

Constructing the World: Art and Economy 1919-1939 + Flashes of the Future

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- 1 Thematic exhibitions, implying a heightened degree of historical awareness on the part of audiences, gain more traction in central Europe, with its turbulent past, than in Western Europe, where museums are under greater external pressures to entertain than to educate. They involve teamwork, are difficult to stage and promote, and wide open to criticism, for their partiality or inconsequentiality. Often, they reveal tensions between curatorial intent and the evidentiary nature of the work on display. Sometimes, they quite simply fall victim to an ill-chosen title. Such exhibitions, however, may offer disproportionate visual rewards (from rare loans to startling juxtapositions) and leave a lasting impact, through the research embodied in accompanying publications. The two publications under review relate, more or less directly, to major thematic exhibitions held in Germany over the past twelve months, and have now appeared in thoroughly readable English translation, at a price (and a cost) that presumably left purely commercial considerations out of account.
- 2 *Constructing the World: Art and Economy 1919-1939* accompanied part one of a 'programmatic exhibition' for the inauguration of the recently expanded Kunsthalle Mannheim. Described by one of its two curators, Ulrike Lorenz, as a 'programmatic exhibition', it commemorated her predecessor, G.F. Hartlaub's, landmark exhibition there, *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* (The New Objectivity, 1925), which lent its name to a movement, and symbolically signalled a short-lived 'return to order' under the Weimar Republic. To reinforce its contemporary relevance, Part 1 on the ground floor was double-backed with a second exhibition upstairs, and a separate publication, broadening out the argument with an examination of the work of thirty 'international' artists, 'characterised by transitional relationships, global production and financing processes, international terrorism and major political conflicts.'

- 3 The main publication highlighted not so much the divergences as the remarkable parallels between artistic developments in the communist Soviet Union and capitalist USA, and the different ways in which they were affected by fluctuations of the economy. Germany, as the paradigmatic European state, was poised precariously in the middle, after successfully negotiating the Treaty of Rapallo with the Soviet Union in 1922. By then, four great empires had collapsed, as a result of the First World War and some form of democracy had been established in around twenty European countries, many of them brand new, though nationalist conflicts meant that barely a handful of these survived intact up to the end of the 1930s. Only the Americans had profited from the War, and it was natural that the Germans should seek to learn from the American example, once a measure of financial stability had been restored to their economy. More surprisingly, the Soviets, too, sought to adopt Taylorist and Fordist practices, with the introduction of Lenin's New Economic Policy, in 1921-22. Duchamp had suggested in 1917 that: 'The only works of art that America has given are her plumbing and her bridges', but now the challenge for industrialised nations was to plan for a better society, as well. Across the ideological divisions of the time, the authors of this publication see parallels between the cool Precisionism of Charles Sheeler, with his photographs and paintings of the Ford plant near Detroit, the communist utopianism of artists such as Aleksandr Deyneka, from the Society of Easel Painters (OST), with his idealised study of women construction workers, 'Building a Factory' (1926), and the rather sombre 'Picture of Industry' (ca. 1924) of a 'Neue Sachlichkeit' artist, such as Karl Völkers, in a decade which celebrated industrialisation and labour. Then, with the Wall Street crash in 1929 came the Great Depression of the 1930s, giving rise to new forms of regionalism, populism and authoritarianism. In America, artists and photographers such as Grant Wood and Walker Evans recorded the misery and deprivations of the rural communities, with support from the Farm Security Administration; in the Soviet Union, artistic freedom was effectively suppressed, with the introduction of the second five-year plan in 1932 and the imposition of Socialist Realism; whilst in Germany the demonisation of modernist movements and glorification of the 'Volk' similarly led to a coordination ('*Gleichschaltung*') of all artistic activity under the supervision of the state.
- 4 The second major publication, *Flashes of the Future*, relates to an exhibition with the same title at the Ludwig Forum for International Art in Aachen, which had been the base of the West German collectors, Peter and Irene Ludwig from the 1960s to the 1990s. Like *Constructing the World: Art and Economy 1919-1939*, it, too, was deliberately designed with a didactic purpose by Eckhart Gillen, the lead scholar-curator on both projects, and his colleague, Andreas Beutin, and their aim was avowedly political: 'Since the national populists are currently attempting to undo all the liberalizing and democratic achievements of the 68ers, this publication is also a way of taking a stand against such revisionist efforts.' The authors play great store by personal testimony, and 14 leading '68ers contribute to a thick and well illustrated volume, relying less on full-plate colour illustrations of works of art than on black-and white photographic documentation of actions, happenings and events in the street. '1968' is, of course, here to be interpreted largely as a symbol for a period beginning around the time of the demise of 'abstraction as a world language' (c. 1960) and lasting until the oil crisis of 1972-73. It was a period during which the barriers between art and life appeared to have fallen, various forms of realism proliferated, and many of the younger generation decried as bourgeois any art from that did not have a social or political purpose. The circle around the newly established German Film and Television Academy (dfbb) in

West Berlin, for instance, seeded at least one notable artist-filmmaker (Farun Farocki), and one member of the Red Army Faction (Jan-Carl Raspe). The burning issues of the day – decolonisation, national liberation struggles and Vietnam; race and civil rights; sexual emancipation, gay rights, feminism, and so on – are all treated in detail, as are many of the emancipatory movements around the world, in India, Mexico, Cuba and elsewhere, though not China. There is reasonable coverage of the well-rehearsed lead-up to May 1968 in Paris, including a lengthy interview with the artist and activist, Jean-Jacques Lebel, who was a prime mover behind several anarchic events, from the Great Collective Anti-Fascist Painting of 1960 to a somewhat farcical show of attempting to set fire to the Bourse, in 1968. However, this volume is at its best, as a source of first-hand accounts of the students' revolts in Eastern Europe and specially in both German states, and East and West Berlin.

- 5 Together, these two lavishly illustrated publications combine a wealth of research with a range of different viewpoints, which contribute to a rebalancing of scholarly accounts of the interwar years and the post-Second World War social revolutionary period of a 'long 1968'. Though only loosely connected, they offer a comparative view of art historical developments from a central European perspective and hint at the renewed threat from various forms of nationalism and identitarian politics.