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Weimar Art: Between Tradition and Avant-Garde

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Abstract This study aims to analyse two art movements in Germany: Dada and New Objectivity, identifying their distinctive features in the context of the anti-modernist mood in the interwar period. A 'call to order', or return to tradition and classics, can even be found in some texts of the Berlin Dadaists. The aesthetic positions of New Objectivity representatives were also ambiguous. On the one hand, they shattered avant-garde foundations through an appeal to the national pictorial tradition. On the other hand, modernist means of expression can be traced in their works.

Keywords Weimar art. Berlin Dada. New Objectivity. Expressionism. Old masters.

1 Introduction

The art of Weimar Germany developed under difficult and controversial historical conditions. On the one hand, this period was characterised by the democratisation of social development (manifested almost in the entire political spectrum of parties, from moderate to ultra-right and left) and relative liberalisation of moral norms. On the other hand, one could observe a radicalisation of social and political spheres, a growing strength of the military establishment, cruel suppression of uprisings and mass political killings. The existence of the Weimar Republic was marked by an extreme paradox: a severe economic crisis and inflation, a high rate of unemployment, criminalisation of society went side by side with the rapid development of both popular and high culture.

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The art process in Weimar Germany fit into the pan-European art context, which was acknowledged as a 'call to order'. The 1920s were marked by the neoclassical period of Picasso and Derain in France, as well as the metaphysical school of painting (De Chirico, Carrà, Savinio) and art group Novecento (Funi, Sironi, Dudreville, etc.) in Italy. However, the 'return to order' in Germany had its national specifics and differed from other European countries in a greater appeal to modernity and topicality. It was Berlin Dada and New Objectivity that set a new system of artistic coordinates for German art.

Young Weimar artists who had witnessed the war could no longer find adequate forms of expression, using the style and aesthetics of Expressionism with its interest in the inner life of the individual, exalted and hyperbolised forms. Some masters mocked the contradictions of the Weimar Republic, as the Dadaists did, while others sought to record 'objective' reality through a naturalistic interpretation of objects, which made New Objectivity artists stand out. In one way or another, in the early 1920s, the focus of artists' work was on current events of public life, and, consequently, they were actively searching for new means of artistic expression.

In this regard, this work aims to consider two art movements – Dada and New Objectivity – and to identify their distinctive features in the context of the anti-modernist mood of the interwar period.

2 Dada in Berlin: Between Provocation and Tradition

The Berlin Dadaists have a strong and widespread image of being the provocateurs who derided a wide range of phenomena of social development, from Philistine conformism to political events. Nevertheless, when carefully studying their theoretical heritage, they appear, rather unexpectedly, as conservatives in some of their texts.

G. Grosz and J. Heartfield, in their joint article *Art in Danger* (1925), emphasised Dada's sobering role in the historical context of the 1920s:

> Dadaism was not 'manufactured' movement, but an organic product, which came into existence as a reaction to the cloud-wandering tendencies of so-called holy art, whose enthusiasts meditated about cubes and Gothicism while the generals were painting with blood. (Sidney 1980, 24)

A negative attitude towards Expressionism was a common feature that brought Dada and New Objectivity closer together, despite the differences in their art practice: Dadaists preferred collages, assemblages, photomontages and graphics (including posters), as well as actions and performances, while representatives of New Objectivity limited themselves to painting and graphics.

Taking on the role of the main offenders of Expressionism, the Berlin Dadaists were the first in Germany to declare the need to return to the skill and tradition in painting. For example, the collective article of Grosz, Schlichter, Hartfield and Hausmann *Gesetze der Malerei* (Laws of Painting) (Grosz et al. 1920; unpublished during the authors' lifetime) states the following:

> The materialistic picture is based on plasticity and accuracy rather than on indecision of subjective impressions or spiritual vibrations. (Grosz et al. 1920)[1]

By materialistic painting, artists implied a work of art that is largely based on academic drawing made with the awareness of form, perspective, light and shadows. The artists, referring to Leonardo da Vinci himself, appealed to their colleagues to rediscover how to be attentive observers of the surrounding reality, rather than follow the Expressionists, whose art, in their opinion, represented "arbitrariness and loss of form" (Grosz et al. 1920).

One can trace the similarity of worldviews between Italian and German masters: in his famous essay of 1918 *Return to the Craft* (*Il Ritorno al Mestiere*), De Chirico (cited in Metken 1981, 83) describes the modern art process from a conservative standpoint, accentuating the fact that the avant-garde movements have negated the significance of drawing, as well as all the traditional studios necessary to create a high-quality work of art in the past. Given the fact that this text was written only two years after De Chirico's article, its impact on the German authors' worldview is obvious.

Grosz's later article, entitled *A Few Words about the German Tradition* (1931), also largely echoes the ideas of the Italian artists. Grosz criticises the contemporary realities in which art and commerce were too closely interconnected. The author takes the position that it is:

> better to be ranked second class but at least to have expressed a little of national community. (Kaes 1994, 502)

He urges his colleagues to turn to the masters of the Northern Renaissance – Bosch, Bruegel, Altdorfer and Dürer – to revive "our good and not inconsiderable tradition of drawing and painting" (Kaes 1994, 502).

It should be noted that in the early 1920s German masters had a genuine interest not only in the Italian master's theoretical legacy but also in metaphysical art. Representatives of the Berlin Dada were attracted by such characteristic features of De Chirico's and Carrà's works as reliance on drawing, technical execution, combin-

1 Unless otherwise indicated all translations are by the Author.

Figure 1 R. Schlichter, *Dada-studio on the Roof*. 1920. Paper, watercolour. Gallery Nirendorf, Berlin

ing various things and phenomena in one space, which gave them an impulse to create assemblages and collages. Impersonalised characters of Italian masters (mannequins and puppets) contradicted the Expressionist 'cult of personality', which drew the attention of many German artists. Leaving out the metaphysical meaning inherent in the works of Italian masters, German artists created topical art in which Berlin appears as a deserted city covered with the functionalist buildings, where weak-willed residents wander. Rudolf Schlichter's watercolour *Dada-studio on the Roof* **[fig. 1]** reflects the artist's passion for metaphysical painting. Nevertheless, despite his desire to adhere to a linear approach, clarity of the drawing and integrity of the form, the traditional linear perspective is distorted here and there are several points of view.

It may be concluded that the Dadaists have paved the way for a new worldview by undermining the reputation of Expressionism. At the same time, their attitudes were paradoxical and contradictory: on the one hand, they called for a revision of the art history, the rejection of reverence for museum masterpieces, and on the other, they called for a return to tradition and the revival of craftsmanship.

3 New Objectivity: Between National Tradition and Modernism

In the early 1920s, another art movement – New Objectivity gradually began to crystallise from the former Expressionists and Dadaists. It absorbed, on the one hand, the antimodernist sentiments that were consonant with the views of representatives of the Italian metaphysical school and Novecento and, on the other hand, radicalism and focus on the current agenda, inherited from Dada.

In the foreword to the catalogue of the first exhibition of New Objectivity in 1925 in Mannheim, the curator Hartlaub noticed the connection between New Objectivity and the classical heritage. He noted:

> In the midst of the catastrophe [artists] began to strive for the closest, most certain and most lasting: truth and craft. (Kaes 1994, 493)

The appeal to the national pictorial tradition was typical for many representatives of the movement. In 1921, Hans Goltz, an art dealer, presented a small exhibition of works by Schrimpf, Menze, Davringhausen and Parziger, hanging the reproductions of works by old masters in the first halls of his gallery in Munich (Crockett 1999, 110), thus hinting to the viewer about the dialogue between contemporary art and the heritage of the past.

The publication of *Malmaterial und seine Verwendung im Bilde* (Artistic Materials and Their Application in Painting), a fundamental book by the German artist, scientist and restorer Max Dörner (1922) was extremely timely. The manual gave a detailed description of techniques, technologies and materials of the painting of prominent masters of the past like Jan van Eyck, Dürer, Titian, Rembrandt and others. It also describes in detail the technique of mixed tempera and oil painting on wood, often used by masters of the Northern Renaissance. It became a handbook for many German artists: Dix, Grosz, Schlichter, Scholz, Heise, Davringhausen. Against the background of a kind of nostalgia for manual labour, craft and painstaking creation of an artwork, this technique was adopted by the representatives of New Objectivity. Georg Grosz wrote in 1921:

> Painting is a manual labour [Handarbeit], and like any other work it can be done well or badly. (Grosz 1921, 13)

In his article *The Object Is First*, Otto Dix (cited in Metken 1981, 141) expresses his thoughts on formal experiments in painting, stating that he prefers to reinforce the expressive form that is contained in the works of the old masters (referring to the works of Cranach, Balthung Grien, Dürer and Altdorfer).

Figure 2
H. Baldung-Grien. *Death and Three Stages of Life*. 1509-11. Oil on wood. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien

Thus, reviving a semi-forgotten technique, they intentionally used wood, rejecting the canvas, applying several layers of glaze to hide the traces of the creative process, invented original signatures for their works in the spirit of the Old Masters. Dix was especially fond of these artists and often imitated them, making his colleagues jokingly call him Otto Hans Baldung Dix (Makela 2002, 43), as a hint of his favourite artist, a representative of the Danube school, Hans Baldung Grien **[fig. 2]**. According to the recollections of the artist Otto Griebel (1986, 110), Dix repeatedly visited the morgue to thoroughly study the corpses of the prostitutes, whom he then depicted in a series of works on lust murders. The commitment to natural sketches and the anatomical accuracy of drawing also correspond to the spirit of Renaissance art with the difference that full-scale Leonardo da Vinci's corpse studies were a reflection of his interests in anatomy, while Dix's sketches were made to reproduce them in painting to shock the viewer.

It is in the dialogue with the Northern Renaissance, or, more precisely, with the works of Hans Baldung Grien, that one should con-

Figure 3 O. Dix, *The Triumph of Death*. 1934. Mixed technique on wood. Stuttgart Art Gallery, Stuttgart

sider, for example, Dix's work *The Girl in the Mirror* (1921), or *The Triumph of Death* (1934) **[fig. 3]**. Through a dialogue with the Old Masters, German artists grotesquely exaggerated the naturalism that was inherent to the art of the Northern Renaissance, which became a characteristic feature of the New Objectivity.

At the same time, it should be emphasised that despite the obvious polemics with Expressionists, New Objectivity artists were followers of Expressionism at the early stages of their work. As a result, the echo of dramatic intensity continued to resound even in their later production. The desire to evoke an emotional reaction in the viewer (shock, disgust, anger) by any means was inherited by that very expressionism, from which many New Objectivity artists then publicly disowned. In his article *Der neue Realismus* (The New Realism), the philosopher Emil Utitz (1927, 174) wrote that in the works of Dix, Grosz, Scholz there was a "fanatical hatred" which, apparently, was an echo of Expressionism, clothed in a naturalistic form.

Figure 4 G. Grosz. *The Big City*. 1916-17. Oil on canvas. Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

Dix's lost painting *Trench* (1923), as well as his famous triptych *The War* (1932) from Dresden New Masters Gallery (that, as it was widely claimed, reproduces the shape of Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1515), were created in a realistic manner, but the naturalistic image of the mangled dead bodies impressed the audience as much as Expressionist paintings. The painting *Seven Deadly Sins* (1933) also, at first glance, refers to the traditional iconography. The work was created immediately after Dix was suspended from teaching at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts. It is an allegorical painting representing the political situation in Germany: one of the characters who represent Envy wears a grotesque mask of Hitler. Dix uses the technique of the Old Masters, but at the same time creates not abstract, but quite concrete images of evil, appealing to modernity.

Despite his passion for Old Masters Georg Grosz's paintings and drawings are influenced by photomontage and collage techniques. In his early paintings of 1917-1918 *Germany. A Winter's Tale* (1918), *Funeral of Oscar Panizza* (1918), *Metropolis* (1917), *Big City* (1917) **[fig. 4]** the stylistic and ideological influences of Expressionist Ludwig Mei-

Figure 5
G. Grosz, *Grey Day*. 1921. Oil on canvas. Berlin National Gallery, Berlin

dner and Italian Futurists can be traced. The chaos of the post-war era is represented via fractional composition, distorted perspective, the displacement of front and background, the overlay of characters and objects on each other. Another work, *Grey Day* (1921) **[fig. 5]**, created in a more realistic manner than the previous paintings refers to the assemblage principle: all the characters seem to be embedded in the surrounding space, and the lack of depth conveys a sense of flatness.

4 Conclusion

Weimar artists' anti-modernist sentiments consisted in an attempt to hide behind the national painting tradition to prevent the collapse of form in their works and overcome the destructive dynamics of the surrounding reality. They represent a characteristic feature of the crisis worldview and stipulated by a chaotic and unstable era in which the authors lived and worked.

The shocking behaviour of Dadaists seems to be completely in contradiction with the classical traditions, and, at first glance, their anti-modernist stance may seem unexpected and paradoxical. However, a careful study of the Dadaist texts in relation to the historical context of the period under study makes it clear that they built almost all their judgments in opposition to Expressionism, which by its nature was alien to tradition.

The art of the representatives of New Objectivity was also caught in a vice between the national pictorial tradition and modernist trends. No matter how hard the artists tried to go back to the craft and tradition, all their oeuvre shows that their works created a new artistic reality that was fundamentally different from the art of the past. Having reinterpreted the national heritage, they created works in which the technique of the Old Masters, reliance on drawing and craftsmanship are combined with the modernist means of expression. As a result, Weimar art should be considered as artists' reflections over contemporary realities, rather than an imitation of the great works of the past.

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