

Strange Beauty: Hannah Höch and the Photomontage

Author(s): Kristin Makhholm

Source: *MoMA*, No. 24 (Winter - Spring, 1997), pp. 19-23

Published by: [The Museum of Modern Art](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4381346>

Accessed: 10-08-2014 15:44 UTC

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*Strange Beauty:*  
**HANNAH HÖCH**  
*and the Photomontage*

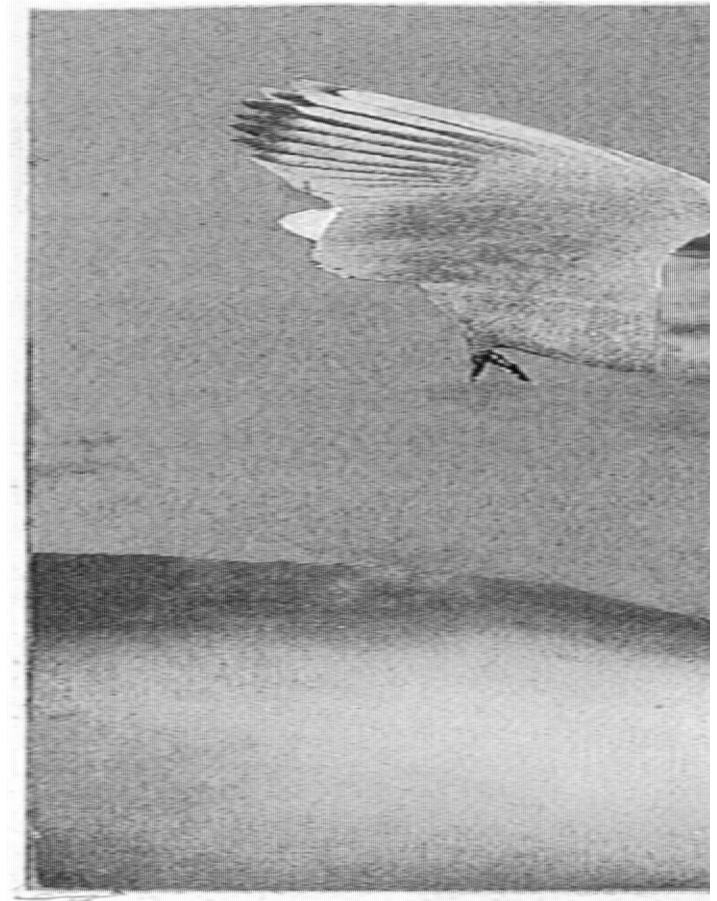
KRISTIN MAKHOLM

THE NAME HANNAH HÖCH is probably not the first to come to mind when considering the antics of Berlin Dada. Artists such as George Grosz, John Heartfield, or Raoul Hausmann seem more suited to Dada's political and social critiques and its loud-mouthed, rowdy contempt of traditional bourgeois art and aesthetics. Yet it is Hannah Höch, whom Hans Richter dubbed the "good girl" of Berlin Dada, who took the characteristic Dada medium of photomontage to its most provocative and challenging heights. With photographs from mass-market periodicals, Höch's photomontages display the chaos and combustion of Berlin's visual culture from a particularly female perspective. By charting her preoccupation with photomontage from 1918 to the early 1970s, the exhibition *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, on view at The Museum of Modern Art from February 27 to May 20, demonstrates Höch's remarkable achievements in this quintessential modern medium and her sensitivity to the power of an explosive media culture.

Born in 1889, Höch became part of the Berlin art scene when both World War I and Expressionism were in full swing. She arrived in Berlin from her home in the German province of Thuringia at the age of twenty-two to study the applied arts, which included the creation of designs for wallpaper, embroidery, textiles, and glass. By 1915 she had met the Czech émigré artist Raoul Hausmann, who drew her into the avant-garde circle around Herwarth Walden and his famous Der Sturm gallery—the leading enclave of Expressionist artists and writers in Berlin.

From this point on, Höch maintained a balance between two seemingly contradictory realms: the world of the avant-garde, whose exhibitions and poetry readings she attended with Hausmann; and the commercial sector, where she worked as a designer of embroidery and lace from 1916 to 1926 at the large Ullstein Publishing Company, creators of popular magazines and newspapers, such as the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Die Dame*. The pattern designs Höch created for Ullstein's women's magazines and her early experiments with modernist abstraction were integrally related, blurring the boundaries between traditionally masculine and feminine modes of form and expression.

By 1918 Dada had emerged in Berlin, transferred there from its wartime origins in Zurich by the writer Richard Huelsenbeck. Essentially an antagonistic nonsense word, "Dada" became the battle cry of



*Flight (Flucht)*. 1931. Photomontage. 9¼ x 7¼". Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart.

a group of young Berlin artists disillusioned with war and politics and the discrepancies between traditional art and modern life. Within the realms of art, poetry, performance, and criticism, artists such as Höch, Hausmann, Grosz, and Heartfield embraced the tempest of modern life in the new metropolis, calling for the artist's wholehearted commitment to the events of the day.

Their work was infiltrated by sweeping forces: the unstable political and social situation brought about by the November 1918 revolution and the formation of Germany's controversial Weimar Republic; the barrage of technology and new forms of industry; and the mass media glut of illustrated magazines, newspapers, photography, and film.



*Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany (Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser durch die letzte weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands).* 1919–20. Photomontage. 44 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 35 $\frac{1}{16}$ ". Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie. Photo courtesy Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin. Photo: Jörg P. Anders.

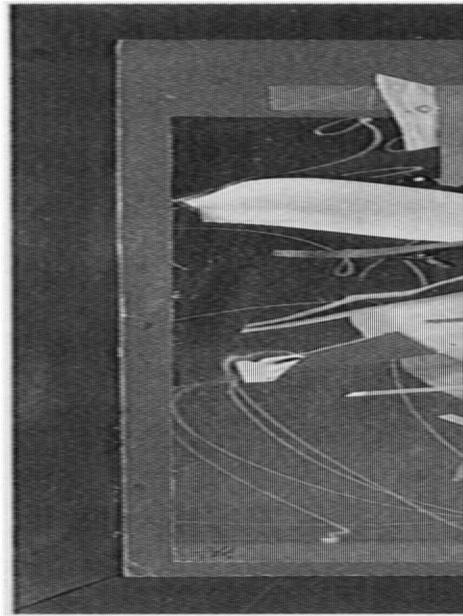


Modern forms of propaganda such as pamphlets, posters, and advertisements brought their rhetoric to an audience familiar with these forms of public address.

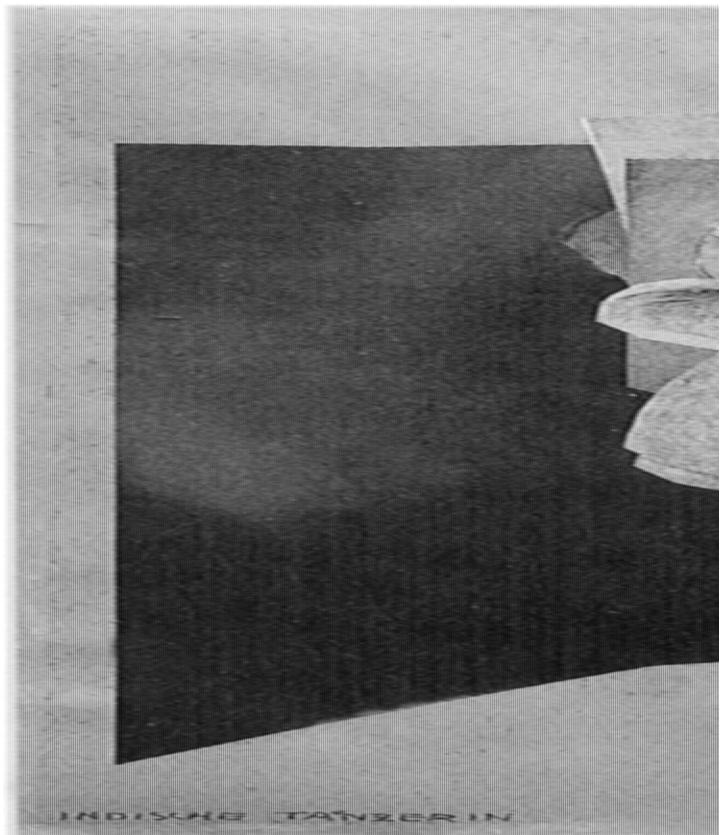
Höch responded to the Dadaist call for explosive, modern forms of expression through her creation of photomontage, which she and Hausmann began to construct after a vacation to the Baltic Sea in the summer of 1918. Here they discovered a type of commemorative military picture with the heads of different soldiers pasted in, a practice with deep roots in folk tradition and popular consumer imagery. By cutting out photographs and words from mass-market magazines and pamphlets and reassembling them into fractured new compositions, Höch and the other Dada artists reconfigured the images of daily life into abstracted works reminiscent of the hectic pace of modern urban life. They downplayed their roles as individual creators by calling these works “montages,” which suggests the impersonal act of a technician or a graphic designer who merely assembles and mounts preexisting images. With photomontage they could call into question the very ways that society viewed itself.

Höch engaged the world of contemporary politics and political figures in photomontages such as *Dada Panorama* (1919) and *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919–20), both of which were exhibited in the controversial First International Dada Fair of 1920. Each presents recognizable figures such as Friedrich Ebert, president of the German Reich, and Wilhelm II, the deposed emperor, absorbed within a chaotic world of popular imagery and formal satire. In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, Höch puts a female spin on the image by metaphorically equating her scissors with a kitchen knife, which she used to cut through the traditionally masculine domains of politics and public life. Machine parts and mass demonstrations connect the images of intellectuals (such as Albert Einstein and Karl Marx), film stars and dancers (Pola Negri and Niddy Impekoven), political pundits, and even the Dada artists themselves in a vertiginous composition that became one of the icons of the Dada movement.

Along with her so-called kitchen knife, Höch uses the images of modern femininity, especially the sensational “New Woman,” to question the complicated relationship between the sexes in post–World War I Germany. With her bobbed hair, sleek new fashions, and increasingly frequent appearance on the streets and in the workplace, this New Woman emerged in Europe in the 1920s as a symbol for all that was fashionable and up-to-date in the metropolis. In many of her photomontages, Höch juxtaposes these sporty, active women with modern technology and domestic appliances, creating ironic statements on



*Burst Unity (Gesprengte Einheit)*, 1955. Photomontage. 15¾ x 11¾". Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart.



*Indian Dancer: From an Ethnographic Museum (Indische Tänzerin: Aus einem ethnographischen Museum)*, 1930. Photomontage with collage. 10¼ x 8⅞". The Museum of Modern Art. Frances Keck Fund.

the ambiguities and deep conflicts that accompanied the new female presence in the public realm.

With the gradual dispersal of the Dada artists in the early 1920s, and her breakup with Hausmann in 1922, Höch entered an increasingly exciting period of experimentation. Her friendships with artists such as Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp and Sophie Täuber-Arp, László Moholy-Nagy, and Theo and Nelly van Doesburg furthered her contact with the international avant-garde and their radical challenges to traditional art and abstraction. Alongside works published in their magazines and books, such as Schwitters's "Merz" magazine, Arp and El Lissitzky's *The Art-Isms*, and Moholy-Nagy's Bauhaus book *Painting-Photography-Film*, Höch created collages of colored papers and embroidery patterns that pay homage to the geometric formality of the new international movements of Constructivism and De Stijl, while at the same time continuing her occupation with traditional materials from the world of craft and handiwork. In the late 1920s and early 1930s Höch became involved in a lesbian relationship with the Dutch poet Til Brugman, with whom she lived in the Netherlands from 1926 to 1929. These years proved particularly fruitful for her photomontage work, which delved into questions of the construction of sexual identity and the changing nature of love and relationships in series entitled "Love" and "Dancers."

Among the most provocative and disturbing photomontages are those collectively entitled "From an Ethnographic Museum," which Höch created between 1925 and 1930. With photographs of female body parts attached to those of so-called primitive sculptures, Höch combines the familiar with the unusual, the Self with the Other, in a powerful indictment of the display and fetishization of the human body within a modern consumer culture.

In *Indian Dancer* of 1930, for example, Höch displays a publicity still of the actress Marie Falconetti as Joan of Arc in Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. A wooden dance mask from Cameroon covers the actress's mouth and eye, freezing the painful grimace of the martyr into something akin to the seductive glances of a magazine pinup girl. Joan's crown of straw has been replaced by cutout silhouettes of silverware, changing the symbol of her martyrdom into one of domestic servitude. With the title *Indian Dancer* Höch compares the light, transparent veils of an oriental dancer with the ossified

features of the wooden mask, freezing the dancer's sensuous performance into a crude parody of the shackles and stereotypes that marked the modern-day media representation of women.

By the end of the 1920s, Höch reaped the benefit of the increasing popularity of photomontage. No longer merely associated with Dada revolt, it became an important vehicle in the fields of advertising and design, which profited from a rising interest in the use of

photographic montage. For the first time, Höch was publicly acclaimed for her provocative photomontages, which were included in several international exhibitions, including the 1929 "Film and Photo" show, the most comprehensive exhibition to date of both commercial and avant-garde photography and film.

All of this came to a halt when Adolf Hitler assumed power in January 1933. Höch and much of the avant-garde were branded "Cultural Bolsheviks" and "degenerate," and not allowed to exhibit their work publicly. Many of her friends, including Schwitters and Hausmann, left Germany. Those who stayed behind, like Höch, were alienated and intimidated by the Nazi politics of reprisal.

Höch's purchase of a house and garden in a suburb of Berlin in 1939, and her brief marriage to a German businessman from 1938 to 1944, allowed her to establish a distance between her personal life

and the cultural and political terrorism of the Nazis. Photomontages from the 1930s such as *Resignation* (c. 1930) and *Flight* (1931) reflect Höch's growing concerns for her safety under the Nazi regime. They also anticipate her withdrawal into a world of fantasy and nature, symbolized by her lush garden and her photomontages of strange, surreal landscapes.

With the end of the war in 1945, artists in Berlin were anxious to rebuild the sense of culture and community lost under Nazi dictatorship, but this restoration was not without its political consequences. Divided into four zones by the Occupation forces of England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union, Berlin quickly became the site of intense cold war politics. Art became a tool in the ideological split between East and West, with abstract art standing for freedom of expression in the capitalist zones and Socialist Realism representing the ideal of a worker's state in the Soviet sector.

Höch fell within the abstract modernist camp centered around the Galerie Gerd Rosen, one of the first private galleries to open in Berlin after the war and one of the leading advocates of abstract and



Hannah Höch with one of her Dada dolls, c. 1925. Courtesy Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Photographie und Architektur, Berlin.



Surrealist art in Germany. Her participation in exhibitions at the Rosen Gallery beginning in 1946 and in public discussions of freedom in modern art allowed Höch to reassert her own artistic voice after years of silence and solitude. Her works of the late 1940s and 1950s—with their suggestions of natural phenomena and complex abstract interplays of color, form, and texture—mirror Höch's abiding interest in formal construction, natural science, and technology. By the mid-1950s, photomontages such as *Burst Unity* (1955) benefited from the proliferation of color photographs and experimental photo techniques in popular magazines such as *Life International*, as well as the influence of American Abstract Expressionism avidly marketed in the international press.

With a renewal of interest in Berlin Dada and her inclusion in major Dada retrospectives in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Höch returned to a subject she had not treated since before the war: the media representation of women. Spurred on by the women's movement of the 1960s and anti-high art movements such as Fluxus, neo-Dada, and Pop, Höch once again saw herself as part of an international art community devoted to irony and critique, with all forms of montage and collage again taking center stage.

Many of Höch's photomontages from this period, such as *Strange Beauty II* (1966) and *Homage to Riza Abasi* (1963) intentionally recall her work from the 1920s and 1930s while engaging the latest New Woman, whose image flourished amid fashion spreads and media advertisements. In *Homage to Riza Abasi*, Höch juxtaposes the hypersexualized body of a belly dancer with the head of an Audrey Hepburn lookalike in an obscure reference to a seventeenth-century Persian miniaturist named Riza-i-Abbasi. Both the female body and the fashion icon are caricatured in this ironic "homage" to modern femininity. By the 1960s Höch could view her subject from a distance, albeit with a critical awareness born from a lifetime of experience with media representations of women.

Produced over five turbulent decades, Hannah Höch's photomontages demonstrate the remarkable ability of one individual to carve a sense of identity and critique out of the frenzy of modern consumer culture. The biting satires and jarring formal incongruities that were the result of Höch's expert reconfigurations become part of her legacy to us as we continue to weather the sensory overload of images and experiences of our own high-tech media culture.



*Homage to Riza Abasi (Hommage à Riza Abasi)*. 1963. Photomontage. 13 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 7 $\frac{1}{16}$ ". Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart.

*Kristin Makhholm is a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota, where she is writing her dissertation on Hannah Höch. The Photomontages of Hannah Höch was organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and coordinated for The Museum of Modern Art by Carolyn Lanchner, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture. Support for the exhibition was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.*