothing but a poster advertising the bourgeoisie.

What we are working toward, on the other hand, is a total work of art that propels itself far above all the advertising posters, whether they sing the praises of champagne, Dada, or communist dictatorship.
I met him in 1943, in London, at the PEN Club Conference called to celebrate the tercentenary of the publication of Areopagitica, at the French Institute, in Kensington. I was in the uniform of the Polish army, he in the grey, worn-out suit of a German refugee. That at least was how we looked in the eyes of some of our neighbours. The logic of the time was to infer from some “public image” individuals to the aggregate, to mix the mess thoroughly, and then to infer down from the aggregate to other individuals. To some of the onlookers, therefore, he was just another German (and once a German always a German, almost a camouflaged nazi), and I, quite undeservedly, one on whose white eagle a bit of the glory earned by Polish soldiers reflected; to others, however, he was an heroic victim of nazidom, and I, again quite undeservedly, one to be blamed for some of my generals’ nationalism or what not. The logic of it all was mad, and when in my first talk with Schwitters (whose “mortal” and “hereditary” enemy I should have been) the word dada (inevitably) slipped from his tongue, it sounded like a trumpet of sanity; it was almost visible, like a column belonging to a perfect order, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian—and now dada—standing upright and watching the conference.

1. Excerpted from Stefan Themerson, "Kurt Schwitters on a time-chart," Typographica 16 (December 1967): 29–48. Text underscored, set in boldface or italics, or circled or boxed is set to match text in the article. One would be well-rewarded to view the article in its original source, complete with all of the graphic embellishments and illustrations.
There were writers from all over the world, there in the hall, and there were sounds of aeroplanes—above the roof. Two hours earlier a bomb had fallen on a nearby house, but it was all quiet again. Two hours had been enough to move away those who needed to be moved away, and the place looked peaceful, and the sky, now made visible by the “removal” of the upper part of the building, looked bright. A picture exactly like that had been predicted years before by many surrealist painters.

The same morning, while passing the bombed site on his way to the French Institute, he had picked up from the ruins a piece of convulsed iron wire, two or three-foot long (“I always take everything I find interesting,” he told me later), and now, sitting in the hall beside me, he was bending it into a space sculpture, while Mr E. M. Forster was delivering his speech. Seeing Schwitters bending the wire, some distinguished writers thought he was an electrician or a plumber who had got lost and strayed into their PEN by mistake. Nevertheless, there, at that meeting, it was he, Schwitters, who was practising what the speakers were preaching.
They were quoting Milton: “Give me the Liberty to know, to utter, & to argue freely, according to conscience, above all Liberties.”

I want to draw your attention to this word: utter. It means not only: to exercise the faculty of speech, but also: to give vent to joy, etc., in sound, to burst out with a cry, to give out in an audible voice. Consequently, the meaning of his oration to the court of Areopagus will not be distorted, perhaps it will be enriched, if we say: “Give me the Liberty to give vent to joy, for instance thus: Fümm bö wo tää zää Uu, pögif, kwii Ee. Give me the Liberty to burst out with a cry: Dedesnn nn rrrrr, li Ee, mpiff tillff too, tillll, Jüü Kaa? Give me the Liberty to give out in an audible voice: Rinnzekete bee bee nnz krr müü? Ziiuu ennxe, ziiuu rinnzkrmmüü, rakete bee bee. To which you may easily add: the Liberty to bend a piece of wire into a space sculpture.

To us, today, it may perhaps seem that the act of putting two innocent words together, the act of saying: Blue is the colour of thy yellow hair, is an innocent aesthetic affair, that the act of making a picture by putting together two or three innocent objects, such as: A Railway Ticket & A Flower & A bit of Wood, is an innocent aesthetic affair. Well, it is not so at all: Tickets belong to Railway Companies (or to the State), Flowers—to Gardeners, Bits of Wood—to Timber Merchants. If you mix these things you are making havoc of the Classification System on which the Régime is established; you are carrying people’s minds away from the Customary Modes of Thought, and people’s Customary Modes of Thought are the very Foundation of Order (whether it is an Old Order of a (in his case: Nazi) Order) and, therefore, if you meddle with the Customary Modes of Thought, then,

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2. The sound words are quoted from Schwitters’ Ursonate, or Die Sonate in Urlauten.
whether you are Galileo, or Giordano Bruno, with their funny ideas about Motion, or
Newton with his funny ideas about Force, or Einstein with his funny ideas about
Space and Time, or Russell with his funny ideas about Thinking, or Schönberg with
his funny ideas about a sort of Democratic Equality between the black and white keys
of the piano keyboard, or the Cubists with their funny ideas about Shapes, or
Dadaists, or Merzists, with their funny ideas about introducing ‘Symmetries and
Rhythms instead of Principles’— you are (whether you want it or not) in the very
bowels of Political Changes. Whether he wanted it or not, whether he knew it or not,
Kurt Schwitters was in the very bowels of Political Changes. Adolf Hitler knew it.
He knew that putting two innocent things together is not an innocent aesthetic affair.
And that was why Kurt Schwitters was thrown out of Germany.

Nothing, nothing is resisted with such savagery as a New Form in Art, wrote
Kandinsky, quoting an historian of the Russian Theatre, Nelidoff.4

I have just come back from Cambridge, where I was asked to address a Society
of Arts on Kurt Schwitters in England. The average age of the audience was about 20.
Consequently, I learnt more from them than they did from me. What I learnt I will
tell you later. One of my tasks was to make those 20-year-old men and women see
that the objects they liked or disliked (such objects as Schwitters' collages) were
produced in a world quite larger than theirs, in a world in which clocks turn much
more quickly than do those embedded in the old walls of the colleges. Their minds
lived in the specially cultivated quiescent isolation of the university green lawns. The

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3. This is Hugo Ball, “Fragments from a Dada Diary, 3 March, 1916;“ quoted from Transition N.25.
objects they wanted to know whether to like or dislike came to them from a different context. They were produced in a world which changes with each turn of its clocks.

I drew a time-chart on the blackboard . . . Just to see Who lived When. No, not when who was born, or who died when. I thought it would be much more interesting to see When Who Was Twenty.  

Twenty is probably the time when the retina of our eye becomes tattooed with the picture of reference points from which we later measure different historical perspectives. Till we are 20, we depend on other people. They are therefore responsible for the World. At about 20, more and more people begin to depend on us. We are therefore responsible for the world. “Now,” I said, “let us see where we were 20. You (the audience), I, whom you see in the flesh, and Kurt Schwitters on whom I am asked to address you.” Whereupon I drew three horizontal lines on the time-chart, and the lines terrified them. Secure and detached as they felt in their black gowns (which, incidentally, they kept tucked away under their arms), they suddenly realized that they were not set apart, not exempt, they suddenly saw themselves involved. Not “committed,” just involved in the inescapable machinery of time that is swallowed up by shifting human lives.

[In the area demarcating the 1920s, Themerson has written] Schwitters was over 30 in THE TWENTIES . . . The end of the first world war, and Europeans were not yet as blasé with universal wars as they appear to be now. Do you remember

5. I am not reproducing the time-chart here for practical typographical reasons, but it is interesting to note the people and their ages when Schwitters was twenty years old that Themerson lists: “Bertrand Russell was 35; Churchill and Chesterton were 33; Adenauer & Marinetti were 31; Stalin and Einstein were 28; Hitler was 18; Eisenhauer & De Gaulle were 17; Macmillan & Khrushchev were 13; Mr Gaitskell was 1; and Harold Wilson was “9.” The time-chart marks key moments in art history, politics, economics, and literature.
George Grosz’s drawings of the 1920’s? Post-war Berlin, officials, businessmen, workers, prostitutes, male and female; a war widow, war hero: unemployed. A war orphan.

Your Freudian subconscious may cryptically enjoy the picture of the world in which the price of a post-Versailles prostitute was a box of cigarettes when you went to bed with her, and a box of matches when you left. That’s to say, if you haven’t chosen to identify yourself with the underdog, or bitch, itself in that inflationary, pre-sulpha, pre-penicillin, pre-welfare, v.d-era of spectacular profits and spectacular hunger.

No, however innocent the collage, the photomontage, the typography of the time may look now [1960], the new surge did not start as an innocent aesthetic affair. A bus-ticket, a bank-note, a bit of newspaper were stuck to the collage picture, and ugly typeface was printed upside down not because of the formal, aesthetic values they possessed, not because they were pink, or soft, or square, or condensed or extended [. T]hey forced themselves into the picture boldly, in their own right: as perforated bus-tickets, as devaluated bank-notes, as outdated tatters of hopeless small ads: JOBS WANTED! ARTICLES FOR SALE! FUTURE . . . PREDICTED!

And so, out of the turmoil of the early twenties, a new art was born. In those seemingly “non-representational” pictures, the bits of reality literally stuck, nailed, glued into them, represented the outside world as much as a pink shape in Hogarth’s represented English Beef, and a black line in Goya’s—the gallows. A shockingly different world, and yet, was it not a sort of refurbished John Ruskin. His most beautiful things in the world, peacocks and lilies, were the most useless. Here, the
most useless things, taken out of dustbins, were meant to become beautiful. But it was not a reversal. It was a sort of transformation of his equations into a different historical space. “There should not be a single ornament . . . without some intellectual intention.” The raw material, the elements of dada art, had some intellectual intention. Fine art was that in which “the hand, the head, and the heart of man went together.” The dadaists belonged to the generation which, still, remembered and read John Ruskin. Ethics and aesthetics were intermingled.

“The blague and the bleeding pose” were at the beginning of the fight. The fight against ideas, values, mentality, (not necessarily and exclusively bourgeois) associated with the war, its causes, conduct, and consequences.

The fight produced discoveries, discoveries of new materials, new techniques, new ways of seeing the world. And not only in painting—photographically—c.f. Moholy Nagy’s eight ways of seeing the world—And not only in visual arts. Revaluations everywhere. Politics, philosophy, science. Economics, ethics. Mathematics. “A kaiser is a kaiser,” or “an underdog is an underdog,” was no longer a self-evident, indisputable truth, if “a bus-ticket is a bus-ticket” was not true either. And it was just demonstrated that a bus-ticket was not a bus-ticket once and for all. It became a part of a picture. Punched by the conductor, it still possessed its full value in different category. We were asked to accept those new categories in which a punched bus-ticket was a valuable thing. Old a priori conceptions which mind used to apply as frames to what was coming from the outside world through our senses—were good no longer. Substance got mixed with quantity, quantity with quality, quality with relation, relation with place, place with time, time with posture, posture with
possession, possession with action, action with passion. In the chorus shouting: “Aristotle go home!” the voice of dada was as loud as the voice of symbolic logic. Thus new ways of seeing the world opened the gates to a domain of new sensitivities. Exploring the jungle of new forms became an art in itself. A purely aesthetic affair. The relics of the rebellion became art-dealer’s times; the purpose of new works—to give pleasure to the eye rather than to open it more widely by force. And then, parturition half-forgotten, new aesthetics once established, the new convention became what old conventions always were—yet another language of the same, eternal art. Thus the circle (or the spiral?) was closed. Kurt Schwitters was born a rebel. He died a lyric poet.

This collage [Examiner 2861, 1947] was not made in the twenties, in Germany, but in the forties, in Ambleside, Lake District, England. It still contains a bit of a bus-ticket, but this bit of a bus-ticket is no more a Protest against the world, nor is it a discovery of new materials and new techniques. This bit of a bus-ticket is a very personal affair. It is his personal bus-ticket. And so is “1/4 lb” (of butter he ate(?)), and the label “opened by examiner 2861,” and the words “like to print some of my poems.”

It seems that those works of art, by many artists, in which the fact of their being an aesthetic achievement overpowered the fact of their being an event, survived the time-corrosion better. Most of Kurt Schwitters’s work, and especially that produced between 1923 and 1928, belongs there. Shall I say that a collage by Schwitters is appreciated now not because it was hip, but because it has become square, as much square as Mona Lisa, both with and without her moustache. Or am I wrong?
“Do you think that this renewed interest in dada and Schwitters means that there is a similarity between the sixties and the twenties? They challenged the problems of their time, do you think their methods can serve you for challenging the problems of your time?, and what are those?, and do you want to challenge them?”—I asked the representative of those who are twenty today, Mr Rackstraw Downes, the President of the Cambridge University Society of Arts. He discussed the questions with his friends and assembled some replies from which, with his kind permission, I shall now quote as follows:

“Modern collage is not much interested in what its materials were before, nor where they came from. If it is photos of Brigitte Bardot etc., this is because BB has some mythical significance for 'sixties—no more. Most people would be able to read Schwitters as ‘innocent aesthetic arrangements’ because in the 60's, surely, ANTI-ART has finished: the personal protest has finished. The Royal Academy no one takes seriously enough (among young generation) to be worth bothering about. If we dislike bombs, there are organized marches to Aldermaston. Rebellion is de rigueur, anti-art is 3rd programme material. Thus the personal protest of Schwitters is dead (except in a historical sense) because personal protests are no longer startling. Schwitters appears much more personal writer than e.g. Ionesco (who is much admired, and not considered dangerous or frightening—he gets praised in The Times). My own feeling is that a man like Schwitters is too well catered for to exist; he adopts a role with society and politics, as a socialist or communist, or Mosleyite if he wants to protest.

“His peculiar attraction, however, over other Dada collage makers etc. is his extremely personal choice of materials. Their juxtaposition is still startling, with
more impact than collage by Sophie Tauber & Arp etc. Their components still assert
their individuality—that is to say their individuality before they graduated to
Schwitters’ arranging hand. In the collages of Ernst or Arp the identity of the
components is concealed, so that in Schwitters, tho’ we do not regard the components
nowadays as essentially NOT belonging together and therefore representing a protest,
we do notice that he was doing something different from the others, and doing it as a
master. Why he is preferred above other Dada artists is perhaps because he shows
love and respect for materials where they show ONLY protest.

“(Yet, still with) reference to our generation, his impact softened by mo-
dernity of others; Braque, Picasso, Matisse used papier collé, and other Dada artists,
and surrealists—Max Ernst, Marcel Janco, Picabia, R. Hausmann, also made collages.
Their influence probably greater on recent collage-makers (and that of Braque etc.).
Thus contemporary collages have not the great personal respect and (so it seems to
me) love of his materials.

“Yes, I think we admit he is becoming an art-dealer’s item, and certainly a
pleasure to the eye.

“(His) relationship to the background of the twenties is certainly of tanta-
mount importance; his relationship to the sixties—in thought, social and political
setting etc.—less valid. Without the socio-political background we ‘read’ Schwitters
wrongly, only partially at least. (the time-chart) gives us a fuller understanding of
Schwitters than can be had in a vacuum i.e. without a historical sense.

“A time-chart of the 60’s could be composed that would perhaps be more
frightening than one of the 20’s, but not till 30 years hence. After all, how many
people were disturbed by ‘a rose is a rose is a rose’ etc. at the time? A 'sixties time-chart could be more frightening, because, it is felt, changes are happening perhaps faster.’


“Do you know what MERZ means?” he asked me once, in London. In 1943, I think.

“Isn’t it a German word for something you throw away, like rubbish?” I said.

“Well, not really,” he said. And I noticed that all the time he was looking at the box of 555 STATE EXPRESS cigarettes, which was there on the table in my wife’s studio.

“Incidentally,” he interrupted himself, “may I take just this one side of this cigarette box? What a beautiful yellow colour it is! I shall stick it on one of my collage-pictures. I always take everything I find interesting.”

He didn’t actually say that the whole world was his painter’s palette, but that was what it meant. And then he returned to what MERZ is.

“Well, not really,” he repeated. “But I’ll tell you. There was an advertisement in a newspaper, and [sic] advertisement of a bank that was called KOMMERZ UND PRIVAT BANK. I took the first word: KOMMERZ, I cut KOM off, and MERZ remained. I stuck it to my collage. It was the first merz picture”—and he smiled his innocent and mischievous smile, as if saying: “Isn’t it all wonderfully simple?”

“Dada?” he said. “Dada was the same thing. Dada people were friends. But Merz was independent. Merz was mine. Dada was everybody’s.” . . .
He used to come to us sometimes, in London, and so did A and his wife. One evening we invited them together; for a drink. A was a great Polish poet and a playwright. He was, and is, at the very top of the Polish Parnassus. His wife is a painter. It was nice and friendly till my faith in basic virtues (which at times makes me do things that end in disasters) prompted me to ask Schwitters to recite his Ur Sonata. He did. A listened quietly for some ten long minutes. But he couldn’t possibly endure it any longer. His lips moved, and he started to imitate Schwitters; mockingly. Now, A has an uncanny gift of mimicking people. His imitation of H. G. Wells used to be superb. His imitation of Ur Sonata was not. “Stop it! Stop it at once!” his wife said. “If you don’t stop it, I will divorce you!” We had another drink. “It’s all right,” Schwitters said, “I’m used to it.”

And there I was. Between two friends whom I liked, and respected, and understood. Because I did understand A as well as I did K. S. I liked them both, and they despised each other. Why?

They were the same age, nearly. Both were men of the world, by which I mean rational, experienced, and tolerant; the ways history had treated them were not dissimilar, both had great talent, enormous sense of humour, and stood by their convictions. Neither would tear to pieces a butterfly. But they would spit at each other’s wings. Both their works were banned and, basically, for similar reasons. Why then? If they could not make peace, why should the rulers?

I scrutinized my own soul and found that I still liked them both—and their work—and there was not a trace of a split in me.
It was then that I wrote: “The world is more complicated than our truths about it,” knowing of course, that I was probably not the first person that made that discovery.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


