

Book Reviews

Tempo, Tempo! The Bauhaus Photomontages of Marianne Brandt. By Elizabeth Otto. Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2005. 176 pp. \$35.00 cloth.

Elizabeth Otto's recent exhibition catalogue and catalogue raisonnée of the photomontages of Marianne Brandt recovers a previously unpublished body

of work and addresses two issues of great importance during the Weimar Republic: the complicated roles of women, and the physical and emotional fragmentation of modern life. Women occupied a conflicted position in 1920s Germany, experiencing struggles over gender and work, sexuality, economic independence, and a general movement towards liberation. Much German art of the period, as seen in paintings by Otto Dix, featured the quasi-mythical figure of the *Neue Frau*, or New Woman, a construction heavily propagated by the popular press as well.¹ Simultaneously, visual artists and other purveyors of culture, from musicians to playwrights, turned to the fragmentation of montage as a way to impart the disjointed, chaotic nature of life in the urban metropolis.² In her photomontages, produced over the course of a decade, Marianne Brandt returned again and again to themes of the modern metropolis, new technologies, and the status of women. Brandt chose the medium of photomontage specifically for its critical potential: by carefully selecting, fragmenting, and recombining images from the mass media, Brandt implicitly questioned the apparent progress of women, the militarization of German society, and the quality of urban life.

Born in Chemnitz in 1893, Marianne Liebe began her formal training under Fritz Mackensen. Strongly influenced by the Expressionists, Liebe earned a degree in painting from the Hochschule für Bildende Kunst in Weimar in 1918. In 1923, however, after her marriage to fellow painter Erik Brandt, Marianne Brandt saw the first major Bauhaus exhibition and was so impressed that she joined the school, renounced her earlier artistic leanings, and promptly destroyed her previous work.

In her years at the Bauhaus, Brandt became known primarily for her functional designs in the metal workshop, some of which are still in production today. Brandt produced her first photomontages during the requisite preliminary course (Vorkurs) at the Bauhaus in 1924, where the method was used as a way of illustrating artistic principles such as balance and contrast. In 1926, Brandt left the school for a nine-month stay in Paris, during which time she more widely explored the possibilities of photomontage. A few works, such as *Bulle-Esel-Affe/Idoles Modernes (Bull-Ass-Monkey/Modern Idols)*, were clearly private productions, working through the emotional trauma of apparent marital infidelity. Most, however, investigated topics of broader cultural concern: the crowded modern metropolis, the increasing militarization of Weimar society, the new technologies used in industry and transportation, and the emancipated New Woman. In each work, Brandt carefully selected images from the popular press, fragmenting and recombining them for a specific critical purpose.

Brandt completed her studies upon her return to the Bauhaus—the only woman to graduate from the metal workshop, where she was soon appointed interim director. As a solitary female in a position of power over a largely male student body, it is perhaps unsurprising that Brandt

endured some gender discrimination.³ Indeed, her increasing interest in gender issues within her montages may in part reflect this. While some of her early works can be read as optimistic regarding women's increased opportunities in the postwar landscape, her late montages exhibit an air of resignation at the unaltered gender status quo. A 1929 photomontage particularly underscores this sentiment, proclaiming "Guten Tag, Frau, Die Welt ist So" (Good Day, Lady, That's the Way the World Is). Following the closure of the Bauhaus by the National Socialists, Brandt almost completely abandoned her forays in photomontage, which did not come to light again until the 1970s.

Elizabeth Otto makes a significant contribution with her exhibition and catalogue raisonné of these photomontages. Otto has located previously missing works (Brandt's entire oeuvre is exhibited and published together here for the first time) and pieced together a much more detailed and complete biography of Brandt than was previously known. Just as noteworthy is the painstaking research Otto undertook in identifying many of the montage fragments, cut from contemporary periodicals such as the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung (BIZ)*. Unfortunately, Otto does not always expand upon the actual significance of such identifications—indeed, some entries, such as *Ihre wirksame Mithilfe (Your Effective Assistance)*, seem to get caught up in the details of source-hunting and privilege formal description over analysis. Otto's use of language can at times seem awkward, though perhaps that is simply a by-product of the bilingual format.

Marianne Brandt produced a timely body of work during the Weimar era, addressing hot-button issues in a thoroughly modern manner through the incisive critique of photomontage. By bringing to light a largely unknown graphic oeuvre, Otto not only recuperates this important production but also situates Brandt's work within its historical context, building a solid foundation for future scholarship.

—Rachel Epp Buller, Newton, KS

Notes

1. For more on the New Woman, see Marsha Meskimmon and Shearer West, eds., *Visions of the 'Neue Frau': Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany*. Aldershot, England: Scholar Press, 1995.
2. See Hanno Möbius, *Montage und Collage. Literatur, bildende Künste, Film, Fotografie, Musik, Theater bis 1933*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2000.
3. Brandt later recalled her difficulties as a woman in a male-dominated arena in her "Letter to the Younger Generation" (1966). In *bauhaus and bauhaus people*, edited by Eckhard Neumann. Translated for a revised edition, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992, 105-09.