

Vernon Lidtke

Bildende Künstler und soziales Engagement



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When I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg I had recently begun the research for a cultural-historical study of socially and politically involved visual artists in Germany in the period from just prior to the First World War into the first years of the Third Reich. During the year, I focussed my attention on two main objectives: first, to develop and refine a conceptual structure for the project, and second, to push as far as possible the research in both published and unpublished sources in the libraries and archives in Berlin. The fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg has been especially beneficial because the collections in Berlin hold far more source material for this project than those in any other city. Moreover, the resources of the Wissenschaftskolleg, especially the excellent library service, facilitated many aspects of my work and made it possible for me to complete a very substantial portion of the research. As the research progressed, so did my reflections on the conceptual and interpretive dimensions of the study.

The emergence of a modern movement of socially involved visual artists in Germany can be clearly discerned in the final decade of the nineteenth century, but the experience of the First World War, and the revolution that followed, stimulated the founding of new artists' organizations, encouraged an increasing preoccupation with variations of socialist ideology, and heightened the need to attempt to harmonize aesthetic and stylistic tendencies with social and political commitments. It is my working hypothesis that this matrix of impulses gave the movement of socially involved artists its fundamental characteristics, which can be summarized under the following headings.

1) The nature of the large number of newly founded associations of socially involved artists after 1918, manifested in organizational plurality and fluidity, can best be interpreted within the framework of theories of voluntary associations. A typology of these organizations includes a wide range of forms, from loose and transitional groupings of like minded artists to highly structured organizations with close party affiliations (for example, the *Assoziation revolutionärer bildender Künstler Deutschlands*).

2) It is important to interpret the movement in terms of an ongoing set of polarities, but which also fluctuated in intensity. These polarities were reflected in: a) contrasting principles of organization; b) an unresolved tension between the demands of artistic individuality and of social collectivity; c) the urge to destroy and the need to build for the future; and d) the incompatibility between the attraction to forms of mysticism, on the one hand, and to rationalism and scientism, on the other, as modes for achieving cultural transformation.

3) On the theoretical level, this study reconstructs the recurrent discussions — sometimes intense, sometimes disjointed — on the relationship between artistic style and social involvement. Broadly characterized, the debate included primarily, but not exclusively, advocates of expressionism, abstraction, realism and the new objectivity, and versions of constructivism. To comprehend the qualities of this debate required systematic reading in many of the artistic and cultural periodicals of the Weimar era (for example, *Das Kunstblatt*, *Die Aktion*, *Der Sturm*, etc.) which has been completed.

4) The study selects four central iconographical themes that reveal some prominent concerns of socially involved visual artists: a) the endeavor to give visual representation to the notion of socialpolitical revolution; b) the search for the nature of the proletariat, that is, for images that combine the reality of deprivation with the idealized notion of the worker as the agent of historical change; c) the recognition of the centrality of sexuality for social relationships; and d) the inclination to employ religious symbolism as a way to retain some traditional values while simultaneously advocating radical change.

This conceptual structure — summarized of necessity in rather abstract generalizations — has taken shape as the research proceeded during the year. In addition to using memoirs, published letters, and essays, as well as numerous major, and minor, cultural journals from the Weimar years, there were valuable sources in a number of archives. The *Nachlaß* of Walter Gropius in the Bauhaus Archiv (where I also could discuss my work with Dr. Magdalena Droste) proved to be of immense value for the history of the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst*. In the *Akademie der Künste* the

Nachlaß of George Grosz was especially fruitful, and in the Handschriften-Abteilung of the Staatsbibliothek I used the materials in the Sturm-Archiv. Informative sources were also found in the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Landesarchiv Berlin.

My energies were centered on the above research project, but in addition I took an active part in some other programs at the Wissenschaftskolleg. From the outset I was affiliated with the Culture of Science group, and, although I presented only one informal paper to its members, I participated in the discussions at the various seminars. Prior to coming to the Wissenschaftskolleg, much of my work was on the Social Democratic labor movement in Germany, and in that connection I contributed a paper — "Bemerkungen zur Arbeiterkultur vor 1933: Vermutungen und Hypothesen über mögliche Kontinuitäten" — to the seminar on "Arbeiter und Gebildete in der DDR: Kontinuitäten und Wandlungen in zwei kulturellen Milieus".