

Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"/ Germany / The 1920s / New Objectivity / August Sander /" exhibition

"/ Germany / The 1920s / New Objectivity / August Sander /" (11th of May – 5th of September 2022) explores cultural, artistic and sociological life in the Weimar Republic from 1925 to 1933.

Let yourself be guided through the main themes of the exhibition with Angela Lampe, curator of the "New Objectivity" section, Florian Ebner, curator of the "August Sander" section, and Sophie Goetzmann, researcher.

Colour code:

In black, the narrating voice

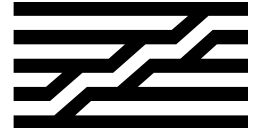
In blue, the curators and the artist

In green, the quotes

In purple, the musical excerpts

In red, all the other sound indications





Podcast transcription

1 - Prolog

[jingle of the show] Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears. You'll be taken for a visit at the Centre Pompidou.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]

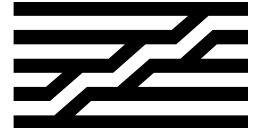
[transitional sound] Today we are at the exhibition on Germany in the 1920s, about art and culture in the art movement *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity. This is the first ever exhibition in France on this movement from the 1920s.

It focuses on Germany, in the wake of the horrors of the First World War. Artists relinquished a very expressive art form in favour of more realistic, or objective art. And there's an exhibition within the exhibition: as we wander through, we see paintings, photographs, plays, design pieces, architecture, film, music, and amidst all this, August Sander's great photographic anthology called *People of the 20th Century*.

[Angela Lampe] There are two parts in this exhibition, a general New Objectivity theme, and a monographic theme, on the artist August Sander and his work *People of the 20th Century*.

The works are on display in a special setting, produced specifically for the exhibition. This is a first: the general theme exhibits are in the side rooms, then there's a kind of cross-section with a gallery featuring August Sander's portraits, showcased as a kind of talent contest, or an introduction to the actors in the Weimar Republic, and German society. These ambitious projects aim to look back at the history of culture and creation during the Weimar Republic, with Objectivity as the keyword.

[Sophie Goetzmann] The term New Objectivity was coined by art historian Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, director of the art museum in the city of Mannheim, the *Kunsthalle Mannheim*. He used it as the title of an exhibition he organised in 1925.



The term designated new art trends in Germany based on a form of realism. In 1925, there were many debates involving aesthetics in Germany, as Expressionism gradually lost momentum, being replaced by painting that drew on a new form of realism. New, because it reflected new attitudes after the First World War, an aspiration to detachment and New Objectivity. The term was to qualify art trends in Germany.

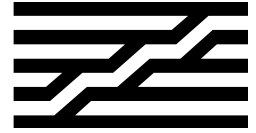
It is not merely a specialist term reserved for painting; it spread rapidly throughout German society, soon to be adopted in mainstream theatre of the time, in songs. It soon reached the height of fashion, used for all kinds of situations, much to Hartlaub's regret. He was dismayed that the term he coined, New Objectivity, would be diluted through overuse, applying to things that had nothing to do with painting nor even the meaning of New Objectivity as he saw it.

The exhibition aims more to analyse the term, Objectivity, than serve as a historic re-enactment. It's the spirit of a time with political resonance and media analogies between those times and society today. German society in the 1920s was in the midst of great transformation, in social, political, media and technological terms.

[Sophie Goetzmann] This small room is a prologue to introduce art trends in Germany prior to New Objectivity, before the 1920s. Three works to represent three trends: a photo by August Sander from 1914 as an example of his pre-war work.

Next, we have an Expressionist painting by Ludwig Meidner, one of the most important painters of the 1910s in Berlin and one of the greatest protagonists of Expressionism. Expressionism is an art trend rooted in expressivity, an artist's individuality and the expression of artistic subjectivity. This kind of painting uses impasto and garish colours focusing on the creative ego, as in this highly subjective self-portrait.

Lastly we have a work to represent Dadaism, a movement which first emerged during World War I, in Switzerland then Germany in the late 1910s.



Dadaism was revolutionary and anti-bourgeois, with the idea of sparking a revolution in art practices and the very notion of art, via works featuring objects, as with this Dada head by Raoul Hausmann, made up of objets gathered together. It is the negation of the idea of individual talent and expression. It is art with a political message. It is a harbinger of New Objectivity and the use of objects in representation. It heralds a kind of standard, in which standardised portraits break away from Expressionism, moving on to something new, especially in portraiture.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]

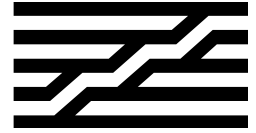
2 - Standardisation

[transitional sound] What is standardisation? It's the end of singularity, replaced by templates, standardised types and simple shapes that are highly suitable for mass reproduction.

Here we see paintings like those of George Grosz with his faceless, schematic human figures, with neutral expressions in empty urban settings.

In architecture, it corresponds to the launch of huge programmes to build housing estates as in Frankfurt, where the habitat was designed as standardised modules. Here, we see engravings by Gerd Arnz in which people are drawn as geometric figures reminiscent of comic strips. The silhouettes appear in a simple, subtle interplay of black and white: a prisoner's striped uniform matches the prison bars; workers repeat their tasks to the beat of the machinery. Angela Lampe, curator of the exhibition, explains the context and reasons for these drawings.

[Angela Lampe] Artists paid attention to the social class each individual belonged to. Sociological considerations took on great importance, especially amongst the group formed in Cologne with artists Gerd Arnz and Heinrich Hoerle and Franz Seiwert, known as the Cologne Progressives, with whom August Sander would exhibit his work. The work involved the use of diagrams, standardisation and social types, such as bosses and workers. Arnz produced a series of woodcuts called *Twelve Houses of the*



Time, in which he represented social classes according to a set of codes. With the philosopher and economist Otto Neurath, he drew up a universal visual language, or “international system of typographic picture education”, abbreviated as “isotype”. One might say that the isotype was a precursor to pictograms, or emoji. In the 1920s, there was a desire or dream of creating universal languages. The pictograms were associated with colour codes, making up for example a typology of trades, social categories and everyday elements, aiming to democratise knowledge. This new visual system provided an easily shared visualisation of economic and social problems. So it was like a system to generate graphics before its time.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]

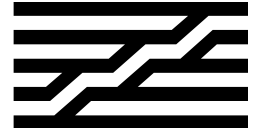
3 - Faces of our time

[transitional sound] [Florian Ebner] This two-part exhibition is an opportunity to study the interactions between August Sander and the artists known as the Cologne Progressives. We see Sander’s portraits here on the wall, which he dedicated to them. Nearby, you can see pictures by some of these artists, including Franz Seiwert, Heinrich Hoerle and Anton Räderscheidt.

We can see the extent to which Sander is inspired by their art. Their discussions, letters, and the reproductions Sander made of the Cologne Progressives’ pictures are on display on a large table. And at this point, there is a magic moment: a gap in the picture rail affords a glimpse of the Sander corridor, where you can spot the Farmers Group, we see the dual forces that permeate his work, his rural roots, for he is from Westerwald, and revolutionary energy. So there are two sources of energy which help to form the productive tension which is a hallmark of his work.

By means of seeing, observing and thinking, and with the aid of the camera and a date, we can capture world history and influence all of humanity by means of the expressive potential of photography as a global language.

(August Sander)



[Florian Ebner] Coming back to photography as a universal language, there was much discussion in 1920s Germany on the various possible types of society, it was a truly introspective society in this period.

The original thought behind my photographic work *People of the 20th Century*, which I started in 1910 and which comprises around five or six hundred photos, of which a selection was published in 1929 under the title *Face of Our Time*, was nothing other than an avowal of faith in photography as the global language. And it was an attempt at creating a physiognomic momentary portrait of the German, built upon the chemical-optical development of photography, which is to say, upon the pure design of light.
(August Sander)

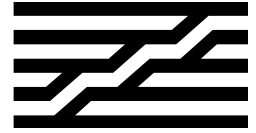
[Florian Ebner] I think that Sander's art of portraiture embodies something specific in photography: he invites people to showcase themselves before the camera, to adopt a posture for several seconds, like an assisted "self-portrait" as Olivier Lugon put it. Then at the same time, he attributes a place for these people in his take on society. The idea of "editing society" is precisely that: he then arranged his archives to show his choices, the place he attributes to the models and their images in the seven groups and 45 portfolios.

The title of his book, *Face of Our Time*, helps those who do not read up on theory to gain insight into the subtle differences in class in the Weimar Republic.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]

4 - Montage

[transitional sound] Photomontage first emerged during the war, among Dada artists. A few years later, this technique was taken up again as a means to analyse society. Artists were able to visually encapsulate the era by blending motifs and information that were dissociated in reality.



[Sophie Goetzmann] This portrait was painted by Lotte Prechner. It looks like a collage, yet it's an oil painting depicting the state of world politics in 1928.

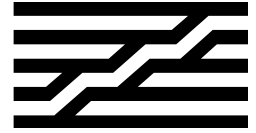
In the top left corner, a sun beaming its rays that are dotted with dollars, a hotchpotch of elements referring to the influence of the USA, industrialisation, the introduction of Taylorism, the rise of fascism, especially in Italy and Germany, the emergence of the USSR and the coexistence of different religions. All is mixed together to give an overall picture in just a glimpse: 1920s Germany in a nutshell.

This is all in the background, contemplated by a black man in a suit and tie, who seems to be meditating and looking on despairingly at the state of the world. His arm lies on a crate, containing a pile of books concealed by a curtain. Symbol of his intellectuality, like a treasure hidden from rising fascism and everything that we can see in the background.

In painting, composition made it possible to show several facets of one and the same person. Alternatively, the composition looks real but in fact is fictive, as for example in Christian Schad's *Portrait of Count St. Genois d'Anneaucourt*: the characters are like cut-out figures set next to each other without any space between them. We see the aristocrat rubbing shoulders with a transvestite in a street in Montmartre. In a naturalist style, the artist celebrates artificiality and ambiguity.

We also have a few examples of photomontage such as these amazing compositions by Sasha Stone.

[Angela Lampe] Photographer Sasha Stone depicts cityscapes, especially Brandenburg Gate and mosques in Istanbul, he treats them like interchangeable objects, to be confused with each other. It was ground-breaking, and today it is like an amusing harbinger, given the latter-day connections between Turkey and Berlin with Turkish immigration to Germany. In the late 1920s, these two entities were already associated in this montage.



Otto Dix's triptych painting, *The Metropolis*, shows the city as a place in which social classes mingle, where the bourgeoisie rub shoulders with those living in grinding poverty. The mixed-bag association of disparate elements opened up a way to a more political reading of the city.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]

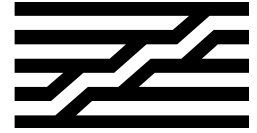
5 - Things

[transitional sound] New Objectivity artists were observant, which prompted them to use objects as models. Purportedly objective, photography was especially suitable for the precise rendering of material things. The two art forms embarked on dialogue. Is logic really purely mimetic?

[Angela Lampe] Their paintings were animated by this tension between inert plant and the geometric environment of an unrelenting void, giving the fake allure of a bourgeois interior but which is completely artificial and fake. Architecture, geometry and abstraction were the attributes which fascinated painters.

[Sophie Goetzmann] No photo is truly objective given that it has to be framed: there's the choice of motif, the choice of subject photographed, there are many choices to be made. The art involves a staging of the plants sometimes from original points of view, with attention to detail and the plant matter. These plants are photographed as objects. They are not of interest as living beings; they do not appear to be vivacious, they are very rigid, placed in neutral, empty environments; still life that is very still indeed.

And we see this with the photo by Aenne Biermann: she favours close-ups when photographing plants: she zooms in on their leaves which are endowed with a kind of metal sheen, like saucepans. There is reification in the sense that these plants are treated as objects in painting and photography alike.



[Angela Lampe] In his 1928 album *The World is Beautiful*, Albert Renger-Patzsch's first title is *Things*. He captures standardised, mass-produced, industrial products. Aluminium pans and lacquered shoe trees were depicted, often in close-up shots, in rows or stacked, repeated as a series to show that they were mass-produced according to Taylorist methods.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]

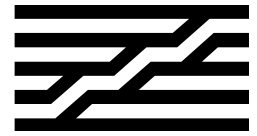
6 - Cold Persona

[transitional sound] The four deadly years of war ended with defeat for Germany, engendering a nationwide form of widespread disillusion. Humiliation in defeat gave rise to a culture of shame. The 1920s saw the onset of what cultural critic Helmut Lethen called the "cold persona". Artists were also interested in changing gender norms at the time, since they were changing a lot, especially for women.

[Sophie Goetzmann] Helmut Lethen explained that guilt and shame were two different things. Feeling guilt means we have made a mistake and thought about it, torturing ourselves to try to set things right again; so guilt implies an introspective approach.

Shame is about making a mistake, but instead of thinking about it, we take a more outward-looking approach, wondering what other people will think of us, how we can save face, how we can move on from this shame. This is what he called the culture of shame; people were overcome with shame at the ideas they entertained before World War I and how readily everyone went to war. A wave of patriotism in Germany as in France, and all these people ended up facing up to the harsh realities of war: mutilation, death, trauma, mourning families. There was shame at those pre-war ideas.

How is this depicted in the portraits? In a new way of being, playing at being detached, protecting oneself by adopting a mask of indifference; in portraits, people do not smile, nor do they express any particular emotion. They are detached, against a neutral backdrop.



Yet at the same time the portraits do say something about the subjects. Rather than expressing their inner feelings, they show their position in the social order, or their profession. New Objectivity artists placed people in boxes and represented their profession and workplace. The portraits make a general statement, that people would hide their feelings. In this section, there is a portrait of a woman putting on her make-up. The make-up is symbolic of this new social attitude: the layer of make-up is to conceal her torment and sentiments from others, for demonstration of sentiment had become embarrassing.

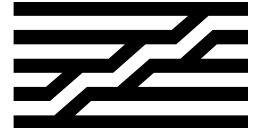
[Angela Lampe] Another example is painter Otto Dix's ruthless portrait of journalist Sylvia von Harden, as an emancipated intellectual typical of the Weimar Republic. She wears her hair short, smoke a cigarette, drinks alcohol and wears a monocle. Her sentimental torment is reflected in her choice of attributes: her stocking is undone, her pose is constrained, she is uncomfortable in a feminised pink world. Her interior is laid bare.

[Florian Ebner] There is a second meeting point where the two circuits intersect: in *Chapter 6*, the Cold Persona for the New Objectivity part of the exhibition and August Sander's *Group 3 on Women*. For *Women*, he devised five portfolios in an attempt to describe women's roles in society.

The last two portfolios, *Elegant Women* and *Women in Intellectual and Practical Occupation*, emphasise "die Neue Frau", the new role and type of woman of the time.

Let's take a look at the beautiful portrait painted by Otto Dix of journalist Sylvia von Harden and that of a secretary for German radio photographed by Sander. The gestures, the hand, the cigarette, the clothing: they could be sisters, even twins. It is an approach to portraiture that no longer explores a person's inner being, but simply describes their outer attributes, showing their gestures, accessories and habitus. The interaction between the painted portraits and August Sander's photographs is very rich at this point in this exhibition.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]



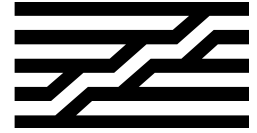
7 - Rationalisation

[transitional sound] In the wake of World War I, Germany plunged into recession, along with hyperinflation. In 1924, the Dawes plan to inject American capital was introduced to put Germany back on its feet and enjoy growth once more. The Germans developed a fascination for the USA further to these generous investments. The USA's social and economic model was held up as an example, perceived as methodical, harmonious and innovative since it hinged on technology. This was the backdrop against which rationalisation was to permeate German culture, from interior design to popular entertainment, not forgetting graphic design.

[Angela Lampe] The Taylorist concept of rationalisation at work was imported into German businesses, leading to swift industrialisation and the mechanisation of tasks. The principle underpinning rationalisation became a new standard applied even to social life and culture. For example, graphic designer Paul Renner designed the Futura font, based on elementary geometric shapes. This new, rational standard also applied to interior design. Viennese architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, who worked in Frankfurt, designed a modern, functional kitchen.

[Sophie Goetzmann] So Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's kitchen was fully equipped, as you can see. It was in fact the first prototype of the modern kitchen fitted with all mod cons, which was to become a standard feature of all modern homes across Europe.

It was an architectural achievement, but also a double-edged sword. The design was initially intended to work towards the emancipation of women. Obviously, at the time, the kitchen was the women's room since women did the cooking. So Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky thought carefully about how to make the kitchen more comfortable for housewives. She noticed that old-fashioned kitchens were not designed to streamline movement, women had to walk for miles in the course of the day, just to go from the pantry to the oven, from the sink to the rubbish bin, to take dishes to the dining room, then back to the sink, and so on.



So she calculated everything scientifically to show how women slaved themselves away in the kitchen, because they had to walk so much due to poorly designed kitchens. She produced a new model kitchen, designed to save on movement as much as possible. Her kitchen design's greatest new feature was the fact that practically all cooking tasks could be performed at the same workstation, sitting on a swivel stool with caster wheels for moving around. This meant that all the furniture was set relatively low, especially the counters, designed so that women could sit to chop vegetables, for example.

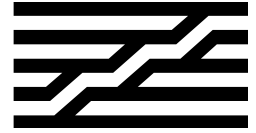
Another feature of the kitchen was that it was designed as a separate room rather than part of the living room. A new concept at the time was that it was more hygienic to cook (and thus produce steam) in a different room, not the living room. So the kitchen was separate from the living room, with just a sliding door between them. The room designated housework as work, which was a new concept. Lastly, while I'm not sure whether it was a novel concept, but it was progress, in feminist thought of the time, to consider home cooking not as a leisure activity or hobby, but work performed for the people living under the same roof.

So it was considered as work, subjected to Taylorism. Housework was rationalised exactly like the division of tasks in factories at the time. However, there is something ambiguous in designing a kitchen as a separate unit because it actually contributes to the alienation of women from the rest of society, relegating them to the kitchen. This is obviously what makes this kitchen an ambiguous achievement, from our 21st century viewpoint.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]

8 - Utility

[transitional sound] New musical styles were imported from America to Germany in the 1920s and were a great hit, especially jazz and dance music such as the foxtrot. Composers Ernst Krenek, Kurt Weill and Paul Hindemith drew inspiration from it to



create their own new musical genre, Zeitoper, or “Opera of the Times” in English. Intrigues are set in the contemporary world, with stage sets featuring modern machinery such as trains, cars and telephones. These operas were intended for a vast audience, drawing many references from popular culture.

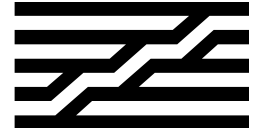
[Angela Lampe] This era witnessed large-scale democratisation of the previously elitist art form of opera. Bertolt Brecht was an important figure in 1920s theatre. A far cry from the lyrical effusions of expressionism, he and Erwin Piscator developed new forms of theatre, known as epic theatre. They introduced scenic devices into the narrative of their plays, to help the audience analyse the intrigue, with the aim of contributing to their political awakening. They worked to achieve a sense of distance.

The narrator’s introduction, for example, and the violation of unity of action were elements that could engender this sense of distance, which incites critical thinking. The aim is precisely to get the audience thinking. There are other moments, which we might call moments of New Objectivity in Brecht’s work. There’s the theme of sport, which he loved. He actually compared theatre to sporting events, especially boxing, which became an important reference in his plays.

Then there was his dry, plain style, setting him apart as a representative of New Objectivity, especially in his poetry. Prose started to dominate poetry. It was truly a ground-breaking form of literature, with an approach that owed more to sociology than poetry. Brecht shared with New Objectivity the aim of popularising art.

He was interested in the possibilities afforded by new mass communications technology. For example, he worked with recorded poems and radio plays, at a time when radio was fast being adopted in German households. It was the beginning of what is now known as mass media, which helps to broadcast cultural productions and make culture accessible to all.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]



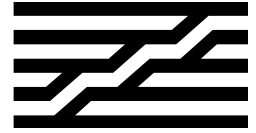
9 - Transgression

[transitional sound] [Sophie Goetzmann] There are two forms of transgression on display in these rooms. Firstly there's the transgression of gender norms: these were shifting, especially in expression, in the clothing people wore, and especially for women at that time. Women from the upper middle classes, living in the city, started dressing like men, in tomboy style, wearing short hair, favoring flat chests, wearing ties, thus modifying women's fashions of the time. There was also a transgression of heterosexuality in 1920s Berlin, there was a thriving queer subculture, with clubs, gay cruising sites, restaurants and bars.

[Angela Lampe] The painter and illustrator Jeanne Mammen produced water colours depicting daily life in lesbian haunts, tenderly portraying the relationships between women. Christian Schad similarly drew two young boys embracing romantically. On the other hand, Otto Dix's portraits are imbued with the more stereotypical homophobia of the era. The dancer Anita Berber, an openly bisexual star with a dramatic love life, was portrayed as the personification of sin. Dressed all in red, she was shown as a figure coming straight from hell, as an incarnation of sinful Babylon.

[Sophie Goetzmann] These two forms of transgression are shown in the first two rooms. The last room in this section actually shows a backlash, a reminder of standards and the attitude of most male artists towards these transgressions, that of anxiety, and fear at seeing lesbian women who openly flaunt their sexuality, at the blurring of gender norms.

Would this not open the door to the blurring of gender roles too, with women taking power from men? Thus many of these men produced multiple representations of women being violently wounded, assassinated, their throats slit, echoing the reporting of crime at the time, with the rising phenomenon of serial killers hitting the headlines and photographs of murder victims being published in the press. These images were greatly fuelled by this visual culture representing murder at the time.



These works depicted a certain anxiety among these artists towards all these transgressions of gender norms and transgressions of heterosexuality. The shame that men felt further to Germany's defeat in World War I was expressed in these representations of violence against women, also because women had made headway during World War I.

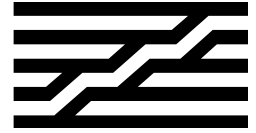
Most positions left vacant by men leaving for the front line were then filled by women. Women had not only carved out a place for themselves in the workplace but also obtained the right to vote in 1918, and started to dress like men, in shirt and tie, with short hair: all this nurtured ideas of vengeance among men. The vengeance here does remain metaphorical, we do need to bear that in mind. These are representations, but it's also a way of exorcising these fears and the fear of losing one's virility, as a result of the post-war situation.

[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]

10 - Looking downward

[transitional sound] [Sophie Goetzmann] In this last room, we see the other side of the coin, as it were, of capitalism. In the "Rationality" section we saw many artists praising the introduction of machinery, new industrial landscapes and factories, like a new contemporary reality to be celebrated, showing off its gleaming beauty, for a form of beauty could indeed be detected.

In this last section, we are exploring artists who show the outcasts, those left behind by Taylorism, the workers, obviously; who were exploited and who became an interchangeable mass, mere cogs in an enormous machine that dominates them. But also, all those living on the fringe of society, wounded war veterans, the unemployed, and those living on the outskirts of the city and who could not enjoy the theatre or opera, or Zeitoper, or Brecht's shows performed in the city centres, those who did not have access to entertainment and were condemned to a form of marginality in their lives and habitat, and who were completely crushed by the capitalist economic machinery.



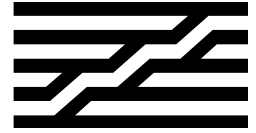
[Angela Lampe] Far from the busy boulevards and brightly-lit shop signs, painters like Hans Baluschek and Hans Grundig painted the outcasts who had no access to urban entertainment, such as poor families living on the wastelands on the outskirts of the city. Artist and photographer Alice Lex-Nerlinger, a Communist Party sympathiser, produced a photomontage highlighting the gulf between rich and poor. Dating from 1930, the simply composed photomontage shows how the comfort of the few was achieved to the detriment of the mass of poor people. This black and white photomontage juxtaposes tennis players and workers using a pneumatic drill, and you can see bourgeois patrons of cafés contrasting with street beggars.

[Sophie Goetzmann] Alice Lex-Nerlinger was an artist who produced a lot of photomontage, which is basically collage using photos. She stopped producing art completely for two or three years after the birth of her son, then when took art up again around 1925, she started producing montage. She was a radical left-winger, and was a member of the Communist Party for a time. She produced work with a message, a very clear message, clearly put across. The idea was to use montage to show the grim reality of capitalist exploitation, with an association of photogrammes and photo collage.

[Angela Lampe] At the time social inequalities were extreme. The gap between rich and poor, between underprivileged and bourgeois society and even industrialised capitals actually widened during this time. Again, this resonates deeply with the situation we are currently living through.

The downward gaze is a motif that runs through August Sander's *People of the 20th Century*, especially in Group VI, on *The City*.

[Florian Ebner] So, Sander devoted 11 portfolios to this group, *The City*, depicting urban youths, a young schoolgirl, a young schoolboy, both dressed up smart, but there are also the displaced, invalids from World War I, those left behind by capitalism. There is one portfolio called *The People who Came to my Door*, which is like a method



within his method. When people came to ask for money (beggars, peddlers and the unemployed), he invited them to have their photograph take in the doorframe, outside the wall at the entrance. This was a great way of classifying them. And he mentions a lovely idea in his conference broadcast on radio, when he asks us to “imagine taking a photo in all the job centres across Germany, at the same time. This would send out a very strong image of poverty”.

Here, the photograph speaks a language of high culture that is broadly understandable; the photo would speak another, equally powerful language if, in each of the 365 employment agencies in Germany, one would simultaneously photograph the people there and join the results together, tagged with the year 1931. The tragedy of this photographic language is probably understandable – and without any commentary – for all of contemporary and future humanity.

(August Sander)

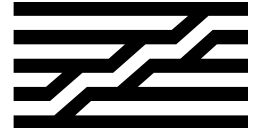
[musical excerpt: *The Threepenny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, 1928]

11 - Epilog

[transitional sound] This last exhibition room features *Retournements (Reversals)*, an installation by photographer Arno Gisinger, commissioned by the Centre Pompidou for the exhibition.

[Arno Gisinger] This installation is called *Retournements, or Reversals*, and explores various meanings of the term. First of all, the reversal of the Kunsthalle Mannheim, the first art museum to showcase New Objectivity in 1925 at the famous exhibition *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and which, just eight years later in 1933, would put on another exhibition, denouncing the pictures from 1925 and others, by then exhibited as negative examples of an art that should no longer be displayed, and even destroyed.

It was a total repudiation of the meaning of the collection and even the institution, which started toeing the National Socialist line in 1933 and effectively shunned contemporary art of the time. [transitional sound]



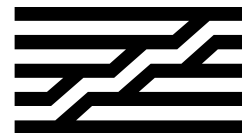
The term “retournement” can also mean “turning back”, and with the exhibition layout, visitors can indeed turn, from this last exhibition room, back to the first with its famous painting by George Grosz, who featured in both Mannheim exhibitions, in 1925 and 1933. This would be a physical turning back, to see the original picture behind glass, but it’s also a trip through time, because we are reminded of this first picture, that initiated us to the meaning of the exhibition of the 1920s, as we come to the end of the exhibition.

Then there is a third meaning of the term “reversal”, used in photography, because I’ve worked with negatives, from the pre-digital age, collected by a museum photographer who had documented all the exhibitions and pictures conserved at the Kunsthalle Mannheim for 40 years, from 1920 to the 1960s and left us a collection of 9,000 negatives. When I came up with this work, I kept the negatives of these glass plates, taking photos on brightly-lit tables, preserving the strange inversion of values, a reversal of value.

So, all that is negative is positive and this strangeness will be felt in the very projection with a distancing effect compared to the perception of a picture, an effect even of strangeness, for we are not accustomed to seeing pictures as a negative. Especially compared to pictures, you look at them in great detail, we look at them in black and white and as a negative. So the strangeness is threefold, leading to a kind of throwback to the original work in the first room compared with its reproduction as a photograph.

As we leave Arno Gisinger’s installation, we come to the last room, showcasing the photographs August Sander added to *People of the 20th Century* post-1945.

[Florian Ebner] With the rise to power of the Nazis in 1933 and the arrest of his son who was close to the Communist Party, Sander could no longer continue his work on *People of the 20th Century*.



In the post-war period, he wondered how to respond to this catastrophe, how to wrap up his account of 20th-century people. He added notes to a portfolio on the Nazis, actors in Cologne. But he also decided to dedicate a portfolio to the Jews of Cologne who came to see him in 1938 to have their portraits done. He further decided to include politicians persecuted by the National Socialists, as well as his son Erich, who died in prison in 1944, and foreign workers.

These portfolios which he added after 1945 are tucked away in a small room at the end, like an epilogue, and so the exhibition culminates with the portraits of young workers from Ukraine. What a coincidence, chiming in with our current era.

[jingle of the show] It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou website, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast!

Credits

Directed by Delphine Coffin and Clara Gouraud

Voices: Christine Hooper and Florian Hutter

Sound editing: Antoine Dahan

Mixing: Ivan Gariel

Practical information

www.centrepompidou.fr/en

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