

John Heartfield: Photography plus Dynamite

December 2, 2021 – February 27, 2022

From December 2, 2021 to February 27, 2022, the NS-Dokumentationszentrum München (Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism) is showing the exhibition John Heartfield: Photography plus Dynamite. John Heartfield (1891–1968) was one of the most innovative artists of the 20th century. With his polarizing photomontages, the artist denounced war, social injustice and National Socialism. Heartfield was a Communist and passionately opposed to war. He saw through the National Socialists and Adolf Hitler, antagonizing them long before their rise to power. Heartfield's biting motifs against Fascism and war made him one of the most hated opponents of the National Socialist regime.

John Heartfield developed his masterful visual rhetoric from the flood of images unleashed by mass media in the early Weimar Republic. His artistic command of satire and photomontage is nearly unparalleled. Calling himself a *Monteur* (an "assembler") rather than an artist, he produced work for magazines, books, flyers and advertising posters instead of for a fine arts audience. He excelled at politically agitating the working class and provoking the bourgeois elite.

Heartfield's photomontages show the manipulability of the medium of photography, revealing how images can be used and misused as political weapons. In our own times, when the truth of words and images is more disputed than ever and deliberate misinformation from the political right calls for resistance, the timeless contemporaneity of Heartfield's photomontages has clearly reemerged with renewed purpose.

This exhibition was developed in cooperation with the Akademie der Künste, Berlin – the institution which houses Heartfield's estate, has researched it extensively, and has digitized and made the works available online with funding from the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung. The NS-Dokumentationszentrum München has developed its own exhibition concept for this presentation, which sheds light on the many nuances present in John Heartfield's work and exposes his political photomontages to both a historical and a contemporary view. Complex references to the past and to current developments are made visible. Lesser-known designs can be discovered alongside key works, all testaments to heartfield's biography, which was ruptured by the 20th century's political upheavals. Also on view is the video installation *Wer leidet, der schneidet* (He Who Suffers, Cuts, 2019–20) by Marcel Odenbach, a complex homage to the artist John Heartfield and a reflection about montage as a modernist art form.

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#PhotoPlusDynamite

The exhibition on the first upper level at the NS-Dokumentationszentrum is divided into five sections:

War Against War

Warnings about the horrors of war are a central motif in John Heartfield's oeuvre. World War I sparked his uncompromising pacifism and fueled his turn to photomontage as a revolutionary art form. His anger was primarily directed at what he considered a lethal alliance between militarism and capitalism. The artist exposed Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists as dangerous warmongers from the start. Heartfield made use of a repertoire of iconographic images and symbols in his allegorical representations of war. It included battlefields showing fallen soldiers as well as bayonets, gun barrels, spiked helmets, medals, and other militaristic insignia.

"Slicing Through Lies"

John Heartfield used photomontage strategically to undercut National Socialist propaganda. Through his cunning interplay of image and text, he demystified the daily lies spread by the Nazis and revealed the truth. In the last years of the Weimar Republic, the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (AIZ), in which numerous works by Heartfield were published, became an important weapon in the Communist election campaign. The newspaper garnered international attention for its biting commentary on current political affairs.

John Heartfield's photomontages always allude to the inherent manipulability of both photographs and facts. Today the political battle surrounding "the truth" rages on; its contemporary manifestations include maxims such as "Lügenpresse" (the lying press) and "fake news."

United in the Fight

John Heartfield understood his art as a contribution to the political struggle in the interests of the working class. From a profound sense of justice and in opposition to the ruling elites, he joined the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD, German Communist Party) on the day it was founded. In the 1920s Heartfield designed election campaign posters, flyers and emblems as well as illustrations and layouts for publications in the KPD's Agitation and Propaganda Department and the associated paramilitary alliance *Roter Frontkämpferbund* (Red Front-Fighters). Nevertheless, his aesthetics and incisive motifs also met with resistance. The KPD was skeptical of the use of images and art in propaganda, and of the avant-garde. From today's view and with hard-earned hindsight brought about by the experiences of the 20th century's dictatorial regimes, Heart-

field's symbolic repertoire of muscular men, fists and flags appears problematic. At the same time, his critique of militant nationalism and capitalist exploitation remains highly relevant. Recently, the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, has reactivated the symbol of the raised fist.

A Life of Ruptures and Adaptation

The 20th century's political upheaval left behind both biographical and ideological ruptures in John Heartfield's life and work. He was repeatedly forced to adapt to changing working conditions and new political frameworks. While in exile in London, he lived through a difficult period, marked by temporary internment, a work ban lasting several years, and a permanent fear of being deported. Starting in 1943, he was able to eke out a living primarily by designing non-fiction and fiction book covers. Considered a Western emigrant when he relocated to the newly founded German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1950, Heartfield was initially viewed with suspicion. The cultural establishment rejected his art as "bourgeois formalism." The GDR only acknowledged him politically and artistically after the climate in the USSR had shifted following Josef Stalin's death in 1953. It wasn't until just before he died in 1968 that Heartfield achieved some recognition in West Germany, when the student movement rediscovered the anti-Fascist artist's oeuvre.

Use Photography as a Weapon

In 1929, John Heartfield showcased his work at the international Werkbund exhibition Film und Foto under a call to "Use photography as a weapon!" He declared photography to be the most important medium in the political struggle and challenged others to use it systematically. This appeal continues to be heard in daily life, political communication and art.

Cut and paste and other montage techniques have been widely used in contemporary art since the 1960s. Artists have broken away from their traditional confines and intervened in public space with political messages. The critical confrontation with the flood of images issued by the media, particularly with images of violence, is a central theme for politically engaged artists.

On social media, attempts to influence political discourse take the shape of memes and fake news. Complex interrelations, narratives and emotions are condensed into a single image or phrase. The extent to which these largely uncontrollable forms of communication interfere in political decision-making has not yet been fully assessed. What is certain is that manipulated images can be strategically misused for political purposes.

John Heartfield

Hellmuth Franz Joseph Stolzenberg was born on June 19, 1891 in Schmargendorf, near Berlin. His mother was a textile worker; his father the Socialist writer Franz Held (Herzfeld by birth), who came from an upper middle-class Jewish household.

In 1905 Heartfield began an apprenticeship at a bookshop in Wiesbaden. In 1908 he studied at the Königliche Kunstgewerbeschule München (Royal Arts and Crafts School) in Munich. He worked as a commercial artist and in 1913 began studying at the Kunst- und Handwerkerschule Berlin-Charlottenburg (an arts and crafts school). He was drafted into military service in 1914, but was released the following year, presumably due to a feigned nervous breakdown.

In 1916 Hellmuth Herzfeld anglicized his name to John Heartfield in protest against the German war slogan "Gott strafe England!" [May God Punish England!].

In 1917 Heartfield's brother, Wieland Herzfelde, founded the Malik-Verlag in Berlin. Together with George Grosz, Heartfield shaped the publishing house's artistic profile.

The artist also worked as a film set designer at the Grünbaum film studio in Berlin-Weissensee (until 1918) and as a director (until 1920) in the cultural department of the Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft (Ufa).

In 1918 Heartfield joined the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD, German Communist Party) on the day it was founded.

By 1919, Heartfield had become one of the main protagonists of the Berlin Dada movement (the "Monteurdada").

Heartfield developed set designs for Erwin Piscator's Proletarisches Theater (Proletarian Theater) and designed posters, leaflets and agitational materials as well as the emblem of the Roter Frontkämpferbund (Alliance of Red Front-Fighters) for the KPD. In the 1920s he created diverse works for a variety of theaters, including set designs, costume designs, projections, posters and programs.

In 1929 Heartfield received an entire room for his works at the Deutscher Werkbund's international Film und Foto exhibition in Stuttgart. In 1930 he began to work regularly (on staff) for the Arbeiter-Illustrierten Zeitung (AIZ).

In 1933 Heartfield's apartment was raided by SA stormtroopers and he fled to Prague. The artist emigrated to Great Britain in 1938, where he was interned in 1940 as a "foreign enemy."

Heartfield returned to Germany in 1950, to the newly-founded GDR, where both his application to rejoin the SED (Socialist Unity Party) and his

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membership application to the Deutsche Akademie der Künste (East German Academy) were rejected. Reassessment of Heartfield's reputation through the SED's Zentrale Parteikontrollkommission (SPKK) would not occur until 1956, followed by his election as an official member of the Deutsche Akademie der Künste in East Berlin.

Between 1957 and 1967, Heartfield, who had moved to Berlin in the interim, exhibited in East Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Rome, West Berlin, Münster, Frankfurt am Main and Stockholm.

John Heartfield died in 1968.

Program

An extensive program of events accompanies the exhibition John Heartfield: Photography plus Dynamite. In addition to public tours on Tuesdays (5:30 pm) and Sundays (3 pm), talks, a reading and a media workshop, among other events, are planned throughout the course of the exhibition.

Dec. 19, 2021, 7 pm: "Von Heartfield zu Memes: Die revolutionäre Kraft der politischen Montage." A talk with Sabine Kriebel, University College Cork, Ireland, and Anna Schultz, Akademie der Künste, Berlin (in German)

Jan. 25, 2022, 7 pm: "The Art of Anti-Nazi Propaganda: Willi Münzenberg and the Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung." A Zoom talk with Kasper Braskén, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland, and Andrés Zervigón, Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA

Feb. 3, 2022, 5:30 pm: "Digitalisierung eines Künstlerlebens: Die digitale Erschließung des Nachlasses von John Heartfield." A talk and tour with Anna Schultz and Meike Herdes, the Art Collection of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin (in German)

Feb. 9, 2022, 7 pm: "Die Montage als ästhetisches und politisches Prinzip." A talk with Marcel Odenbach and Maria Muhle, chair of Philosophy and Aesthetic Theory at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich (AdBK) (in German)

Feb. 16, 2022, 7 pm: "Die 'rote Gräfin': Wiederentdeckung der linken Autorin Hermynia zur Mühlen." Reading and talk with Julia Cortis, Sven Harnushek, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU), and Katharina Manojlovic, Literature Museum of the Austrian National Library (in German)

Feb. 22, 2022, 7 pm: "John Heartfield im Spannungsfeld von Kultur und Politik 1928–1957." A talk with Rosa von der Schulenburg and Michael Krejsa, Akademie der Künste, Berlin (in German)

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Feb. 5, 2022, 10 am – 1 pm: "Von der Heartfield-Montage zum Internet-Meme." Media workshop in collaboration with the Medienzentrum München (in German) Registration: buchung.nsdoku@muenchen.de

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Further information and scheduling (updated daily): www.nsdoku.de

Publications

John Heartfield. Fotografie plus Dynamit / John Heartfield. Photography plus Dynamite (Available in German or English)

With contributions by Vera Chiquet, Richard Deacon, Tacita Dean, Stephan Dörschel, Jeanpaul Goergen, Meike Herdes, Haiko Hübner, Charlotte Klönk, Michael Krejsa, Prem Krishnamurthy, Angela Lammert, Marcel Odenbach, Jindřich Toman, Rosa von der Schulenburg Andrés Mario Zervigón, et al.

Angela Lammert, Rosa von der Schulenburg and Anna Schultz (eds.), on behalf of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin

Montage oder Fake News? Von Heartfield bis Twitter

Angela Lammert (ed.)

Akademie der Künste, Berlin / Steidl GmbH & Co., OHG, 2021

Heartfield Online – Catalogue of John Heartfield's graphic estate

More than 6000 works from John Heartfield's estate have been preserved in the Art Collection of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin. More than 4000 works have been made publicly available online since 2018: www.heartfield.adk.de. In addition, a virtual exhibition was developed under the title Kosmos Heartfield in 2019.