

Art History Exam

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The divided heritage

themes and problems
in German
Modernism

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can serve to motivate desire for alternative personal and societal identities. These questions consider that the popularity of certain forms of entertainment (film, T.V.) is, in part, due to pleasures not always restricted to individualistic fantasies but equally extending to the mobilisation of desires for more satisfying societal constructions. Further work is needed concerning the reception of both high and mass culture and the assimilation of a complex area of representational interplay within specific areas of reception.

Strategies of pleasure and deconstruction: Hannah Höch's photomontages in the Weimar years

Maud Lavin

I will suggest, then, that the proper political use of pleasure must always be *allegorical* in the sense [that]: the thematizing of a particular 'pleasure' as a political issue ... must always involve a dual focus, in which the local issue is meaningful and desirable in and of itself, but is also at *one and the same time* taken as the *figure* for Utopia in general, and for the systemic revolutionary transformation of society as a whole.

Fredric Jameson, 'PLEASURE: a political issue'

I

Pleasure as a condition has its basis in the body and its drives, but the many levels on which we experience pleasure are not restricted to the physical and personal. Rather, pleasure – or the experience of the pleasurable – also functions ideologically, shifting according to different historical and cultural contexts, but always maintaining an inherent or latent potential for political transformation. In arguing for this conception of pleasure as a radical political force, Fredric Jameson suggests that it occurs in two ways simultaneously: as a motivation for local or individual political involvement and as an allegory for the transformation of societal relations as a whole.¹ In other words, pleasure functions politically when it breaks through the closure of self-satisfaction and links up with the broader pleasure of desiring a utopian social structure. Pleasure, then, always has the potential to serve a specific kind of allegory, one that is a figure for social utopia, and to be experienced dialectically on both local and societal levels.

Today, these issues regarding pleasure and its political functions are central to debates in feminist film theory concerning the nature and function of representation and specifically questioning the ways in which women are identified both as the site of and the principal consumers of pleasure. In terms of processes of reception, a fundamental concern is how women are accustomed to reading visual images and how conventionalised media representations contribute to female identity formation. This contemporary discourse on the relationship between women, mass media and pleasure is critical to my consideration here of Hannah Höch's Weimar era photomontages, since Höch's work provides

an important political precedent for the consideration of these issues. As early as the 1920s, Höch, a member of Berlin Dada, had evolved an aesthetic that incorporated the pleasure of viewing the mass media and, while repeating and celebrating these pleasures, also used montage to transform media images into allegorical figures of female liberation and societal revolution. Although Höch's specific techniques or motivations cannot be transposed from her era to the present, her aesthetic strategies of pleasure and deconstruction bear directly on contemporary discourse.

Höch's photomontages were created partly in response to contemporary representations of women in the mass media. In the 1920s, an unprecedented proliferation of photography in newspapers and magazines offered new pleasures to female film or theatre fans, who could suddenly see innumerable images of their favourite actresses and dancers. The expanded availability of photographs of these stars contributed toward their idealisation and increased the negative potential to develop closed systems of narcissism and/or masochism in identifying with the ideal. In Höch's work, this closure is disrupted both literally and metaphorically, for the highly controlled or posed photographic portraits are cut up, reassembled and recombined with other photo-fragments to form new, pleasurable yet disturbing representations.

Höch's approach – to aggressively recompose the physical incarnation of the stereotype, to functionally fragment the image and to call into question its founding precepts – is particularly relevant to current discussions regarding the strategic implementation of the feminine masquerade. For some critics maintain that the masquerade provides a device to reveal the cultural construct of femininity, and that the artificiality of the masquerade can be dramatised through exaggeration or other alienation techniques. Mary Ann Doane, in her seminal article on female reception and film, 'Film and the masquerade: theorizing the female spectator', argues that by treating femininity explicitly as a masquerade, the female spectator might gain control over and distance from conventionalised structures of femininity. Doane desires a defamiliarisation of the masquerade, thus invoking a Brechtian alienation effect – that is, one that could forbid empathy and encourage recognition and distance. In this way, Doane attributes to the masquerade a radical transformatory potential: 'By destabilizing the image, the masquerade confounds the masculine structure of the look. It effects a defamiliarization of female iconography.'²

However, this claim can be contrasted with the ways in which the masquerade already functions in popular culture. For example, Joan Collins, as Alexis Colby in the television epic *Dynasty*, plays a character developed specifically on the basis of her subtle display and directing of the masquerade. Alexis is shown constantly constructing and re-constructing herself and her appearance in accordance with her current

scheme. Other examples of this type of female pleasure in watching women represent themselves, flaunting and manipulating the masquerade of femininity come to mind easily. The rock star, Madonna, simultaneously wearing the signs of the bride and the whore, or Sheila E., in the 1985 film *Krush Groove*, packaging and re-packaging herself for financial success, both represent impudent and spectacular manipulations of the masks of femininity. Even these brief examples elicit the question: do these stars – experts at manipulations of the masquerade – really produce a defamiliarisation with its Brechtian connotations, an alienation effect that in some ways liberates the female viewer from the constricting range of acceptable female identities?

Rather, what this suggests and what is made clear by *Vogue* and other upscale women's magazines is that western women today are raised with a consciousness of one aspect of femininity as a masquerade already inscribed in their upbringing. And, while a recognition and control of this masquerade might alleviate certain identity traumas and provide limited and closed pleasures, it is not a curative, nor does it ward off the pressure towards homogenisation. To exaggerate (or to apply any other defamiliarisation technique to) conventional feminine identities is one step in recognising femininity as a cultural construct instead of a biological given. However, it is only one step and one that does not provide alternatives to rigid societal definitions of the feminine. With the canonisation and simplification of Brechtian theory in contemporary criticism, it has become common to praise alienation techniques without considering alienation as merely one element in a complex set of a spectator's responses which in turn are a part of a specific socio-economic arena of reception. Certainly, Doane is proposing an alienation more extreme than that usually found in popular culture; however, her contribution is more theoretical than practical and more local than allegorical and refers back to itself only. In general, such defamiliarisation techniques seem largely insufficient unless they are incorporated into an allegorical representation, one that elicits a desire for pleasurable alternatives and political transformation.

So, in relation to these contemporary issues and to Höch's photomontages, we might ask: What would be alternatives to the choice between a restrictive cultural concept of femininity and the exaggeration of its masquerades? Here, I would like to consider as an alternative the representation of oscillation, oscillation being the means for dislocating static definitions of gender and socio-economic hierarchies. What I am calling for is not a different, feminine 'Role model', a humanistic ideal of an individualistic, whole female persona to be projected through the mass media but, rather, an androgynous pleasure in experiencing a range of gender positions. In this model, the ramifications of representing flux in occupying gender roles are linked directly to a utopian socio-economic equity in that gender roles are viewed as characterisations of power

relations, not biology. With this concept in mind, my questions centre on how (or if) it is possible to intervene within capitalist mass media's functions in feminine identity formation. How is it possible to go beyond a representation of the masquerade and other defamiliarisation techniques? How can the political pleasures of oscillation between gender positions be represented? And how can pleasure be incorporated with deconstruction and other critical strategies?

These contemporary questions and biases form the basis of my examination of Hannah Höch's photomontages of the Weimar period. Höch's work is presented here not as an ideal, the totalised production of a creative genius à la Picasso to which we turn for autonomous pleasure or mythic answers, but rather as an example, critical for the questions it raises and for the political strategies it employs. Although I am focusing on a tension between deconstruction and pleasure specific to the reception of mass media images in the 1920s, it should be clear that the motivations and context for my investigation are present-day. Indeed, it is this contemporary position from which my writing of history develops that I want to state explicitly. Given the exhibition *German Art in the 20th Century* as the articulating context of this essay, it is necessary to argue for a methodology in opposition to an ordering in which chronology serves as a substitute for history and in which style is invoked as a masking and unifying factor. As an alternative methodology, I want to assert here the idea of writing history and an overtly political representation – a writing of contemporary myth, a rewriting of memory, and a feeding of current ideologies. To do this it is necessary to write into this essay the historicity of my own position. For my position is itself not fixed, but rather exists as part of a contemporary discourse, in which we desire to transform our pleasure as female viewers and producers of mass-media into a revolutionary strategy.

II

During the Weimar Republic, 1918–1933, two developments – both part of a larger history of industry, rationalisation and consumerism – came about simultaneously: a rapid growth in the mass print media and a redefinition in the roles of women. Generally, these social phenomena have been regarded separately, but they are connected in the proliferation of New Woman images produced for the mass media's consumer market. Here it is necessary to distinguish between the representation of the New Woman and actual material changes in the lives of Weimar women. New to this era were the numbers of women in assembly line and secretarial jobs, in a rationalised and double-burdened schedule of housework and wage-work, and even participating in a rationalised sexuality propounded by sex reformers of the period. But at the same time – despite these apparently major changes in women's public and private lives – the

socio-economic status of many individual women seems not to have improved. Rather, it was in the mass media that a complex and often contradictory image of modern women was generated. In newspapers, films, magazines and fine art, a radically new societal role for women was projected and distorted, and popular culture became the scene of anxieties and desires about women's transforming identities.

Hannah Höch's photomontages draw on these mass-media for their sources: the cultural myths and mass-media stereotypes of the modern female are ones that Höch, operating within the Berlin Dada aesthetic and from her own socio-economic position as a New Woman, both affirms and negates. Analyzing Höch's representational strategies – on the one hand, deconstructive techniques using montage and, on the other, a pleasurable repetition and restructuring of fan photographs (newly available publicity and news photographs of stars designed for mass consumption) – provides a reading of her individual response to the deeply ambiguous positions of Weimar women.

In terms of Höch's political reading of media images, it is significant that all her Berlin Dada photomontages date from the period just after the so-called socialist revolution of 1918, and after the subsequent disillusionment of many people, including members of the left intelligentsia, with the new Republic. The Berlin Dadaists were especially critical of the Republic's inability to create a viable socialist system and of its bloody suppression of the Spartakist revolt. As a result, the more radical members of Berlin Dada – George Grosz, John Heartfield, and Wieland Herzfelde – joined the newly formed communist party, the KPD, while Höch and Hausmann were affiliated with a more utopian type of anarcho-communism.³ Despite the Dadaist's attention to other political issues, Höch was the only Berlin Dadaist to centre her montages around the representation of Weimar Germany's New Woman.

As the historian Atina Grossmann explains, the New Woman was 'a much abused and conflated image of the flapper, young stenotypist and working mother', a symbol of actual social and demographic changes in Germany during and after World War I.⁴ Intense debate in the media and the legislature of the period centered on two significant trends: a gradual increase in the number of women working (by 1925, 35 per cent of the female population was employed) and a declining birth rate (despite the illegality of publicising contraception and performing abortion).⁵ Although these statistical shifts were not limited by class, the popular media sources used by Höch, such as *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, the top-circulation Berlin photoweekly, and *Die Dame*, a German equivalent of *Vogue*, were restricted to candid or idealised photographs of specifically bourgeois women. (Later the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* and other communist print media offered a different subject and type of idealisation, heroising the female worker in a photo-reportage style).

Höch herself had been raised in a small-town bourgeois milieu and had

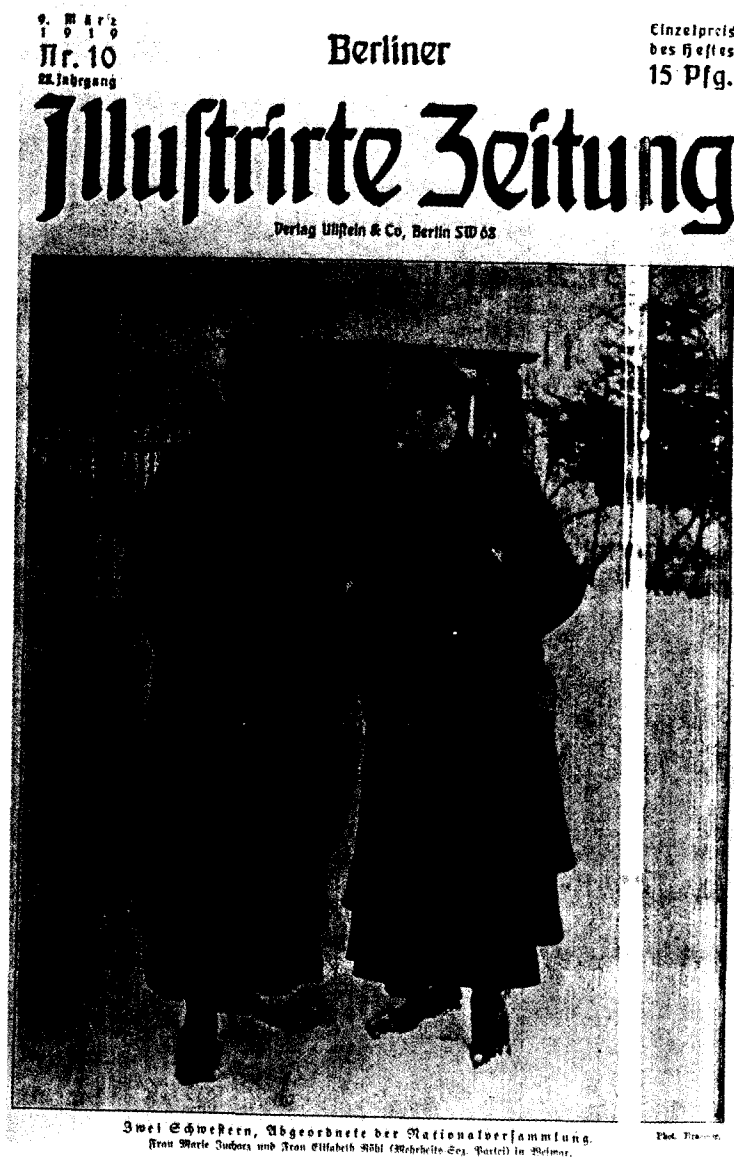
moved to Berlin where she led a non-traditional personal life and supported herself financially. From 1916 to 1926 Höch worked for Ullstein Verlag, the publisher of *BIZ* and *Die Dame* and so was familiar with their New Woman images. Höch was employed in the handiwork department, which produced individual brochures on knitting patterns, crocheting, etc., and which also contributed to a bi-monthly two-page spread in *Die Dame* on women's handicrafts.

The bourgeois media images of New Woman produced by Ullstein Verlag represent a narrow range of stereotypes; in the 1919 *BIZ*, photographs of women are most often either of politicians or performers. For example, the 9 March 1919 cover of *BIZ* portraying two National Assemblywomen is a photograph of contradictory messages: the newly empowered women demonstrate authority and timidity, confidence and lack (see plate 7.1). The two wear severe, business-women coats and hats and carry briefcases. They seem insecure in this masculine attire and stand hunched, looking out timidly. As German women had just gained the right to vote in late 1918 and first ran for office in January 1919, in *BIZ* at that time there was a fascination with female politicians, and many portraits were published, documentations of problematic accessions to power within a patriarchy.

By contrast, the 4 May 1919 cover of *BIZ* shows an actress performing the role of the New Woman, outfitted for aeronautics, buoyant and energetic, a photograph functioning as an advertisement for the idealised, bourgeois modern female (see plate 7.2). Framed by the new aviation technology, the actress poses for the camera with a theatre-trained stance. Her smile announces the ease with which she bears both goggles and flowers, helmet and curls, flight wear and femininity. In this photograph, the contradictions of daily life are glossed over; such cosmetic representations could serve to alienate the female spectator from her perception of her own complex identity, material needs and possible effectiveness.

Similarly, in 1918 and 1919, *Die Dame* illustrated photographs of two principal types of women: modern female performers, particularly dancers, and daughters and wives from 'good houses' or well-to-do bourgeoisie. While this visual dualism of 'good daughters' and sensual dancers attests to a traditional good girl/bad girl dichotomy, it also points to a class division between *Die Dame* readers and the photographed dancers. In a general sense, this split can be theorised as a projection of desires about new identities for middle-class women on to the 'other' of what had been, in the pre-war era, a lower-class profession.

Still, these photographs of dancers cannot be judged simplistically, for they also offer historically specific pleasure and utopian moments of identification. We might ask whether such representations could in some way have functioned as allegories for general societal change. Would it have been possible for photographs of bold and sybaritic modern dancers to signify liberation when they were contained within a magazine devoted



Zwei Edmehren, Abgeordnete der Nationalversammlung.
 (Von Marie Suders und Frau Elisabeth Sittl (Rechts) in Berlin.)

Phot. T...-

7.1 Cover.
 Illustrierte Z
 1919, Zwe
 Abgeordnet
 Nationalve

7.2 Cover, *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* 4 May 1926, 'Margarete Christians in Deutschen Theater in Berlin) vor Antritt einer Reise im Flugzeug'



to the status quo? This question is problematised by the fact that when *Die Dame* celebrated modernity, it was in the service of selling new consumer products and not as a style connoting alternative ideologies. However, in those early days, the relationship between a female fan and the rapidly transforming mainstream press lacked the narrative and biographical structure of today's fan magazines; instead, in *Die Dame*, dancer photographs were spread on the cover and throughout the magazine with little or no relationship to the articles, creating a counter-text analogous to the advertisements.

If these dancer photographs may have been somewhat circumscribed by the magazines that illustrated them, when Höch removed them from the magazine context, she allowed the reception of these images to change. Moreover, Höch constantly used photographs of admired actresses and dancers in her photomontages specifically as figures of liberation. By combining the pleasures inherent in these images with deconstructive techniques, Höch was able to link female pleasures with calls for systemic transformation and flux in Weimar society, to urge a political use of pleasure.

In general, during the Weimar period, Höch shifted from using mass media photographs of the New Woman as celebratory allegories – as in her well-known Dada photomontage, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919–20) – to a multi-layered treatment of such images as in the painting *Roma* (1925), or even the more critical photomontages such as *Deutsches Mädchen* (1930) and the Ethnographic Museum series of mid to late Weimar. Yet, at the same time, Höch never relinquished the pleasure of representing fan photographs of women, as is evident throughout her Weimar work from the 1919–20 *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* to the Dancer series begun in 1926 (see plate 7.3). On multiple levels, Höch both criticised and reproduced the media's representation of women in her day. Therefore it is the interaction between deconstruction and pleasure that merits attention in Höch's aesthetic.

To look closely at specific strategies in a major early work, how does deconstruction operate in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*? In Derrida's theory of deconstruction, he conceived of it as a process: specifically, the use of components of a system to decentre the supposed truth values, to dissolve the hierarchies of that system, and to activate within it a play of other, alternative ideologies. In employing these terms, my purpose is not simply to map postmodern deconstructive theory on to pre-existing modernist motives, but rather to explore ways in which certain elements of contemporary theory were already nascent in the dismantling strategies at work within certain modernist traditions in the Soviet Union, Germany, the United States and elsewhere. In a general sense, much of Berlin Dada photomontage is deconstructive in that it uses mainstream mass media images – ones that perpetuate the dominant beliefs of Weimar society – to



7.3 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), 1919–20

create artworks that foreground minority ideologies such as communism and question the very language with which mainstream beliefs are articulated.

In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, many of the photographs are of women whom Höch admired. In the opposition Höch creates between the anti-Dada world of the paunchy, compromised President Ebert and other Weimar government leaders (upper right) and images of the Dadaists, aligned with Marx, Lenin and other revolutionary figures (lower right), famous women are used to signify various metaphors of liberation: movement, technology, the female, the new, Dada and revolution. By functioning as operatives in a decentred inversion of Weimar society, the images of women are deconstructive elements in Höch's critique of the Weimar Republic.

However, the various mass media representations of the New Woman are not themselves deconstructed. Instead Höch appears as a fan of these images, and it is significant for the reception of Höch's work that she makes use of easily recognisable photographs celebrating famous contemporary women. In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, the centrifugal composition rotates around the body of the popular dancer Nidja Impekoven, who holds aloft a speared and beheaded Käthe Kollwitz. In the Dada circle portraits, these female faces are included: Nidja Impekoven again (here bathing John Heartfield), Hannah Höch, and the actress Asta Nielsen (as an American photojournalist). On the whole, the recognisable women are, by their identities, movements and locations, strongly and positively associated with Dada and the new. (Although there are three women in the anti-Dada section, two are anonymous.)

In this work, the power of Dada is signified on several levels by movement; it is a destabilising force. The dynamic action of the compositional design is paralleled iconographically by images suggesting movement, either by machines, wheels and roller bearings, or female dancers, or revolutionary scenes.⁶ Hanne Bergius has suggested that dance could represent the anti-intellectual, action-dedicated beliefs of Dada.⁷ In the same way, Impekoven, as a female dancer, can be read in her position here as antithetical to male logocentric culture, with Kollwitz's head in an importantly unresolvable and ambiguous position. As the dancer symbolises power, movement and the female, the key role of Dada dancer is one that Höch assumes for herself. For the title, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, implies a female actor; it is the female gaze which cuts through the 'Weimar Beer Belly' and offers this Dadaist cross-section.

Höch's women in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* have major and revolutionary roles. Within the composition of the photomontage, physical expression, such as dancing and ice skating, are mainly performed by women. Dada, as disseminated by voice and word, is associated with men. (For example, 'dada' emanates from Einstein's brain in the upper left of the montage.) But it is Impekoven's body, small as it is, that literally



7.4 Hannah Höch, *Roma*, 1925

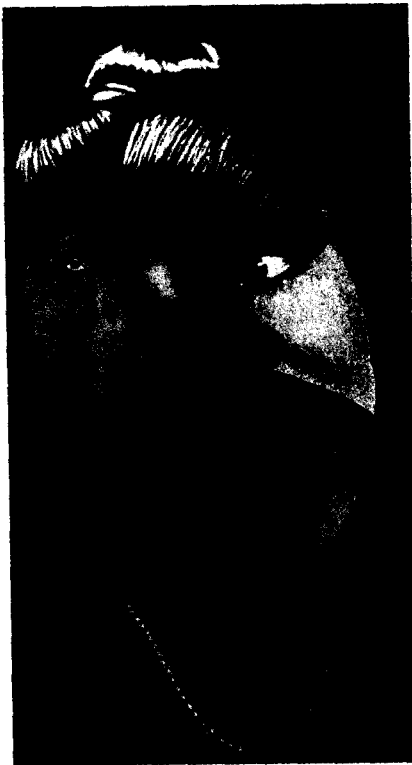
has the pivotal position in the work. Impekoven's pirouette and the movements of other dancers and ice skaters can be read explicitly in the terms of physical freedom and Dada anti-repression. But, more than this, with Hausmann's theories, the images of women can be confirmed as signifiers of female liberation and anarcho-communist revolution. In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, the montages and representations of women function as deconstructive elements within the centrifugal dissolution of Weimar hierarchies.

In a later work, *Roma* (1925), this strategy continues (see plate 7.4). The central woman in this case is the actress Asta Nielsen. In a forceful and provocative way she simultaneously stands for a particular androgynous accession to power in a patriarchy – her fame as a film star was based partly on her playing male roles⁸ – and an oppositional, leftist political force countering Mussolini and ordering him out of Rome. What is different here is that, unlike in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, Höch is

performing a deconstruction of female coquettishness: in two repeated gestures, Nielsen orders Mussolini out, while also seeming to flirt with him. Nielsen and Mussolini both are dressed as competitive female swimmers, their athletic outfits connoting the 'body-as-machine' cult in post-war Germany.⁹ Poised to enter the water, their pressed-together knees and aslant heads also read as gestures of coy flirtation. Contemporary photographs of leotarded or bathing-suited female athletes – common in newspapers like *BIZ* – often possessed sexual overtones such as those emphasised and parodied by Höch in *Roma*. Höch also inverts the meaning of the image of female flirtation, attaching to Nielsen's luring crouch its opposite, Nielsen's pointing hand, ordering Mussolini away. Thus, in *Roma*, the deconstruction of coquettishness is effected by showing opposites but favoring one pole of action, women as commanding instead of coquettish. This dialectical approach is appropriate to montage, where opposites can be juxtaposed on denotative and connotative levels, and Höch created *Roma* as an oil whose composition imitates photomontage.

While in many of Höch's Dada photomontages she employs media photographs of women to symbolise progress, in some Dada images and in many works of the late twenties, Höch uses more disruptive montage techniques to unmask media constructions of the New Woman, her masquerades, roles and sexuality. Particularly discomforting are works such as *Deutsches Mädchen* (1930), where Höch cuts up and reassembles photographs of women's faces (see plate 7.5). Identification with the image of a pretty, young German woman is made uncomfortable by this disfiguration, and the subjecthood of the figure is denied by substituting two unmatched eyes for the woman's own. Höch transforms the face and especially the eyes from the home of consciousness and the self into an externally manipulated set of parts; she composes fragments in such a way as to disorient the gaze, multiply perspectives, shift scale and, above all, assault empathy. Again, Höch dismantles conventions of the mass media, such as those that use the eyes to represent an exalted subjecthood. By using fragments of media images, Höch reveals both the conventionalised nature of media representations and their origin as highly manipulated constructions, rather than documentation of natural truths.

To return to Höch's use of allegory in her Berlin Dada period, 1918–1922, the contemporary theories of Raoul Hausmann support the argument that Höch's representations of women in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* are allegorical and involve the female as a liberating political force. Hausmann's 'feminist' and anti-Freudian theories are elaborated in a series of articles published in 1919, at a time when he and Höch were lovers. Particularly influential for Hausmann's writing was the psychoanalyst Otto Gross, who separated himself from classical Freudianism on the issue of gender differentiation. Not that Freud can be posited simplistically as an essentialist, but Gross saw gender difference as



societally conditioned and considered such conditioning as it was practised in his own culture to be repressive and destructive. Gross's writings, however inconsistent and utopian, contain arguments for the full expression of male and female sexuality in communal living. Following Gross' theories, Hausmann attempted in his 1919 articles to naturalise communism by locating constructive communal instincts in the unconscious. According to Gross and Hausmann, these instincts, along with gender roles, had been repressed and their manifestations malformed by patriarchal capitalist society. Therefore they argued for an idealistic repatterning of sexuality and family structures to liberate communal instincts.¹⁰

In a series of articles in the post-war periodical *Die Erde*, Hausmann developed a model of communal living that centered around matriarchy, in which he combined pre-war anarchist goals with post-war admiration for communism.¹¹ For our purposes, what is significant in Hausmann's theories is how his concept of political revolution is interdependent with a new, liberated role for women in society. It should be strongly cautioned that the theories of Gross and Hausmann should be considered as

theoretical texts intertwined with but *not* reflective of their personal relationships; after all, both men participated in the problematic and, by our contemporary standards, sexist bohemian mores of their times.¹²

In his 'Weltrevolution' essay, Hausmann wrote in support of a communist economic revolution, stating that it would not be viable unless accompanied by a sexual revolution:

The communist movement will lead to a fiasco of male spirit if it does not carry out a radical switch-over from only economic justice to a sexual justice that allows women finally to become women.¹³

For Hausmann, the capitalist ideas of ownership were deeply rooted in the patriarchal organisation of the family, a system legalised by marriage which allows the father to possess the wife and children. Hausmann, in theory, opposed marriage, asserting that: 'Marriage is the projection of rape into law.'¹⁴ This oppression of women's sexuality enforced female bondage and the false idea of the male's right to possession. Hausmann, at least in his essays, insisted that each person should have control of his or her own body, and that women should have the right to experience a full range of female sexuality:

The formation of a female society which leads to a new promiscuity and, connected to this, to matriarchy (as opposed to the patriarchal family of masculine shaping) is most profoundly linked to the reorganization of bourgeois society under communism.¹⁵

Hausmann was a theoretician – his nickname was 'Dadasoph' – and a prolific writer, whereas Höch left few written statements. Unfortunately, she published nothing at the time on feminist issues. Höch and Hausmann were closely associated, but it cannot simply be assumed that she agreed with his writings. In much later interviews, Höch disassociates herself, for the most part, from the women's movement and does not comment on Hausmann's interweaving of feminism and anarcho-communism. There are, though, areas in Hausmann's theory which must have been of interest to Höch and which pertain to Höch's representation of women.

Despite the fact that Hausmann in his relationship with Höch actually contradicted certain tenets of his own 'feminism', he upheld others. Höch recalled the relationship as 'a difficult and sad apprenticeship', and, in contrast, remembered Schwitters as one of the few male artists of the time who could respect a woman as a colleague.¹⁶ Still, Höch might have agreed in general with Hausmann's call for liberation of women. Although a woman from a bourgeois family and the daughter of an authoritarian father, she was leading an unorthodox and independent life. (In 1920, for example, she hiked to Rome across the Alps for travel and in an effort to separate herself from Hausmann.)¹⁷ Also, she was living with Hausmann outside marriage. Like Hausmann, in her Berlin Dada days Höch would most likely have found sexual equality aligned with communism. Her own support of communism is evidenced by her participation in the 1920

November Group letter which demanded artists' involvement in politics and advocated communism in particular.¹⁸ This was a time when many Weimar left intellectuals supported the communist ideals associated with the early years of the Bolshevik revolution. And even later, in the Cold War years when it was impolitic, she admitted her earlier interest in communism.¹⁹ The most convincing proof of Höch's associating women's liberation with political revolution is in her art work, where representations of women are central to her ironic, anti-Weimar images depicting and urging political change.

Instead of simply celebrating Höch's deconstructions, however, I would like to raise some problems and questions presented by her work. This is not to suggest that Höch should have existed as some kind of ideal to which we look for model behaviour. Instead, I want to indicate limits in Höch's work and to generalise these for their relevance in our contemporary debates. These limits are ones of class and distribution. For example, Höch's heroines are almost exclusively bourgeois, as are the masquerades addressed. In addition, one might point to Höch's marginalisation, both in relation to other Dadaists and to a larger public. She did not participate in distribution channels which reached a broader audience, as, for example, Grosz and Heartfield did with the Malik Verlag. Höch was the only woman in Berlin Dada, and I suspect that her being female was a factor in her unspoken exclusion from certain distribution systems. So, despite the great power of her images, we are left with questions as to the effectiveness of Höch's aesthetics and deconstructive art in general – doubts that disrupting a sense of unified self or recognising the uses of female masquerades can *in themselves* trigger a shift in political identities, either individual or collective.

III

✓ As I suggested at the outset, Höch's work is not only about deconstruction: it is also about pleasure. Using montage, Höch fragments photographs of female performers and allegorises these images, recomposing them in open-ended narratives, eliciting but confounding a sense of closure and empathy in the viewer. To look at the unintegrated image of Impekoven and Kollwitz in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* is to respond with feelings of empathy, alienation, exultation and dislocation (see plate 7.6). Ambiguities result from viewing the head separated from the female body and from recognising the dancer's headless body as a signifier of female pleasure, power and movement. As such images become allegories in the deconstructive narrative of the larger composition, this pleasure is linked specifically to revolutionary change.

Here theories of montage reception from the twenties and thirties, particularly those of Ernst Bloch, aid in interpreting the nascent utopianism of Höch's montages. In much of Bloch's theoretical writing, he



7.6 Detail. Hans
*Schnitt mit dem
Küchenmesser* –
the Küchen Knife
the central mon
Nidda Impekov
Kathe Kollwitz

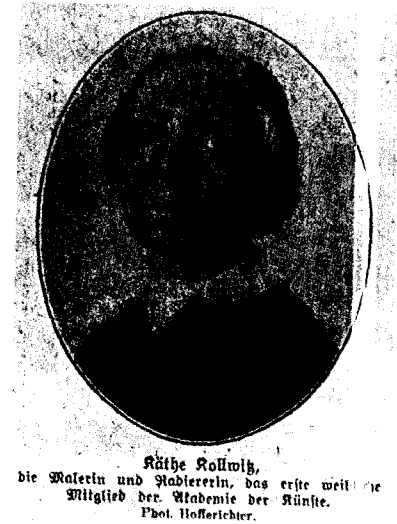
stresses the critical value of disjuncture and fragmentation and their relationship to anticipatory consciousness. Bloch does not privilege a single technique such as photomontage. Rather, he celebrates any technique that prompts the viewer to desire a new, Marxist utopian future. This technique would necessarily avoid creating a closed system. Bloch critically examines both fine art and mass culture for utopian traces (these being elements in a representation that elicit a desire for societal utopia). Thus Bloch, unlike Lukács, concentrates on the reception of various styles rather than on prescribing one correct style. Bloch is interested in mass appeal and considers the liberating potential of both the nonsynchronous

(*ungleichzeitig*) and the futuristic. This position immediately raises questions about the relationship of mass media to pleasure and the issues of liberation and its link to political change. This whole argument has direct bearing on Hanne Bergius' discussion of the representation of dance in Höch's work as connoting exultation, Dada and the female. For, in terms of Bloch's theory, these dance elements can be read as utopian traces and point to a reading of the more pleasurable, less overtly critical aspects of Höch's work as presenting radical alternatives.²⁰

Fredric Jameson's recent theories of utopianism are closely related to Bloch's writings.²¹ Both theorists emphasise the need for a radical utopianism and warn of the dangers of a reified utopianism. The difference between these categories of utopianism is in *what* is desired – that which contributes to societal change (such as a Marxist vision) or, in contrast, that which appears to promise newness but actually forecloses change (such as the technological progressivism so prevalent in the twenties).²² Bloch in particular is concerned with how these different utopian visions combine with other elements in representation (one example is his writing on the mass appeal of Nazi culture).²³ Thus to apply a Blochian critique is not simply a matter of identifying elements as utopian but rather of analysing their function within representation.

In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, the historical specificity of Höch's referents to Marx, Lenin, Ebert, Hindenburg and others prevents a timeless idealisation. And, in terms of formal strategies, it is her combination of pleasure with deconstruction that disallows reification. In other words, Höch celebrates female pleasures of liberation along with the dissolution of the Weimar government and suggests an anarcho-communist alternative; none of these is separable from one another; all of these are in flux. This assertion can be explored by focusing on what kind of pleasures are represented in the Impekoven/Kollwitz pairing and how they are depicted formally.

In 1919 Käthe Kollwitz had just been named the first female professor at the Prussian Academy of Arts, and, at the age of 52, held the position of a long-established and highly respected artist/activist. Höch's image of her head was cut from the 30 March 1919 *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* which announced Kollwitz's appointment.²⁴ The oval of the head is left intact and icon-like, but an idealised wholeness is made impossible by the disassociation of head from body and by its diagonal orientation (see plate 7.7). In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, the head is speared by an Indian man with an elephant. Yet, whatever connotations of martyrdom might be inferred are made merely ironic by the improbability of the narrative. The spear disturbs neither Kollwitz's head nor her contemplative expression. Although formally, there is a great contrast between Kollwitz's integrated stereotypes of working-class women and Höch's ecstatic, fragmented dancers, politically, Kollwitz was aligned often with the Dadaists. In addition, several tributes were later paid Kollwitz in the



Käthe Kollwitz,
die Malerin und Radiererin, das erste weibliche
Mitglied der Akademie der Künste.
Phot. Hoffrichter.

77 *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* 30 March 1919 p. 101. 'Käthe Kollwitz, Malerin und Radiererin, erste weibliche Mitglied der Akademie der Künste'

communist press. Therefore she could not have simply personified the Expressionist enemy derided in Dada manifestos. Perhaps Höch's mixture of irony and spotlighting here can be interpreted as an inter-generational tribute, a sign of both admiration and difference. In all probability, like most other women in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, Kollwitz, as a leftist artist, was someone Höch admired.

Nidda Impekoven was also highly celebrated, but in a different context. Having made the transition from a child star to an adult one, by 1919 'Niddy' Impekoven still conveyed a child-like persona in the popular press and in her dances. The particular image used by Höch was reproduced in both *BIZ* and in *Die Dame* and shows Impekoven in a dance pose dressed in a marionette costume (see plate 7.8). The *BIZ* caption reads: 'Mit 15 Jahren ein Tanzstern erster Grösse! Die Tänzerin Nidda Impekoven, die mit ausserordentlichem Erfolg in Berlin auftrat als Pritzel-Puppe.' Lotte Pritzel was a well-known contemporary puppet-maker; an exhibition of her work, for example, was advertised in a December 1919 issue of *Die Dame*.²⁵

Is the juxtaposition of Impekoven and Kollwitz simply a contrast of ages? This question concerns as well the contradictions between Impekoven's dancer status that could have connoted an active, empowered woman and her child-like identity. However, in discussing the reception of this image, today's viewers must be distinguished from Höch's contemporaries. That this contradiction might have been invisible and only subliminally communicated to Höch's audience can be seen by viewing a February 1922 *Die Dame* brassiere ad, captioned: 'Harmonie der Linien im Tanz mit Büstenhalter *Forma*.'²⁶ In the accompanying

7.8 *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* 9 November 1919, p. 460, 'Mit 15 Jahren ein Tanzstern erster Grösse! Die Tänzerin Nidda Impekoven, die mit ausserordentlichem Erfolg in Berlin auftrat, als Pritzel-Puppe'



photograph, Impekoven, slender, virtually without female curves, stretches backwards, further erasing any suggestion of breasts, and yet is presented as an ideal for bra-wearers. Impekoven here embodies a liberation of movement and a freedom from aging, which, however, creates an uncomfortable (and ultimately destructive) equation of female power and childishness. By depicting Impekoven as headless and juxtaposing this photo-fragment with that of Kollwitz's head, Höch further complicates these connotations, perhaps upstaging them with the more obvious contrasts of mind and body, stillness and motion.

Kollwitz's head is pinned in place, but all of Impekoven's body suggests movement. The viewer's focus is on her kick which sets in motion the circular sweep of the montage's composition. Does this mean that female pleasure is located in the body, and that a biologically determinist argument for female power as physical is being presented or can be read? In answer, I would point out that it is a dancer's body *from 1919* that is being thus celebrated, and that female pleasure is not biologically but

rather historically determined in this representation; it is ideological.²⁷ In this historical framework, the modern dancer can be seen as representing various pleasures associated with new possibilities for Weimar women, particularly in their ideological relationships to their bodies. It can be generalised that these new concepts about the body often concerned issues of sex, class and/or the machine. The image of the modern dancer in Weimar can be read as a pastiche, a sign operating in multiple contexts: partly the lower-class dancer image from the nineteenth century, a woman who could live out fantasies forbidden to bourgeois women; partly a symbol of post-war modernism with its cult of the machine and contemporaneity; partly a myth of a bohemian artist, existing outside class boundaries; and partly a pleasurable representation of an unbounded, fully expressed female body.²⁸

On the basis of her montages, Höch herself can be considered a dance fan. In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, Höch preserves formal aspects of the fan or publicity photograph of Impekoven. Despite the image's beheading, the graceful silhouette of the pose is retained and highlighted by a surround of white space. (Compare this respect for the outline to the treatment of Hausmann's face – above the diver suit in the lower right – where the scissors have invaded his outline, trimming the face and leaving the open mouth ridiculously large). Impekoven's silhouette is echoed by that of an ice skater, (lower left), and an exotic dancer, (upper right, below Ebert's head). The exotic dancer's body has a dual function: juxtaposed with Ebert's head, it mocks him, and it also functions independently in the composition, echoing Impekoven's movement and adding to the sense of female-propelled motion. Again, it is the representation of ambiguity and the lack of resolution in this montage that is one of its most radical aspects and that responds to the Berlin Dada call to affirm and negate at the same time.²⁹

If a recognisable mass-media image is repeated in a celebratory way, even if fragmented, this in and of itself is a method that re-presents the pleasure of viewing media images. And Hannah Höch was a media viewer in the twenties, the era when a proliferation of publicity photographs was new. For example, she could have seen Asta Nielsen on stage and screen, in photographs reporting on or publicising her performances in the newspapers, in 'candid' shots in *Die Dame* and other magazines, and in advertising images. To repeat such images of an admired star in an avant-garde context was to participate in this pleasurable reproduction. However, to deconstruct a Weimar reportage scene using elements of photojournalism was to counter the widespread reverence for the media and its technologies. To combine the two was to turn technological progressivism in on itself and, at the same time, to desire a new order set in motion by the female and the machine – representing an anger, a humour and an optimism specific to the twenties.

IV

How does this analysis of *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* pertain to present-day media interventionism? Unlike John Heartfield, Hannah Höch did not distribute her images through mass circulation channels, a strategy that would become more and more imperative as the mass-media boom continued and has become important today in our media-permeated society. Repetition, defamiliarisation, montage techniques and other strategies that earlier could have been considered critical are not incorporated into the media's sophisticated practices. Like the foregrounded masquerade, defamiliarisation practices are already so much a part of our mass media that it is possible nightly to see popular American TV talk show hosts (hardly subversive figures) using the techniques of Brecht's epic theatre. For example, it is not unusual to see David Letterman casually bringing the camera behind the scenes to introduce the audience to the man who builds the sets (or, in Brechtian terms, interrupting the narrative flow to display the labour which produces it). Thus specific techniques which were revolutionary in the twenties have a different reception today. This raises the skeptical question of whether deconstruction of the mass media is possible today. I think not. Instead other strategies countering the media's stereotyping must be developed, ones offering alternatives and pleasures. The terms of interventionism have changed; with the increasing centralisation of today's media, there is an increased consensus on what gets covered and how, leaving out wide sections of contemporary society; poverty virtually does not get covered, for example; nor do possibilities for gender identities outside a particular and narrow range. Effective coverage of these excluded areas would mean a distribution on a par with that of existing mainstream media and would be above all an economic challenge.

Within the utopian goals of media interventionism, it is necessary to theorise feminist aesthetics and to address issues of gender identity. For this project, it is helpful to analyse material such as Höch's work which employs a radical montage of strategies of pleasure and criticality. Recently, feminist film theorists have begun to examine the revolutionary potential of female pleasure – earlier considered negatively as a sphere to which women were regulated in ways that shored up a male-dominated hierarchy and now re-thought as a position of difference and a platform for change. This investigation is based on the understanding that women have no position outside (masculine) culture from which to put forward a critique. So the feminine positions within must therefore be examined for their power, ambiguities and contradictions. Thus aesthetics of pleasure are considered for the ways they can motivate change through desire and can represent alternatives in feminine identity formation that allow for an oscillation in gender roles.³⁰ In this context Höch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* serves as a model in which the representation of female pleasure is

read as interdependent with that of a sharp societal critique to create a utopian allegory of revolutionary change.

This article is part of my doctoral dissertation, 'Hannah Höch, photomontage, and the representation of the New Woman in Weimar Germany, 1918-1933', at The Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1989, and will appear, in revised form, in my forthcoming book on Höch's photomontages published by Yale University Press. Portions of it were given as a talk at the Frick Symposium, New York City, 1985. I would like to thank Arina Grossmann, Jo Anna Isaak, Rose-Carol Washon Long, Linda Nochlin, Kathy O'Dell, and Sally Stein each for a generous exchange of ideas which contributed to the development of this essay, which was completed in 1986. © Maud Lavin