

The Museum of Modern Art

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JOHN HEARTFIELD: PHOTOMONTAGES

April 15 - July 6, 1993

The first extensive American exhibition of the work of John Heartfield, a member of the Berlin Dadaists who is known as the inventor of photomontage, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on April 15, 1993. Organized by Magdalena Dabrowski, curator, Department of Drawings, **JOHN HEARTFIELD: PHOTOMONTAGES** presents some of the most powerful political art of the modern era. The exhibition explores the range of Heartfield's achievements and provides a substantive view of the artist, who has been previously little-known in this country.

The works in the exhibition were chosen from the 1991 touring retrospective commemorating the centenary of the artist's birth, organized by the Akademie der Künste zu Berlin, the Landesregierung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, and the Landschaftsverband Rheinland, Cologne. The Museum of Modern Art's showing, which remains on view through July 6, has been made possible by a generous grant from Robert Lehman Foundation, Inc.

Included for the first time in this country are ninety-six of the artist's original photomontages, many of them shown alongside their published reproductions from the left-wing workers' daily *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (*AIZ*), as well as poster- and book-cover designs.

In his works for *AIZ*, Heartfield uses the very tools with which the mass media of his time constructed "reality," such as photographs and text, to

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represent instead the incompetence, greed, and hypocrisy behind appearances. His aim was to expose the dangers and abuses of power in the Nazi regime. For example, *Adolf, the Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk* (1932) shows Hitler from the waist up. A swastika replaces his heart, and his torso is an x-ray revealing gold coins flowing down his throat and collecting in his stomach. *Meaning of Geneva* (1932) shows a dove spiked on a bayonet in front of the League of Nations palace. The headline reads: "Where Capital Lives, There Can Be No Peace!" Such images remain among the most vivid satirical images of German political conditions of the 1930s. Although they deal with figures and events of more than half-a-century ago, they are instantly comprehensible today.

Heartfield's strikingly original book jackets, for works by such authors as Upton Sinclair and John Dos Passos, were designed for his brother's publishing firm, *Malik-Verlag*. These designs -- which combine a variety of images relating to the text and convey their meaning through the juxtaposition of images on the front and back covers -- represent a dramatic departure from the plain book jackets of the period.

Heartfield's art is particularly relevant today, in light of the current political climate in Germany, and in the context of European and American artists who draw on the techniques and appearance of the mass media to create a highly politicized art. Nancy Roth writes in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, "Now, at a moment when the model of an autonomous, socially isolated art seems increasingly inadequate, renewed interest in Heartfield is associated with a broad reconsideration of modernism itself. He offers, among

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other things, an entrypoint into a 'lost,' or profoundly obscured body of thought about what art might be and what it might accomplish in a democratic society."

Born Helmut Herzfeld in 1891, John Heartfield anglicized his name as a protest against German nationalism during World War I. In 1929 Heartfield began his long collaboration with AIZ, furnishing full-page photomontages nearly every month. Forced to flee Germany after Hitler came to power, he continued to create work for AIZ while in exile. He spent the war years in England, where he worked as a graphic artist. Heartfield was an active supporter of Communism and in 1950 returned to what was then East Germany. He continued to work there, mostly designing scenery and posters for the Berliner Ensemble and Deutsches Theater. Heartfield died in East Berlin in 1968, leaving an extensive archive, which, upon his widow's death, was transferred to the Akademie der Künste zu Berlin. Given Heartfield's leftist political leanings, his work has rarely been shown in the West. His first exhibition in New York was in 1938; the next was in 1991, when pages from the AIZ were shown.

After its New York showing, this exhibition travels to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (July 23 - September 19, 1993) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (October 7, 1993 - January 2, 1994).

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PUBLICATION *John Heartfield*, edited by Peter Pachnicke and Klaus Honnef; with contributions by Petra Albrecht, Hubertus Gassner, Klaus Honnef, Michael Krejsa, Heiner Muller, Peter Pachnicke, and Nancy Roth. 352 pages. 83 color and 206 black-and-white illustrations. Clothbound published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Clothbound, \$95.00, and paperbound, \$45.00, available in The MoMA Book Store.

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