

German photomontage artist John Heartfield: A new online exhibition

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Numerous museums forced to close by the COVID-19 pandemic have placed current or past exhibitions online, thereby providing the public access to them.

The Academy of Arts (Akademie der Künste—ADK) in Berlin, which controls the estate of the legendary left-wing photomontage artist John Heartfield (1891-1968), has placed online a virtual, multimedia presentation of photos, documents and audio-visual testimonials dealing with Heartfield's life and work. The online presentation, *Kosmos Heartfield*, is available in English.

The ADK exhibition, *John Heartfield—Photography plus Dynamite*, was due to have opened at the end of March.

The virtual exhibition is well done and, in many respects, highly relevant in the present situation. More than virtually any other visual artist, except perhaps his friend George Grosz (1893-1959), Heartfield is associated with the struggle against reactionary forces in Weimar Germany (1919-1933). His innovative and slashing political montages became directed at the rise of Nazism in particular.

As Christoph Vandreier vividly describes in his book *Why Are They Back?*, which bears one of Heartfield's photomontages on its front cover, militarists, nationalists and fascists are once again coming out of the pores of crisis-ridden capitalism as in the 1920s and early 1930s and taking up leading positions in the state apparatus, police, military, judiciary and intelligence agencies. Reactionary ideologies are being revived in the universities and frequently picked up and promoted in the media.

Once again, and for the first time since the end of World War II, a far-right party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), sits in the German parliament as the official party of opposition and occupies leading posts in Bundestag committees. Its xenophobic and anti-refugee policy has been increasingly adopted as official German government policy.

John Heartfield was born on June 19, 1891 in Berlin-Schmargendorf, the son of the writer Franz Held (actually Franz Herzfeld) and his wife Alice. He was the first of four children. He changed his name, Helmut Herzfeld, to an English one to protest Germany's chauvinist, anti-English propaganda during World War I.

Heartfield was one of a small group of artists and intellectuals who decisively opposed war and militarism in a period when many others went to war enthusiastically, praising the virtues of combat as a "cleansing thunderstorm." Heartfield's poor health and nervous conditions meant he was able to avoid murderous trench

warfare.

The AKD online presentation explains that he gave up his plan, conceived in his youth, to become a great painter, and committed himself as an artist to the struggle against war and reaction.

The structure of the presentation is based on the five fingers of a worker's hand designed by Heartfield for a German Communist Party (KPD) election poster in 1932 (an appeal for workers to vote for slate no. 5, the KPD ticket). The five sections deal with the chronology of his life, the places he lived in, his various artistic genres, his use of materials and the motifs for his work. Heartfield's eventful and difficult life is vividly described in the online exhibition and it is not necessary to deal here in any detail with the facts of his biography.

The presentation also illustrates Heartfield's artistic environment, which included such figures as Bertolt Brecht, Grosz, Else Lasker-Schüler, Johannes R. Becher and Erwin Piscator, as well as the entire group of artists associated with the Dada movement—Max Ernst, Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann and Otto Dix. Heartfield's opposition to war was shared by his close friend Grosz whom he had known since 1914. Grosz also adopted an English-sounding first name in protest German chauvinism during World War I.

Heartfield's younger brother, Wieland Herzfelde, also played an important role. The two brothers founded the magazine *Neue Jugend* (New Youth) and later the Malik Verlag (Malik Publishing House), which specialised in contemporary political art and Communist literature during WWI. Heartfield designed the covers for the books published by the Malik Verlag. In typical Dada fashion, he designed a portfolio for Grosz, which appeared in *Neue Jugend* in 1917.

A closer examination, however, of Heartfield's biography, his problems, the political decisions he made, and the prevailing political circumstances would have helped a contemporary audience to better understand the artist's rather tragic role and fate. The presentation notes that Heartfield joined the KPD immediately after its foundation in 1919 (as did Grosz). He received his party book from KPD leader Rosa Luxemburg herself, but his decision to side with the working class remains unexplained in the current exhibition.

In fact, Heartfield regarded a workers' revolution along the lines of the Russian October Revolution of 1917 as the only alternative to capitalist exploitation and warmongering. Further research in the Akademie's online archive reveals the numerous references,

photos and documents that testify to his intense preoccupation with the Russian Revolution. Like many other artists and intellectuals, Heartfield regarded the Communist Party as the only political force that could effectively combat capitalist reaction and its drive towards dictatorship.

It was therefore not surprising that Heartfield produced the powerful photo montages which appeared on the front pages of the KPD newspapers *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag) and the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (AIZ, *Workers Pictorial Newspaper*). Many of these montages can be seen in the presentation and a complete documentation is available in the ADK Heartfield online archive.

In the course of the 1920s, the AIZ developed into a publication that found support not only in the working class. The paper published contributions by leading artists and writers such as Käthe Kollwitz, Anna Seghers, Erich Kästner, Maxim Gorki and Kurt Tucholsky (Theobald Tiger). It was also during this period that the KPD increasingly came under the influence of the reactionary Stalinist bureaucracy.

Heartfield's adherence to the KPD, which became completely subordinate to the Stalinist leadership and policies, is not without tragedy. His photomontages vividly exposed the manifold connections between capitalist crisis, the preparations for a new war and Nazism, but he ignored or chose not to see the role played by the KPD in sabotaging a successful struggle by the working class to prevent the seizure of power by Hitler.

Like many of his friends and intellectuals, Heartfield did not question, at least in public, the catastrophic policy of the KPD. Under the influence of Stalin, the KPD refused to fight for a United Front with workers in the Social Democratic Party (SDP)—the policy advocated by the Left Opposition and Leon Trotsky. Instead the KPD denounced the Social Democrats as “social fascists,” helping to open the door for Hitler.

Heartfield remained loyal to the AIZ in Prague where he fled after escaping from a gang of Nazi thugs by jumping from the balcony of his apartment in Berlin in 1933. In exile in Prague along with many other Communists, Social Democrats and left-wing intellectuals who had fled Germany, he created some of his most impressive and politically astute photo montages. He continued to work for his brother's Malik Verlag, also forced into exile.

Heartfield's trip to the Soviet Union in 1931 is not mentioned in the presentation. There is also relatively little information about his half-year stay in the USSR in the ADK online archive and in the exhibition catalog. He lived in Moscow with the writer Sergei Tretyakov, a friend of Brecht and a leading member of the Russian avant garde, who, like many other artists and intellectuals, was not prepared to accept the official Stalinist doctrine of “Socialist Realism” in artistic production. Tretyakov was a victim of the Stalinist purges in 1937. In Odessa, Heartfield helped build the exteriors for Erwin Piscator's film *Revolt of the Fishermen* (1934) based on the novel by Seghers.

In 1938, the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia and Heartfield began his second exile, in London. He chose flight to the West rather than fleeing east into Stalin's sphere of influence. This was no accident—he evidently avoided exposing himself to Stalin's repression. In England, however, he still did not break with

Stalinism and remained a member of the country's KPD community in exile. He was involved in various activities organised by German artists in exile, in particular the Free German Cultural Association (Freier Deutscher Kulturbund).

In the summer of 1940, he was interned as an “enemy alien,” but released after seven weeks for health reasons.

After the war, his first attempt to return to Germany was initially delayed for health reasons and then became problematic following the outbreak of the Cold War. The Stalinist regime in postwar East Germany regarded with suspicion emigrants seeking to return from Western exile who might be too independent-minded. Even after Heartfield was able to return, he had problems building on his previous successes in the German Democratic Republic. The narrow-minded GDR cultural bureaucracy disparaged his photomontages as “formalistic.”

In 1951, he wrote in his résumé: “I work as a freelance artist. I work with my brother Professor Wieland Herzfelde. From now on, my printing work and montages are always undersigned ‘Heartfield Herzfelde.’” The very fact that the artist bore an English name made him an object of suspicion.

Heartfield was able to make some advances in the theatrical field in the GDR, but in a relatively conventional manner. He was unable, however, to recreate his powerful collaboration with Piscator in the 1920s. His admission to the GDR ruling party, the SED, and then to the East German Academy of Arts only took place following the personal intervention of Brecht in 1957.

Heartfield died on April 26, 1968 in East Berlin.

Should the ADK exhibition with its 400 items eventually open to the public, it is well worth visiting. It is due to travel to Zwolle (Netherlands) and London.

The *Photography plus Dynamite* catalog by Angela Lammert, Rosa von der Schulenburg and Anna Schultz is available from the Academy of the Arts bookshop at a special price of €29.90 (from July €39.90) plus shipping costs. In the foreword, the ADK draws attention to the growing influence of far-right radicalism today.



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