

Elizabeth Otto. *Tempo, Tempo! Bauhaus-Photomontagen von Marianne Brandt.* Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2005. 176 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-936314-55-7.



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Modern Technology and Modern Women Artists in Weimar

A critical exhibition on view in 2005 and 2006 highlighted the importance of photomontages as a crucial component of Weimar culture. The comprehensive exhibit *Dada*, first shown at the Centre Pompidou (Paris) before traveling to the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) and currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art (New York City) contains hundreds of images by all the major Weimar artists, including the iconic photomontage of Hannah Höch, *Cut with a Kitchen Knife* (1919).[1] The art historian Maud Lavin has characterized the image as a “remarkably concise and elegant work that functions as a Dadaist manifesto on the politics of Weimar society.”[2]

A gifted designer and artist in this genre, Marianne Brandt (1893-1983), whose work is little known, has finally become the subject of this fascinating exhibition catalog. Brandt was an important student and artist at the Bauhaus, a metal worker primarily known for her modernist teapots and lamps (still manufactured today). Her designs incorporated the Bauhaus elements of basic shapes, the sphere and the square. Through her simplified, aesthetically creative designs, she was able to move

her innovations beyond the drawing board to the board rooms of industry, working as head of design for the Ruppelwerk Metal Products Factory in Gotha in 1930. The economic depression cut short her career, and the subsequent Nazi seizure of power effectively ended her job prospects during the Third Reich. She nonetheless joined the Reichskulturkammer in 1939 and her work was displayed in three exhibitions in Chemnitz, her birthplace, in 1938, 1939 and 1941. After the war, she joined various artists' associations in the GDR and directed classes in industrial design in Dresden and later in Berlin. After 1955, she freelanced as a designer for various East German firms, including VEB Zeisswerk. She died at age eighty-nine, in 1983.

Tempo, Tempo! is both an exhibition catalog and a catalog raisonn e of Brandt's lesser-known work—her photomontages. These photomontages were publicly exhibited late in Brandt's life, during the 1970s. Moholy Nagy's *Malerei Fotografie Film* (1925) stimulated Brandt's interest in this media while she was a student at the Bauhaus. Photomontages could be seen not only in art exhibits, but in popular illustrated magazines of the pe-

riod. They speak to the hybridity of high and low culture, which allowed photographic visual fragments and texts to be constructed into collages of new meaning. Brandt created almost fifty documented photomontages. The exhibition catalog, artfully assembled and written by Elizabeth Otto of the University of Buffalo brings these works together for the first time. They highlight a number of important elements in Brandt's art during the 1920s.

Brandt's very first image, *Montage I* (1924), following Moholy Nagy's notion of "photography without a camera," is a striking composition, an assemblage of two triangles, one off-white and one black, with four interlocking circles diagonally thrusting upwards on the picture plane. Brandt employed her mentor's conception of the "photogram." This ingenious method places objects on photographic paper, exposes the objects to light and thereby creates an artful image. Brandt's first two montages feature abstract and pared-down forms. Beginning two years later, Brandt embarked on her signature style, which incorporated cut newspaper and journal fragments with photographs taken from contemporary publications, such as *Bulle-Esel-Affe/Idoles Modernes* (1926). Her style shows her familiarity with Hannah H  ch's photomontages, especially in the crowded juxtaposition of text and image. But her subsequent work begins to limit the number of visual and textual fragments, providing a tight construction of forms on the page, harking back to her earlier, abstract and geometric forms. Often her individual montages reflect a particular theme—the liberation of the new Weimar woman; popular entertainment in Paris; city life; the new technology of flight; Americanization; and popular sports. The combination of photos and text with constructivist elements provides a powerful visual impact in Brandt's photomontages.

The catalog is certainly a welcome addition to the growing number of works on women artists of Weimar

and is important for several reasons.[3] First, Otto describes Brandt's creativity in variety of media—from metalwork to photography to painting. Second, the catalog demonstrates Brandt's versatility and engagement with the key political, social and cultural issues occupying Weimar Germany. Her photomontages illustrate the new public persona of women as active agents—whether as actresses, athletes or artists. Furthermore, Otto's descriptions accompanying the photomontages link Brandt's work to other aesthetic developments of the time. Finally, the volume suggests that the master narratives of Weimar culture have still not sufficiently highlighted the importance of women artists—who constituted over half the students at the Bauhaus by the end of the 1920s. Thus, Otto's account is a critical contribution in redressing this deficiency and will serve as an important text for understanding the visual culture of Weimar Germany.

Notes

[1]. Leah Dickerman, ed., *DADA, Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington: D.A.P. Publishers, 2005).

[2]. Maud Lavin, *Cut with a Kitchen Knife, The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah H  ch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 19.

[3]. For some selected English titles, see Naomi Sawelson-Gorre, ed., *Women in Dada, Essays on Sex, Gender, and Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999); Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada and Everyday Modernity: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002); Anja Baumhoff, *The Gendered World of Bauhaus* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2001); Marsha Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Marsha Meskimmon and Shearer West, eds., *Visions of the Neue Frau: Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995).

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