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The Neue Frau and the Significance of Beetle Imagery in the Photomontages of Hannah Höch

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“...it was not very easy for a woman to impose herself as a modern artist in Germany...Most of our male colleagues continued for a long while to look upon us as charming and gifted amateurs, denying us implicitly any really professional status.” – Hannah Höch¹

Hannah Höch (1889-1978) is one of the few female practitioners of Dada and the only female to have been recognized by the formal Berlin Dadaist group.² Höch is considered a pioneer of the medium of photomontage.³ Her work reads with strong feminist themes, but also reflects the surrounding art movement with references to modernity and machinery. Höch recontextualizes the images she appropriates by manipulating spatial relationships and the scale of human figures. She alters perception and depth to emphasize certain aspects of the composition, allowing some elements to serve as a background. While viewing collections of her work, certain subjects and images are repeatedly used, yet are generally easily explained. Some of the consistently implemented components directly relate to the Dada movement and aesthetic, yet others are particularly unique to Höch. There is one repetitious element, however, that cannot be explained as easily: the beetle. In several instances, the incorporation of the beetle is easily missed by the viewer due to the almost hidden nature of their placement. However, within her body of work, it reoccurs at least six times, often in relation to the feminist themes she incorporates. By analyzing three of her works, *Untitled* (c. 1920), *From Above* (c. 1922), and *The Coquette* (1923-25), I propose Höch's beetle to be a response to the archeological understanding of the Egyptian scarab's meaning of

rebirth, which relates to the contemporary social phenomenon of the *neue Frau*, or New Woman. Thus, by removing the beetle from the focal points of these works, Höch represents the society's rejection of the *neue Frau* as well as the Berlin Dadaists' denial of her.

German Dadaism & Political Consciousness in Art

To comprehend Höch's work fully, it is essential to recognize the cultural and social environment in which it was produced, particularly the framework of Dada. The manifestations of Dadaism varied in every country; however the general sense of absurdity was present in each.⁴ The international Dada movement did not occur simultaneously; instead, it began in Zurich, Switzerland, and spread to New York, Paris, and Berlin.⁵ Dada is characterized as being anti-aesthetic.⁶ Less concerned with formalism, Dadaists sought non-traditional materials and modes to convey absurdity.⁷ Initially, Dada was a response to the senseless violence of World War I and Dadaists used unconventional means "to shock society into self-awareness."⁸ Within the context of the Berlin group, the Dada movement was equally about social awareness, but more involved with political consciousness as well.⁹ The Berlin group was particularly concerned with the state of the Weimar Republic.¹⁰ The Weimar was the democracy that replaced the imperial government in 1919 after the revolution of the previous year.¹¹ The political system made itself available to extremists on both ends of the spectrum, which resulted in many political factions and led to a fractured society.¹² This was

paralleled in the arts as many movements occurred simultaneously during this era. The fractured art world was primed for a medium such as photomontage.

Photomontage: a Manipulated Reality

Photomontage as an artistic medium was cultivated by the Dadaists, with Hans Bellmer considered a founder of the practice.¹³ The fragmentation of Dadaist photomontage causes it to be problematic due to the depiction of reality through photography being manipulated to the point that it is familiar, yet displaced from the viewer's sense of reality. While photomontage and collage were originally pioneered by print advertisers, the avant-garde approach removed itself from the polished effect presented in commercial illustrations.¹⁴ The cubists originally experimented with collage, however, photomontage allowed for a depiction of reality completely disjointed from actuality.¹⁵ Photography is generally considered an absolute truth, even by today's standards. Editing photography, particularly in this sharp and disjuncture manner, undermines this assumption. By manipulating popular cultural images, the Dadaists were able to create a sense of familiarity while presenting it in an absurd manner. The reconfiguration of images redefines their meanings. Whereas some photomontages might be concerned with similar content and themes as the earlier German expressionists, the act of compiling a photomontage reflects a more distant and impersonal approach. The removal of the artists' mark making reflects this mechanized technique.¹⁶ Simultaneously, realistic representations were primed for manipulation. This is

why H□ch, among her colleagues, utilized this method to present social commentary.

The gender construct of the *neue Frau*

Within the era following World War I, there is a move towards women's rights internationally. This movement manifested itself in various ways throughout the world; in Germany, it resulted in the social construct of the *neue Frau*, or New Woman.¹⁷ Within German society, the New Woman was one of financial independence; she lacked legal ties to a man.¹⁸ The avant-garde held this New Woman in the highest regards, however, their expectation of the New Woman was combined with that of a patriarchal view of a muse. Within the media, someone like Marlene Dietrich was admired predominantly for her sex appeal yet upheld as the epitome of the New Woman.¹⁹ It becomes apparent that the New Woman was idealized to the point that she was unrecognizable within a real-world context. While the emergence of the independent modern woman was recognized and even celebrated by some, women still remained subservient to their male counterparts.²⁰ H□ch fit the mold for the *neue Frau*, as she too was unmarried and fiscally independent. Reviewing H□ch's position within the Dadaist group, some contradictions become apparent. It can be suggested H□ch was only included in the group because of her relationship with Raoul Hausmann, and not because of her own artistic merit. In fact, George Grosz and John Heartfield, two other members of the Berlin Dadaists, protested her inclusion in

the First International Dada Fair.²¹ This disdain for Hoch shows how this New Woman existed as a mere ideal instead of as an acceptable position within society.

Untitled (c. 1920)

The three aforementioned photomontages contain other tropes on which I have not focused on. This is because the majority of them can be explained within the context of the era and fit the subset of imagery used by other Dadaists and modernists. As the beetle is such a miniscule part of these compositions, it is necessary, however, to discuss the surrounding images to evaluate the context in which the beetle exists and how it operates within the subset of images of the composition. Within *Untitled* (Fig. 1), the composition is less about depth and more about intensive patterning. The background of this image consists of lines and markings common within fabric patterns. This reflects Hoch's commercial work with the Ullstein Verlag creating crafts for women's magazines.²² Coexisting with the fabric patterns in the background are various mechanical images, oriented upside-down. The newly industrialized world was dealt with in various modes by modernist artists. More closely aligned with the era in which Hoch was working, we see mechanical objects associated with males, as is the case with Hausmann's *Mechanical Head (Spirit of the Age)* (1919) and Francis Picabia's *Here, This is Stieglitz Here* (1915). If these inverted mechanics are viewed as male imagery, Hoch has subverted the patriarchy by means of turning it upside-down. Above this layer we have a female figure perched atop a

turntable. A male figure to the right points at the female with an implication of viewing her. Contemporary theories of the male gaze assert power in viewing.²³ The connotation of the turntable suggests movement of the female figure; simultaneously it conveys the movement to be repetitive and predictable. This sort of implied dance lends itself to the male gaze; it is a performance of sorts just as gender is a performance.²⁴

The beetle in this composition is in the upper right quadrant and contrasts with the mechanized imagery. Whereas the majority of the imagery is contained within a consistent margin of the edges of the composition, the beetle's leg touches the very edge of the paper. The beetle, as I will define it, is symbolic of the New Woman. If this is accepted within this context, then here H□ch challenges the very concept of the New Woman. In this sense, H□ch's conscious placement of the beetle on the outer edges of the composition reflects the New Woman's position on the fringes of society.

From Above (c. 1922)

Within *From Above* (Fig. 2), H□ch creates an expansive sense of space by reconfiguring scale to create what appears to be a construction site. As construction is a male trade, the viewer might assume the two central figures to be two men, yet upon close review they have feminine facial features. H□ch was known to experiment with such gender constructs by splicing male and female features together in many of her other artworks. This play on gender questions

traditional gender roles within the workplace and furthermore asserts the ability of women to pursue the same professions. The beetle rests on a pipeline which leads the viewer's eye to the two figures. As previously mentioned, the use of mechanical and industrial imagery was common throughout various modern movements as many sought to cope with the new mechanized world. The industrial landscape below can be viewed similarly. Other elements within the landscape include an ant, the head of an African woman, a pointed foot, a hand pointing upwards, a disembodied breast, and a man peeking over the edge of the island. These elements are curious, but also fairly explainable. The African woman demonstrates H□ch's interest in Non-western elements. H□ch began incorporating such elements as early as 1919 within her famous image *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* and continued to include them well into the 1930s. Her interest in the subject matter is due to her understanding of the intersection of oppressions; as colonized Africans were thought to be primitive, women were also thought of as simple.²⁵ The ant can also be found within H□ch's *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* composition, however, within this context, I believe H□ch was making a visual pun. As proposed, this image is in essence a construction site and the two figures are workers. Ants are known for their incredible strength; the ants that are considered "worker ants" are asexual females.²⁶ The other various images can be considered a result of the absurdity that was Dadaism.

The beetle in the bottom left corner again reflects the New Woman, however within this one, Hōch has spliced its appearance with that of a bird's; it has a beetle's body, but rests on a bird's foot and has a parakeet's head. Combined with the central, genderly-ambiguous figures, I perceive this to be a playful comment on dichotomies between what the viewer might assume is there in contrast to what is actually there. The figures at first glance can be mistaken for male, and likewise the hybrid can easily be assumed a beetle. The relationship between Hōch's beetle in this scenario is similar to the androgyny of the figures she creates within this scene. Both the figures and the beetle are spliced together; the gender ambiguity of the figures is reflected within the ambiguity of the hybrid beetle. Hōch conveys the essence of the *neue Frau* by strategically denying the figures definitive gender assignment.

The Coquette (1923-25)

The simplified composition of *The Coquette* (Fig. 3) reads with overtly feminist themes, with a hierarchy of scale emphasizing the importance of the female figure. The title alone implies a woman who uses flirtation as means to manipulate men.²⁷ The image consists of three figures; a woman, a man, and a canine. All of the figures have been manipulated, with the heads reconfigured. The woman has a mask of sorts instead of an actual head. Dehumanizing the woman in this sense reflects the title as a woman who plays into the emphasized feminine stereotype is objectified. As Joan Riviere illustrates within the text of

Womanliness as Masquerade from 1929, degrees of femininity are used to deny the possession of masculinity as well as avoid the social consequences of revealing such masculinity.²⁸ Therefore, by using sexuality to manipulate men, the woman may feel powerful, but is still abiding by the patriarchy. The male figure, which is actually more boy than man, has had the head replaced by a dog's face. The male figure is neutered; it is presumably male, but shows no outward signal of sex. Freudianism infiltrated many artistic circles at this time; if we view this as a remark on castration theory, then H□ch has successfully emasculated the male.²⁹ Again, referring to the title, the woman has claimed the authority by manipulating the man and essentially disempowering the male figure. The hands of the male offer up a present of sorts; again playing into the title, the female figure has manipulated the male figure for her own gain. The third figure is that of the dog, with an adult, even middle-aged man's head attached. By doing this, H□ch equates the man with the canine to some degree.

Within the collaged frame exists a red oval in the upper right hand corner upon which H□ch has placed the beetle. The tilt of the beetle echoes that of the female figure's extended hand. The beetle disrupts the pyramidal structure upon which the rest of the composition operates. The triangular arrangement is so strong that the beetle can easily evade the viewer's gaze. Simultaneously, the use of red behind the beetle should call attention to its existence. This reflects the significance of the beetle within the composition; if the accepted connotation of

the New Woman to the beetle is carried into this artwork, then H□ch's choice of red shows a separation between the New Woman and the coquette. In this situation, the coquette is the woman who manipulates the patriarchy, whereas the beetle is a true feminist who rejects the status quo.

Within all three of these compositions is the beetle. In each instance, the beetle exists outside of the predominant picture plane as described. With overt and subtle feminist tones, the addition of the beetle does not add any obvious commentary, yet, repeatedly H□ch incorporates it. This leads the viewer to speculate the value of the beetle for H□ch. The majority of the themes described do not pertain to the natural world, but to the human-made existence within it, again accentuating the oddity of the beetle. While in most situations the beetle appears as a byproduct of the composition, by placing the beetle outside the main focal points, H□ch makes it a point of visual interest. Likewise, by consistently incorporating the beetle in this same fashion, H□ch is consciously emphasizing its existence outside of the main composition.

Significance of the Beetle

H□ch is known to have visited the Ethnographic Museum of Leyden in the year of 1926.³⁰ As the three images in dispute were created prior of this date, this does not correlate the beetle with non-western imagery. However, it is important to note that H□ch had read *Negerplastik* (African Art) by Carl Einstein prior to this point, however the exact year is unknown.³¹ Elza Adamowicz within

her essay “Between Museum and Fashion Journal: Hybrid Identities in the Photomontages of Hannah Höch” claims that Höch did not begin to explore non-Western imagery prior to 1923.³² As Adamowicz presents this as fact, she also does not acknowledge that there is non-western imagery within Höch’s image *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*, which is from 1919. Upon close inspection of this image there is an elephant led by an African man holding a spear within this composition, disproving the previously assumed year of exposure. This image is known to have been from the Berlin Illustrated Newspaper, which was an Ullstein production.³³ With her incorporation of various images originally printed by Ullstein media, it is obvious she was exposed to a number of their publications.

Within the time she was working for Ullstein, an important acquisition was made by the Berlin Egyptology Museum. The fully painted Nefertiti bust was presented for display to the public for the first time in 1923.³⁴ While this also is later than two of the dates of the work in question, it also reflects the general interest in Egyptian artifacts. The College of Arts and Crafts that Höch attended was a short 2.4 kilometers (or 1.5 miles) away from the Egyptian Museum of Berlin.³⁵ It is impossible to say definitively that Höch visited the museum, however it is more than plausible that due to the curiosity at the time, her interest in non-western imagery, and her exposure to the media from her position at

Ullstein Verlag, that H□ch would have been aware of the most minor of Egyptian artifacts, including the scarab.

The scarab as defined in today's terms is a metaphor for resurrection; the way it rolls the dung balls and lays eggs within them reminded the ancient Egyptians of the rising sun.³⁶ Even though this is a modern definition, documents from the time definitively associate the scarab with death; the resurrection association is implied, as the scarab is "means which the deceased king gets life."³⁷ Again, with H□ch's plausible exposure to media and the museum, it is very likely she was aware of this association with rebirth. Therefore, the incorporation of the beetle is a conscious reference to the Egyptian scarab and its meaning of rebirth. This assumption of rebirth colludes with the idea of the New Woman. As the woman was being reborn within the context of German society, H□ch's beetle reflects this correspondence. H□ch is known to have been particularly interested in the idea of the New Woman.³⁸ H□ch's feminist imagery called for a new social order among the genders and the beetle reemphasizes the need for a "rebirth."

Conclusion

The symbol alone does not fully justify H□ch's intentions. H□ch's placement is significant as well. H□ch strategically places images to create a visual argument; such has been proven within the content of *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, as Maud Lavin has found it to be divided between images that are dada and

those that are not by a diagonal axis.³⁹ Art historians, however, have consistently overlooked her lesser known photomontages. While in several of her works the overt feminist imagery is undeniable, simultaneously, H□ch employed covert imagery in order to prescribe a more masked feminist symbolism. The dialogue between images is problematic, yet provides insight into H□ch's state of mind and motives. H□ch intentionally places the beetle outside the realm of the major composition. This speaks to the rejection of the New Woman within the German society. Furthermore, I would like to propose that the beetle is a reference for H□ch. She consciously implemented this image repeatedly within the same fashion; therefore it served some sort of purpose for H□ch on a personal level. I believe her intention was to create a covert symbol for herself. As a real-world example of the New Woman, H□ch began to recognize the failure of the trope within the society that idolized the New Woman. To further this association between herself and the beetle, the image *Notes de mon Menage* (Fig. 4) is the only artwork I am aware of in which H□ch has implemented her own image. Surrounding her image are German adages and various other images. Almost perfectly opposite of the image of the portrait are several beetles of various species. This again reiterates the significance of the beetle within this time period for H□ch. The quote with which I opened this paper is best applied here and reflects H□ch's identification of this rejection. Thusly, in order to avoid giving her colleagues any other reason to view her as an amateur, H□ch avoided overtly

placing her own image within the composition and resorted to the covert image of the beetle as a representation of herself, the *neue Frau*, and society's failure to progress.

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17. Marsha Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999): 128.
18. Ibid., 131.
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20. Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough*, 128.
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30. Elza Adamowicz, "Chapter 14: Between Museum and Fashion Journal: Hybrid Identities in the Photomontages of Hannah Höch," *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* 26 (January 2011):188.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.

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