

Reclaiming a Legacy: Photography in Germany and German History

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# Reclaiming a Legacy: Photography in Germany and German History

By Klaus Honnef

**From the glories of Berlin's Golden Twenties, to the nadir of the Nazi Era, to the renewal of art and society after World War II—the path of German photography in this century has paralleled the history of the country itself.**

Photography in Germany can look back on a grand tradition. In the twentieth century, German photographers have made essential contributions to the history of the medium. The years after World War I produced an extraordinarily rich cultural climate, fueled by the efforts of artists and intellectuals to distance themselves from the prewar hierarchical society of Prussian militarism. A willingness to run aesthetic risks and a technological innovativeness led to a tremendous flowering of the medium. With the slogan of “New Vision,” German photographers and artists, together with their Russian colleagues, renewed the visual language of photography. In Berlin, Cologne, and Munich, photojournalism developed on a large scale; in Weimar and Dessau, the Bauhaus taught experimental photography; on the Rhine and the Ruhr, photographers like August Sander, Albert Renger-Patzsch, and Werner Mantz created a sober, objectively tinged visual idiom, laying the foundations for an encyclopedically oriented conception of the image—an approach that is still evolving in the photographic oeuvre of Hilla and Bernd Becher as well as countless American photographers. The history of photography during those years reflected a profound change in the human image: whether in Hugo Erfurth's portraits, made within the realm of artistic photography, or August Sander's incisive type-portraits, which carried out an analysis along the lines of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Neo-Realism). This change paralleled similar shifts in attitude toward empirical reality occurring throughout visual art.

In close contact with painter friends, Sander, whose earlier work was dictated by the premises of art photography, developed his ambitious project: a topological pictorial atlas of the society of the Weimar Republic. Meanwhile, Renger-Patzsch, emphasizing the technological structure of the medium, formulated his photographic notions in resolute contrast to the then-

dominant ideology of art photography. According to his aesthetic credo, photography would simply “recognize, record. If it tries to interpret, it is already overstepping its boundaries. It should leave interpretation to art.”<sup>1</sup>

Volume 8 of the renowned Bauhaus Books was Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's theoretical manifesto *Painting Photography*

*Film*. Here, with the help of words and images, Moholy-Nagy (who, despite claims to the contrary, did not teach the Bauhaus photography class) explored the creative potential of photography, which, he felt, had been barely reconnoitered. His foreword proclaimed: “The camera has provided us with surprising possibilities, which we are only just beginning to exploit. In expanding the visual picture, even the present-day lens is no longer bound to the limits of our eyes; no manual device for shaping (pencil, brush, etc.) can capture similarly seen slices of the world.”<sup>2</sup> The new explorations of the medium were thus accompanied by equally far-reaching critical and theoretical investigations of all sorts.

A contest involving some thousand works by more than two hundred photographers, the legendary

exhibition *Film and Photo* was mounted by the German Labor Alliance in 1929. The show, presented in Stuttgart, documented the high aesthetic standard that had been achieved by postwar German photography and cinema in virtually all areas of application. (Photojournalism, which was only just emerging in Berlin, Munich, Leipzig, and Cologne, did not come to its full fruition until the early 1930s.)

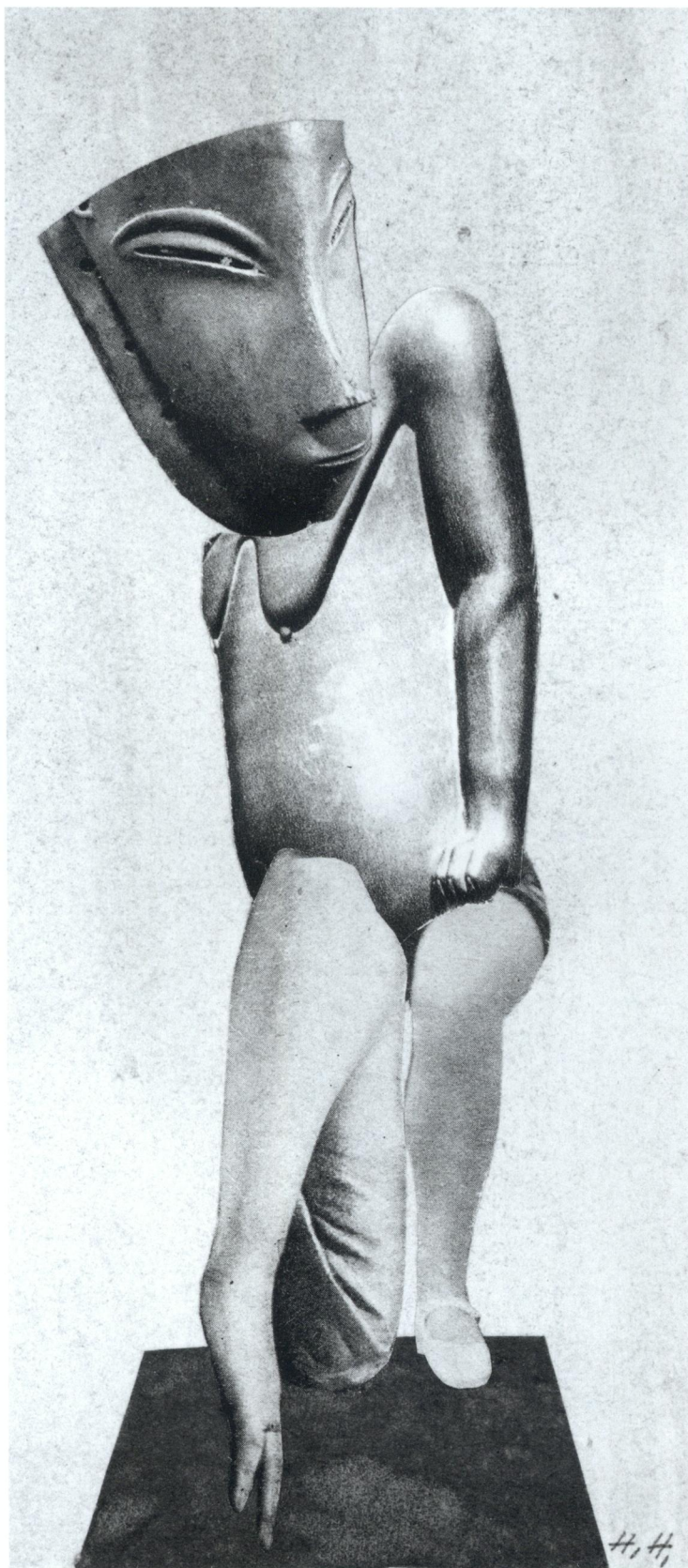
The events taking place in a faraway Germany did not elude attentive observers in the United States. Two years after the Stuttgart show, Walker Evans, under the title “The Reappearance of Photography,” reviewed six photo books in the magazine *Hound and Horn*. Three of these books were German: Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön* (The world is beauti-



Dr. Otto Steinert, *Maske einer Tänzerin* (Mask of a dancer), 1952



UMBO, *Die Himmelskamera* (Sky camera), 1937



Hannah Höch, *Denkmal I, Aus einem ethnografischen Museum VIII* (Monument I, from an ethnographic museum VIII), 1924

ful); Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold's *foto-auge* (photo-eye); and August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit; Sechzig Aufnahmen deutscher Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Face of the times; sixty photos of German people of the twentieth century). Before zeroing in on the individual books, Evans bluntly declared:

Without money, postwar Germany experimented with photography heavily and thoroughly. There was an efficient destruction of romantic art-photography in a flood of new things which has since lost its force. But the medium was extended and insisted upon, even though no German master appeared. The German photo renaissance is a publishing venture with political undertones.<sup>3</sup>

Even though Evans was unable to perceive any “master” in German photography, he admitted that Sander's book was more than just a volume of type-studies:

Finally the photo-document is directed into a volume, again in Germany. *Antlitz der Zeit* is more than a book of “type studies”; a case of the camera looking in the right direction among people. This is one of the futures of photography foretold by Atget. It is a photographic editing of society, a clinical process; enough of a cultural necessity to make one wonder why other so-called advanced countries of the world have not also been examined and recorded.<sup>4</sup>

In Berlin in these years, creative minds from all over Europe were colliding with one another, creating an electrifying atmosphere. This climate was documented on the pages of the illustrated magazines, whose circulation skyrocketed. Photojournalism was not born in Germany, but it was here that it attained its first El Dorado. Well-known figures such as Erich Salomon, Felix H. Man, Martin Munkacsi, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Wolfgang Weber, Harald Lerchenperg, the Gidal brothers, and the Capa brothers (Robert and Cornell) are representative of others, like Sasha Stone, who are now largely forgotten. From eastern and southeastern Europe, young artists and intellectuals poured into Berlin, functioning somewhat as a yeast in the fermenting cultural dough of the city. Art and literature, theater and music, photography and cinema forged the legend of Berlin's Golden '20s. Dada, the anti-artistic movement that radically declared war on the bourgeois concept of art, had a far more political coloring in the German capital than in Zürich or Paris. In structural terms, George Grosz's drawings with their acid social critique, Hannah Höch's razor-sharp collages, and John Heartfield's aggressive political montages rejected the illusionist outlook of traditional art. The new mode of representation appropriately reflected the social conflicts of the day as well as the new complex scientific and technological view of the world.

In cinema and photography, a specific “Berlin style” crystallized, a pictorial language of which only vestiges remain. The



Heinz Hajek-Halke, *Fashion Photograph*, c. 1930



Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Tannenwald im Winter* (Fir wood in winter), 1956



Friedrich Seidenstücker, *Berlin, Winter*, 1947–48



August Sander, *The Painter Otto Dix and his Wife*, 1928

*Nothing is more hateful to me than photography sugar-coated with gimmicks, poses, and false effects. Therefore let me speak the truth in all honesty about our age and the people of our age. . . .*

AUGUST SANDER, 1927



Robert Häusser, *Relative Orientierung* (Relative orientation), 1972

*The camera sees only what I see. But what the camera sees has to be identical to the observer's image of reality. There is no such thing as objective photography.*

ROBERT HÄUSSER

American film noir of the 1940s and '50s, whose directors and cameramen were mostly German immigrants, and the photographic oeuvre of Helmut Newton, a native Berliner, preserved this characteristic diction with its deep shadows and violent contrasts of black and white. Far from expressing uncritical enthusiasm about the machine world of the industrial era (of the sort that marked Italian Futurism), the works of the photographic vanguard in Germany evinced a deep understanding of the technological limits and possibilities of the medium and the modern age. A direct photographic approach to reality was

accompanied by an unvarnished conception of material objects. "Things" was the original title of Renger-Patzsch's book, which finally bore the questionable name of *The World Is Beautiful*. The spectrum of photographic activity ranged from the reportages of magazine photographers and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* photos taken by the critical analysts to the lovingly shaped photographic impressions of Friedrich Seidenstücker, whose extremely erotic nudes have still not been adequately appreciated; the experimental pictures of Heinz Hajek-Halke, who actually ventured into the scientific terrain



of biology; and the seductive fashion tableaux made in Yva's studio, where Helmut Newton learned his craft.

When the National Socialists used an appeal to law and order to abolish artistic freedom, vast numbers of photographers and filmmakers left Germany; others, refusing to believe the ominous announcements, paid for their trust with their lives. Still others, like Renger-Patzsch, Weber, Lerchenperg, and even Sander, retreated into a sort of "inner emigration" or else went on extended trips throughout the world. The night of terror and war descended upon Germany, and German photography was forever branded: aside from a few shots by amateurs and by the perpetrators themselves, almost nothing of the horrifying events of the Nazi period was captured in photos. For twelve years, German photography capitulated to the visible historical reality.

In a divided postwar Germany, photography recovered only very slowly from the blood-letting—the expulsion and annihilation of the most innovative minds in art, literature, photography, and cinema. While the advanced photographers in the free portion of Germany were able to draw on the experimental approaches of Bauhaus photography, and photojournalists like Wolfgang Weber and portraitists like Liselotte Strelow generally remained apolitical, photography east of the Elbe River was co-opted by Communist propaganda. The buzzword "Subjective Photography," adapted by a group of photographers in the 1950s and '60s who emphasized the expressive aspects of photography over the documentary, points out the direction taken by many in the Western occupation zones and the later Federal Republic of West Germany. Otto Steinert, the outstanding representative of the subjectivistic stance and also its eloquent champion, rallied a group of young German photographers around himself, showing them in a few successful exhibitions and paving the way for contacts with like-minded photographers in other Western countries. For many of these photographers, in Germany and elsewhere, empirical reality—the realization of the historical process—was merely a foil for technically brilliant formal exercises. Compared with the New Vision of the 1920s, "subjective photography" did not produce any fundamental expansion of photographic language. At the same time Robert Häusser, an outsider just as Seidenstücker had been, cultivated a surreal, traumatic view; his impressive pictures, inspired partly by his intense friendships with the German painters of the Informel group, offered variations on the categorical premises of "subjective photography." On the other hand, Strelow's incisive, psychologizing portraits managed to salvage at least a hint of the "Berlin style" of German photography for the postwar era.

The cultural weight of a no-longer-divided Germany has gradually shifted westward, to the Rhine. Meanwhile Berlin, which may once more be facing a great future, has sunk down into a cultural province—at best a paradise for social desperadoes and nostalgia buffs. For the time being, the question of

how great a cultural clout East Germany can have must remain open. The lack of a true center has had an extraordinarily positive effect on postwar German history. Jürgen Habermas's notion of the "new non-lucidity" may also be applied to the field of photography, but recently, several powerful trends have developed, testifying to the vitality of the German photography scene. In Düsseldorf, Bernd and Hilla Becher, initially applauded only by the art world, have established a new school of photography with their sequences of pictures showing buildings characteristic of industrial architecture. Names like Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Axel Hütte, and Candida Höfer can boast of growing reputations among the photographic public. In Kassel and Bielefeld, Floris M. Neusüss and Gottfried Jäger have joined the tradition of German experimental photography. Neusüss has continued the technical development of the photogram, while Jäger has created "generative photography." Angela Neuke in Essen has opened new perspectives for photojournalism; like many of her earlier fellow students, this disciple of Otto Steinert has marked the physiognomy of contemporary photojournalism in Germany for years to come. Thomas Höpker, Robert Lebeck, and Ulrich Mack have also provided critical accents for German photojournalism. The line of art photography has been extended by Arno Jansen's morbid still lifes and ingenious female portraits.

German photography has received extremely fruitful impulses from vanguard art. An influential figure in this context is Sigmar Polke. His innovative treatment of photography as a medium has had both a crystallizing and a liberating impact. Other artists such as Jürgen Klauke and Bernhard Johannes Blume have come to photography through such areas as performance art and Conceptualism. They all share an attitude of critical distancing toward the medium and its mass distribution. At the same time they have extended the boundaries of photography, releasing it from the constraint of a philistine technique of reproduction. That their seeds have fallen upon fertile soil is suggested by, say, the crumbling of ossified structures in the photography of the former GDR. To this extent, Thomas Florschuetz's oeuvre is only the tip of an iceberg whose expanse we are as yet unable to survey.

Photography in Germany or German photography? The question awaits clarification. There are many signs that photography as a medium has evolved a specific German accent. The latter may not be as self-sufficient as the spoken and the written language; but it is nevertheless unmistakable. □

1. Quoted in Fritz Kempe, *Catalogue for Albert Renger-Patzsch* (Essen, 1966).
2. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei Fotografie Film* (Painting photography film), new edition (Mainz and Berlin, 1967), p. 5.
3. Walker Evans, "The Reappearance of Photography," in *Hound and Horn*, Oct.-Dec. 1931, vol. V, no. 1, pp. 125-128.
4. Op. cit.

Translated from German by Joachim Neugroschel.