KUNSTAUSSTELLUNG

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(Un)masking Trauma between the Wars

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After World War I, crippled war veterans selling matches or begging in the streets were a common sight in Germany. More than four million soldiers had returned from the front with horrific bodily injuries and disfigurement. In the past, victims of severe facial wounds had rarely survived, but twentieth-century advances in battlefield medicine and ambulance transport saved many who previously would have died. The brutally injured soldiers and civilians dared not show their faces in public before undergoing reconstructive surgery. Of these mutilated people, thousands remained hidden away in military hospitals and psychiatric institutions, denied (or denying themselves) access to mirrors or old photographs. Some were put on view as human monstrosities in freak shows such as those offered in Berlin's working-class district.

The treatment of the disfigured and crippled multitude became a touchstone of collective consciousness and responsibility in the unstable Weimar Republic, "a society struggling to make a transition from authoritarian empire to democracy."[1] New developments in plastic surgery, cosmetics, and prosthetics enabled reintegration into the community, and, as Boaz Neumann wrote of this period, "the cosmetic look, in such cases, was the most authentic one because it 'restored' these soldiers' 'real' appearance."[2]

In some cases, patients were even taught how to routinely construct their own prosthetics, such as ears cast weekly from elastin. The postwar rehabilitation program in Germany led to unprecedented cooperation between physicians and engineers, who designed ingenious, efficient prosthetics and other aids with the goal of returning those who had been injured to the workforce.

What began as a corrective to the devastating effects of war extended to other realms of life in peacetime. Cosmetic surgery flourished among the affluent members of society whose modern lifestyle demanded a more "perfect" self and embraced new revealing fashions. Surgeons like Dr. Jacques Joseph were at the forefront of initiatives to

1 See Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2007), p. 4: "disability became a focal point for sociopolitical and cultural controversies in newly intense ways, and ascertaining the positions of disabled people in society was a means of measuring the success of the new democracy."

2 Boaz Neumann, *Being in the Weimar Republic* (Tel Aviv, 2007), p. 64 [Hebrew].

Opposite: Max Pechstein, Poster for the New Secession exhibition, Berlin, 1912. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, gift of Rudolf Bermann, Jerusalem. B00.0306

Otto Dix, *Skin Graft*, from *The War*, 1924. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett

promote plastic surgery as a means of improving people's self-esteem and vocational opportunities. And, along with the appropriate dress, speech, and demeanor, rhinoplasty to reduce the size of one's nose was seen as a facilitator in the assimilation of Jews into German culture.

To aid the millions wounded among the Allied Powers, in 1917 the British sculptor Francis Derwent Wood opened the "Masks for Facial Disfigurement Department" in a London hospital, and a year later, in Paris, the Massachusetts-born sculptor Anna Coleman Ladd founded the American Red Cross Studio for Portrait Masks. Both used their artistic skills to devise lightweight face masks made of extremely thin galvanized copper in order to hide the mutilated faces of veterans of trench warfare.[3]

As opposed to the creators of such "normalizing" masks, avant-garde artists active between the two world wars sought to expose the gruesome face of this abysmal period. Walter Benjamin wrote of "a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world" and asked "Wasn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence?"[4] Artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Otto Dix, and Alice Lex-Nerlinger, who had experienced World War I firsthand, strove to break this silence and release what was repressed and hidden. They depicted twisted countenances, grossness, suffering – the real tissue of life in interwar Germany. Kirchner, Dix, and Lex-Nerlinger employed the idea and image of the mask, in diverse forms, to confront pain and death and to denounce militaristic nationalism. In a sense, they paved the way for the development of present-day art therapy, in which soldiers are encouraged to create masks to help them work through trauma and brain injury, literally putting a face to their pain.

3 See David M. Lubin, "Masks, Mutilation, and Modernity: Anna Coleman Ladd and the First World War," *Archives of American Art* 47: 3–4 (Fall 2008): 4–16.

4 Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, vol. 2, part I: 1927–1934 (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), pp. 731–32.

Kirchner: Masking Prostitution in the Metropolis

In 1913–15, the Expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner produced a series of drawings, woodcuts, and paintings focusing on Berlin street scenes, and particularly on prostitution along Friedrichstrasse and Potsdamer Platz. The theme of prostitutes and their clients, rendered in Kirchner's distinctive style – drastic spatial distortion and strident color – manifests the commodification of human relations in Berlin as capitalist metropolis.[5] Kirchner's scenes express ambivalence towards the city, as a brutal arena and as a place bursting with the exciting and electric energy of life, "a place of both decadence and vitality."[6]

Otto Dix, *Front-line Soldier in Brussels*, from *The War*, 1924. Sprengel Museum Hannover

Objects of lust and desire, yet associated with illness and death, these women on the streets embody a glamorous danger – the age-old coupling of *eros* and *thanatos* – and at the same time are "emblems of urban psychology in the modern age."[7] Illustrating the transformation of women through fashion "from frugal German housewives into fashionable ladies," as Sherwin Simmons puts it,[8] they signify the emergence of the modern woman within the metropolis. Kirchner's portrayal of such women and their urban setting has been read in various ways. Simmons, for example, argues that Kirchner's street scenes participated in a discourse about luxury and immorality that arose in Berlin at the time when political conservatives attempted to pass laws to check immorality. Charles Haxthausen understands the works not as depictions of urban alienation or a moralizing critique of prostitution, but as an expression of the artist's invigorating encounter with the vibrant metropolis, and also of his identification with the prostitute's vulnerable status because of his fear at this time that the authorities were about to recall him to the army.[9]

5 Rosalyn Deutsche, "Alienation in Berlin: Kirchner's Street Scenes," in *Art in America* 71 (1983): 64–72.
6 Donald E. Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea* (New Haven, 1987), p. 136.
7 Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven, 1991), p. 147.
8 Sherwin Simmons, "Ernst Kirchner's Streetwalkers: Art, Luxury, and, Immorality in Berlin, 1913–16," *The Art Bulletin* 82 (2000): 117.
9 See Charles W. Haxthausen and Heidrun Suhr, eds., *Berlin: Culture and Metropolis* (Minneapolis, 1990), pp. 75–79.

Detail from Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Potsdam Square*, 1914. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie

In Kirchner's *Potsdam Square* of 1914 (see p. 89 in Hebrew section for full image), two elongated female figures stand at the center of a square in front of the city railroad station. Their potential clients, reduced to flattened black silhouettes, approach from behind, one stepping across an abyss to live out his fantasy. The Potsdamer prostitutes often worked in disguise, attired in the fashions of the period. The woman on the left is clad in a widow's black dress and veil, which had become fashion accessories in patriotic Berlin in the late summer of 1914. The black "widow's veil"– added by Kirchner only after the war had begun – was appropriated by prostitutes as a shield from the police and also as a way to arouse sympathy and proclaim solidarity with Germany's fallen soldiers. And in fact, lacking sufficient financial support from the government, many actual war widows were forced to engage in prostitution to feed and clothe their families.

Dressed in blue, the prostitute on the right strides purposefully toward the viewer. Her décolletage and curvaceous figure contrast with the angular lines of the "widow" on the left, portrayed in profile. Both wear high-heeled shoes with pointed toes and both are crowned with the prominent plumes typical of prostitutes. Their feathers and heavily made-up mask-like faces reflect the influence of African and Polynesian artifacts – sources Kirchner had discovered already in 1904 – on the prewar Brücke artists. This foreign, non-white artistic influence would become increasingly problematic for the reception of his art as reactionary German nationalism grew stronger in the late twenties and early thirties, and of course under the Nazi regime. In addition, the liberally

expressed sexuality of Kirchner's work – particularly his nudes in the landscape from summers at the Moritzburg Lakes (see *Bathers at the Beach*, 1913, p. 76) – reflected his affiliation with the naturist Life Reform (*Lebensreform*) movement, and also offended conservative sensibilities. His paintings – and notably the Berlin street scenes – thus combine modernity and primitivism.

From Otto Dix to Yael Bartana: *Entartete Kunst Lebt*

Appearing in 1924, ten years after the onset of World War I, Otto Dix's *The War* similarly couples war and prostitution. This portfolio of fifty prints, reflecting the artist's experiences during his service as an artillery gunner at the Somme and on the Eastern Front, presents horrific images of dead, dying, and shell-shocked soldiers, graves, and bombed-out landscapes. In one etching, *Front-line Soldier in Brussels* (p. 61), a soldier lurks in darkness surrounded by voluptuous whores in expensive clothing, demonized as femmes fatales and war profiteers.

This artist's postwar images of prostitutes and injured war veterans act as symbols of a society damaged both physically and morally. Associated with the Berlin Dadaists and with New Objectivity, Dix employed techniques like collage and montage as a paradoxical dis-reparative means to denounce the military for butchering a generation. With everyday materials such as paper, foil, and cloth standing in for skin and bone, his satirical caricatures simultaneously disguise raw emotion and expose

Detail from Otto Dix, *The Skat Players*, 1920. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie

trauma. Haunted by wartime experiences, Dix saw art as exorcism: "I paint dreams and visions too; the dreams and visions of my time. Painting is the effort to produce order; order in yourself. There is much chaos in me, much chaos in our time."[10]

In *The Skat Players,* 1920 (see p. 91 in Hebrew section for full image), Dix offers a shockingly direct depiction of three hideously disfigured officers playing skat, a popular three-handed German card game, in a café.[11] With its grotesque figuration, Dix's painting served as a scathing indictment of war and militarism, much like the photographs of wounded veterans published at this time by the left-wing press. Between March and June 1920, the artist painted four works dealing with officers. Here, three invalids, former members of the 342nd Regiment, "form a conspiratorial gathering of dismembered outsiders in postwar society, caught up in the misery of the Kapp Putsch, inflation and social deprivation."[12] Suffering grotesque deformities, the players clutch their old-fashioned playing cards (glued onto the canvas) with foot, mouth, and prosthesis. Displaying a masterful use of collage, Dix creates extremely vivid characters. On the right, a decorated lieutenant lacking both legs and an arm sits on a metal contraption; his artificial jaw is rendered in silver foil (marked with the artist's image and signature as manufacturer's brand), while a black eye patch replaces his missing nose. The middle player – a captain with furrowed brow, huge motionless glass eye, patched scalp, and prosthetic jaw – ironically sports a starched white collar and well-groomed moustache. Behind his head, front pages of contemporary German newspapers have been affixed to the canvas. The blind and severely scarred non-commissioned officer on the left uses a blue snakelike ear trumpet. He is dressed in a tweed suit, and a cufflink adorns the shirtsleeve he wears on his leg – which serves as an arm for card playing. The cripples' ebony stumps repeat the forms of the black legs of chairs and card table, uniting human and inanimate objects.

Dix's *War Cripples: A Self-Portrait (45% Fit for Service*), also subtitled *Four of Them Don't Add Up to a Whole Man*, 1920, contains three similar war veterans, now in outdoor apparel and joined by a fourth figure, walking down a shop-lined street – a parody of a military parade. A subversion of the message conveyed in countless press photos celebrating Germany's technological progress and military capacity, Dix's work shows how, in the words

10 Quoted in Linda F. McGreevy, *Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War* (New York, 2001), p. 201.
11 See Sabine Rewald, "Dix at the Met," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 31 (1996): 219–24, for an analysis of this work in the context of its preparatory drawing and related drypoint.
12 Roland März, entry on *The Skat Players*, in idem, ed., *Arcadia and Metropolis: Masterworks of German Expressionism from the Nationalgalerie Berlin* (exh. cat., Neue Galerie, New York, 2004), p. 130.

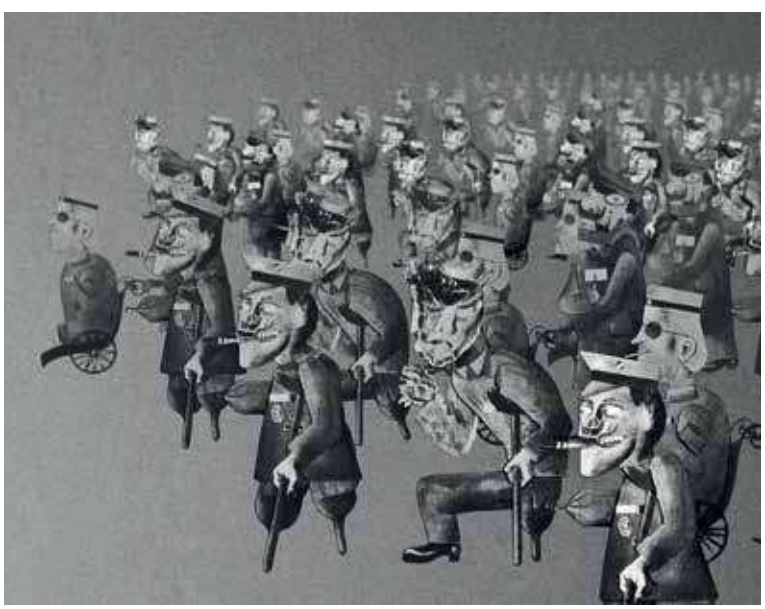
Opening of the First International Dada Fair, Berlin, 1920; on the wall at left: Otto Dix's *War Cripples*

of Ann Murray, "modern technology proved highly efficient in the production of death and debilitation but could not rebuild the shattered bodies and minds of war veterans."[13] The painting communicates a profound empathy with disabled veterans while criticizing policies set down by the government and implemented by the medical profession.[14]

Symbolically identifying himself as a war cripple, Dix brought awareness of the maimed into the art gallery. In the summer of 1920, he exhibited *War Cripples: A Self-Portrait* at the First International Dada Fair, organized by the brothers John Heartfield and Wieland Herzfelde and mounted in the Berlin gallery of Dr. Otto Burchard. Unlike many of the exhibiting artists, against whom the military filed charges of insult, Dix escaped

13 Ann Murray, "Reformed Masculinity: Trauma, Soldierhood and Society in Otto Dix's War Cripples and Prague Street," *Artefact: Journal of the Irish Association of Art Historians* 6 (2012): 17.
14 Ibid., 31.

Otto Dix, *War Cripples*, 1920. Under the heading "The Jew is Deforming German Art" and above a quotation from *Mein Kampf* regarding the Jews' destructive influence on culture, aesthetics, and moral values, the work was included in the Nazi racist educator Alfred Vogel's collection of pedagogic images *Erblehre, Abstammungs- und Rassenkunde in bildlicher Darstellung* (2nd ed., Stuttgart, 1939)



Yael Bartana, Still from *Entartete Kunst Lebt*, 2010. Courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

official censure despite the anti-militaristic content of his work. This painting was later donated to the Stadtmuseum Dresden. When the Nazis came to power, Dix was labeled a degenerate artist, forbidden to exhibit his work, and fired from his post at the Dresden Academy. *War Cripples* was seized and displayed in the state-sponsored *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in 1937, captioned "Slander against the German Heroes of the World War." The painting disappeared after the exhibition and is presumed destroyed.

The contemporary artist Yael Bartana, born in Israel in 1970, brings *War Cripples* back to life in her video and sound installation *Entartete Kunst Lebt* (Degenerate Art Lives), 2010. Bartana happened across a black-and-white digital reproduction of Dix's *War Cripples* while working in Berlin and became interested in the story of this artist's transformation from enthusiastic frontline soldier into pacifist. Intrigued by the possibility of digitally manipulating a work of art that no longer exists, she created cut-outs from the reproduction and worked with animator Hadar Landsberg using classic stop-motion technique, later adding the digital multiplication of frames. The veterans, shadows of the proud soldiers they once were, move forward and then increase in number from one row of the original four war veterans to eight rows, then twelve, then twenty-five, until in the end more than one hundred rows of cripples convey the tremendous scale of injury. The thuds of wooden legs against the pavement are evoked by a soundtrack consisting of repetitive knocking or stepping noises, while the creaking of metal gradually builds up so that the movement of the wheelchair carrying one of the veterans can be heard. At the climax of this hypnotic animation, the marching specks of veterans are seen from above spelling out the words *Entartete Kunst Lebt*. Bartana's anti-war installation expresses the absurdity of an "army" of cripples, who metaphorically join together to create a powerful yet anonymous mass, the multiplicity of weakness becoming strength.[15]

Gas Masks: Otto Dix and Alice Lex-Nerlinger

In French avant-garde circles of the 1920s, the image of the gas mask as an emblem for the brutality of the new warfare became widespread. French surrealist Georges Limbour (1900–1970), analyzing contemporary Western "sacred" artifacts, wrote that the gas mask substitutes for the humanity of the face, and the 1930 issue of the magazine

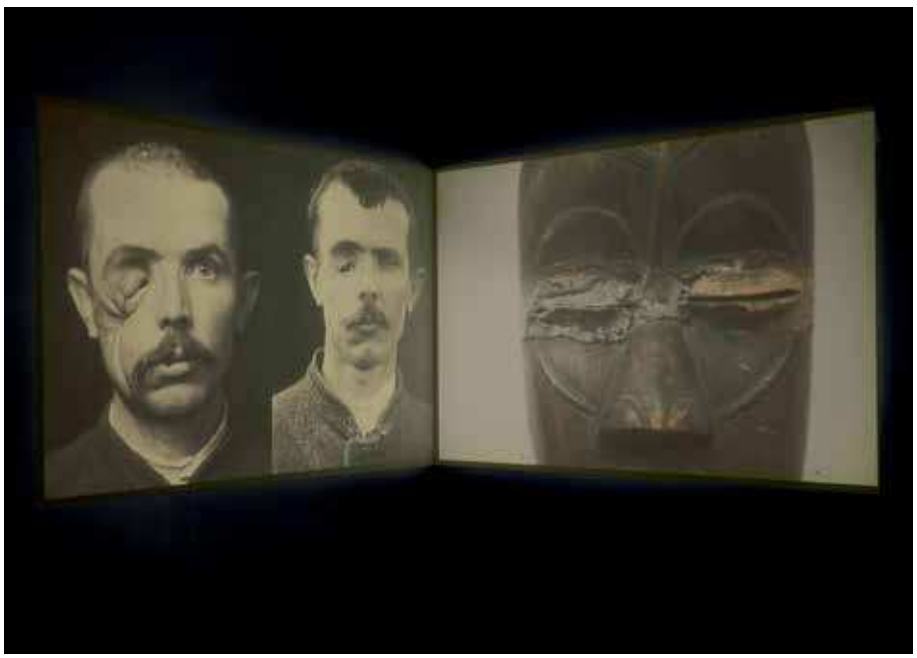
15 Yael Bartana interview with the author, 22 April 2015. To view a section of the project, see: http://yaelbartana.com/project/enartete-kunst-lebt-2010#info. My thanks to gallerist Irit Sommer for bringing this work by Bartana to my attention.

Otto Dix, *Shock Troops Advance under Gas*, from *The War*, 1924. Sprengel Museum Hannover

Variétés featured a series of photographs showing wearers of gas masks and other kinds of mechanical devices, manifesting a fascination for what the "modern imagination has dreamed to replace the head of man."[16]

This idea required no explicit pronouncements in interwar Germany; already in an etching entitled *Shock Troops Advance under Gas* from Dix's 1924 portfolio *The War*, the soldiers' features are obscured by masks and their fingers are claw-like – these figures have lost their humanity. *Field-Gray Yields Dividends*, 1931 (p. 161 in Hebrew section), by Alice Lex-Nerlinger clearly relates to this print, but isolates one soldier, a modern-day suffering Christ who is entangled in barbed wire as tanks proceed from a factory in the background. The soldier's gas mask is partially lifted to reveal one eye aimed heavenward. His nose and mouth are exposed to the airborne pollutants embodied by the greyish sfumato of the painting, which recalls Dix's etching. Although censored reporting had obscured the ghastly details while the war was underway, by the time these works were created, people

16 Georges Limbour, "Aboutissements de la mécanique," *Variétés* II, no. 9 [January 1930], quoted in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 68–69.



Kader Attia, *Open Your Eyes*, 2010. The Museum of Modern Art, New York

were fully aware of the horrors of gas and its long-term effects. The viewer knew all too well what would ensue from such scenes.

In their interwar work, Kirchner, Dix, and Lex-Nerlinger invoke masking or facial disfigurement to reveal the true face of war and its aftermath by exposing vulnerability and physical or psychic damage. In the twenty-first century, the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia revisited the ghastly facial injuries of World War I, continuing to investigate the idea of trauma and "repair" in a very different political, personal, and aesthetic context. His 2010 dual-slide projection *Open Your Eyes* offered a powerful postcolonial critique in which photographs of repaired African artifacts were juxtaposed with images of wounded soldiers whose faces have been reconstructed in ways that resonate visually with the African objects. The artist intended his narrative to reveal the "cultural gap between the Western and non-Western worlds through different understandings of the aesthetics of the human body."[17]

17 Kader Attia, *Artforum*, 23 August 2013, http://artforum.com/words/id=42670

Kader Attia, *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, 2012, dOCUMENTA 13, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel

Attia's more extensive 2012 installation at dOCUMENTA 13, *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* presented repaired African bowls, pottery, and masks together with portraits of France's wounded World War I veterans, whose facial gashes, grafts, and stitches evoke the mended artifacts. The artifacts had been remade by African artisans using materials like staples and plastic buttons, resulting in a hybrid aesthetic that challenges Western expectations of authenticity and seamless unity. According to Attia, the integration of a Western element into an African object is a restorative process: "an intentional act that represents the slave's resistance to the master's power. It is through repair that I believe non-Western cultures begin to take back their liberties."[18] In the same installation, trench art – such as spent bullet cases and artillery shells transformed into decorative objects – demonstrates a will to repair that transcends specific cultural contexts. Nearby, white marble busts portraying African men and women, made in Italy, are juxtaposed with teakwood busts of injured veterans, carved in Senegal using visual sources from the First World War. These function as a "life continuum for the so-to-speak

18 Ibid.

'dead' archive," since Attia views the universe as "endless music phrased by a succession of repairs just as much infinite." [19]

Kader Attia's images attest to the desire of modernity to restore subjects – physically and psychologically – to their pre-traumatic state. The German word *Reparation* denotes (in addition to financial compensation for war damage), the "natural replacement of corrupted, necrotic body tissue by means of granulation and scar tissue within the framework of the healing of wounds."[20] The healing of wounds suffered during World War I appears in this contemporary artist's work at a marked chronological and cultural distance. In the interwar works of German art discussed above, the only distance was a function of the artist's choice: how to present a face that has witnessed the battlefield's horrors – as an immobile mask with a frozen expression, as something that has become a devastated lump of human flesh, or as a terrifying facial substitute that is not even human? The faces these artists depicted forced viewers to contemplate the suffering of the wounded veterans in their midst, and they continue to remind us of the price of war.

19 Ellen Blumenstein, "Kader Attia: REPAIR. 5 ACTS. Four questions of the curator to the artist," exhibition leaflet for "Kader Attia: REPAIR. 5 ACTS." (KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin), http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2013/kader_attia_kw

20 Dictionary definition from Duden (Mannheim, 1999), vol. 7, pp. 3173–74, quoted in Thomas Reinhard, "The Cannibalization of the Other. Mirror, Art, and Postcolonialism in Kader Attia's *Repair. 5 Acts*," http://kaderattia.de/the-cannibalization-of-the-other-mirror-art-and-postcolonialism-in-kader-attias-repair-5-acts/