

## Inscribing Temporality, Containing Fashion:

### Otto Dix's *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber*

#### Recontextualized

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*This is what the film diva looks like. She is twenty-four years old, featured on the cover of an illustrated magazine, [...] Time: the present. The caption calls her demonic: our demonic diva. [...] Everyone recognizes her with delight, since everyone has already seen the original on the screen.*<sup>1</sup> (Siegfried Kracauer, 1927)

Otto Dix's *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* (plate 1), painted in 1925, is one of the most intense and well-known paintings in his oeuvre and it has been described as 'without a doubt *the* icon of the Weimar Republic'.<sup>2</sup> The portrait and its subject, its exceptional emotional charge and dramatic aesthetics, seem to exemplify many cultural and social developments of 1920s Berlin, based on the knowledge of Berber's scandalous performances and life, as well as her early death in 1928. What deserves further attention, however, is the fact that this is a portrait unlike any other in Dix's oeuvre: the subject of this portrait was a famous dancer and film actress, an icon and celebrity, whose mediated image was already widely

distributed in a wider economy of images. This exposure made her image extremely unstable. In fact, Berber's popularity had been in steep decline for more than a year when the artist decided to paint her. The ways in which the painter negotiated the temporal dynamics of rise and decline that Berber – and by extension his painting – were caught in will be examined, and the relationship of Dix's work to contemporary fashionable tropes and images will be revealed. Artistic developments in a wider cultural field will be considered alongside this, with a focus on their currency at the time the painting was first displayed at the Neumann-Nierendorf Gallery in Berlin from February to April 1926.<sup>3</sup>

I will argue that the painting functioned as a tactical statement about the possibilities of portrait painting, made by an artist faced with a cultural paradigm that privileged the photographic image. A critique of the painter as a fashion-conscious figure will reveal the intellectual and painterly challenges that a new, heightened form of commodification - intensified during the 1920s - posed for an artist of the interwar avant-garde.

### **Siegfried Kracauer and the 'Truth Content' of Photography**

In his well-known essay on 'Photography' (1927), quoted above, Siegfried Kracauer points out photography's limited indexical powers, using as an example the picture of an

unnamed 'demonic diva' on the cover of an illustrated magazine: as her photograph ages, her demonic quality will be lost. Following Kracauer, this attribute is only accessible to a contemporary audience that has experienced her performances and is able to ascribe her demoniacal presence to the photograph: 'the demonic is less something conveyed by the photograph than it is by the impression of cinemagoers who experience the original on the screen.'<sup>4</sup> As Kracauer explains, 'the demonic belongs to the still-vacillating memory-image of the diva to which the photographic resemblance does not refer'.<sup>5</sup> In the photograph as optical sign, he contends, 'the truth content of the original is left behind in its history; the photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged'.<sup>6</sup> Anita Berber, described by the fashion magazine *Elegante Welt* in 1920 as 'the demonic dance virtuoso' (*plate 2*), was one such 'diva'. With his portrait of Berber, who had been celebrated for her beauty, talent, and transgressions in the immediate past, Dix attempted to permanently inscribe this fugitive content, capturing and bringing to the fore both Berber's 'demonic' qualities and simultaneously accelerating her trajectory of decline. Dix wanted to demonstrate that his specific style of painting, which did not idealize but heighten and distort the features of the portrayed, could not be 'emptied' like a photograph. His portrait of Berber would be able to rescue and continue to transmit some of the diva's 'memory image', the

historic 'truth content' of the original. What is more, Dix's portrait of Anita Berber became so iconic that it acquired generative powers: in a reverse action, it is able to pull the 'demonic' qualities of the dancer into our present and to transfer them to her photographs for those viewers who have experienced the painting. At the same time, by firmly situating her in the past and stripping her of what might have been left of her beauty and volatile fashionability, the painter found a strategy to stabilize his artwork, to strengthen its temporal anchoring in order to ensure its future positioning within art history.

In his essay Kracauer explicitly linked photography to fashion, since a photograph is 'bound to time in exactly the same way as fashion'.<sup>7</sup> Referring here to fashion as artifact, he put forward the idea that an outdated dress in a photograph 'protrudes into our time like a mansion from earlier days that has been marked for destruction.'<sup>8</sup> This is what was at stake for the portrait painter: by painting fashionable women, he would risk exactly that for his art. Not just the appearance and identity of the portrayed subject, but the artwork itself would lose its power not long after its creation. Therefore, an awareness of the temporal dynamics of continuity and contingency had to become intrinsic to the creative process, since - as Sabine Hake writes, drawing on Georg Simmel's conception of fashion: 'If things are perceived as fashionable because of their ephemeral status,

then fashion consciousness is always guided by an acute sense of temporality.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the following attempt at historical retrieval the portrait of Anita Berber is revealed as the result of a complex dialectical maneuver that required an awareness of the destructive temporal qualities of fashion.

### **Anita Berber - Dancer, Fashion-Icon, Celebrity**

Anita Berber was one of the Weimar Republic's 'it-girls' and sex symbols, famous for her fashionable dress-sense and expressionist dance from 1917 onwards.<sup>10</sup> Berlin's dance culture had exploded after the war. Small cabarets and large revues staged popular performances of nude and semi-nude women and Berber became a cult figure. Karl Toepfer contends that 'as a bizarre exponent of expressionism' she represented 'perhaps the most complex, significant, and memorable relation between nudity and dance to emerge between 1910 and 1935'.<sup>11</sup> Her image was disseminated across a wide range of media platforms, from newspapers, to cabaret and film posters, postcards, cigarette cards, even Rosenthal figurines.<sup>12</sup> She was, like many other dancers (at the time one of the most fashionable career choices for young women) photographed regularly for upmarket fashion magazines such as *Elegante Welt* and *Die Dame* (plate 3) as well as drawn and painted by a number of artists and illustrators.<sup>13</sup> She did not follow, but instigated new trends. Scandalous reports of her outrageous bohemian lifestyle,

which included drug and alcohol addiction as well as open sexual transgression, from bisexuality to suggestions of prostitution, became almost as important as her performances. Her whole persona was built around excess and decadence, representing the opportunities and dangers inherent in capitalist consumer culture. Even her cocaine-use was fashionable at a time when the upmarket Berlin fashion house Valentin Manheimer displayed 'cocaine outfits (a dress with matching long jacket) in muted colors in its shop windows'.<sup>14</sup> Klaus Mann, who spent some time with her, described her status and influence on the zenith of her fame:

It was the year 1924 and Anita Berber was already a legend. She was only really famous for two or three years by then, but had already become a symbol. Depraved bourgeois girls copied Berber, and every slightly more ambitious cocotte wanted to look exactly like her. Postwar-erotic, cocaine, Salomé, ultimate perversity: such terms formed the sparkling crown of her glory.<sup>15</sup>

### **Art, Fashion and the Problem of Fashionability**

To paint fashionable women could be a dangerous occupation for any painter who wanted to be taken seriously by the art world

elite. Kees van Dongen, one of the most popular portraitists of fashionable Parisian society, is a case in point. He ‘was destined to be a great modern painter’, wrote an art critic in the upmarket fashion magazine *Elegante Welt* in November 1925, but he only became ‘a great painter of fashion’.<sup>16</sup> Van Dongen should be pitied since fashion’s allure threatened his talent and future position in art history, despite the fact that the artist tried to ‘protect himself with his strong, daring – at the same time refined painterly style’.<sup>17</sup> What is more, a painting could be doomed in two ways: not just the work’s subject and his or her appearance would inevitably go out of fashion, this could also apply to the painterly idiom - even if it was as ‘refined’ as that of van Dongen.

In his famous ‘Fashion’ essay, published in 1904, Georg Simmel described fashion as an abstraction because of its indifference to form, as ‘the total antithesis of contents’.<sup>18</sup> Anything could be caught in its dynamics. For Simmel, the allure of fashion lay in the ‘simultaneous beginning and end’, its positioning on ‘the dividing-line between past and future’, because ‘as fashion spreads, it gradually goes to its doom’.<sup>19</sup> Charles Baudelaire had already recognized fashion’s paradigmatic role in contemporary aesthetics in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ of 1893, and around the same time cultural critics and innovative art historians made efforts to integrate fashionable clothing into the analysis of historic styles to help

identify synchronic and diachronic aesthetic correspondences, chief among them Heinrich Wölfflin in his study of the Gothic.<sup>20</sup> By the early 1920s the issue of fashion had become a widely debated concern in contemporary arts criticism – more specifically a theme through which an artwork’s relationship to time and its status as a commodity could be negotiated. Painterly idiom, subject and content of a painting could be the result of fashions in wider visual culture, and potentially undermine its credibility. As a result, art critics (commonly trained art historians) saw it as one of their tasks to identify and dismiss short-lived fashions in order to contain creative production within a logical line of stylistic development. As Paul Westheim, the editor of the influential, elitist art journal *Das Kunstblatt* explained in 1923, the art critic’s goal should be to identify ‘the actual art of the present, the authentic, the creative and therefore the lasting’ and ‘not the new per se’.<sup>21</sup> Emerging artistic positions had to be protected against the ‘art business and mere followers, who will just elegantly play along with the next fashion’.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, Westheim expressed sympathy for people who believed art to be undermined by ‘too much contemporaneity’, by ‘something too bound to time, too time-limited’.<sup>23</sup> Along with many of his fellow critics, Westheim struggled to verbalize the effect of accelerated and increasingly complex cultural changes of Modernity and their effect on art production.



Even if an artist did not paint fashionable women, he and his work could become fashionable, trapping him within the same dynamic of decline Simmel had identified for fashionable clothing - that it 'gradually goes to its doom'. That painters might actively respond to this problem is suggested by Paul Westheim in 1922, in an article on artistic developments in France. In order to explain the speed of stylistic change in Picasso's work he proposed that the painter consciously and strategically responded to dynamics of fashion:

When looking for an explanation for the question why Picasso paints in this way or that, the so-called "Ingres-fashion" is certainly the most stupid and most easily refutable. ... For Picasso, I believe, it would be easier and more convenient to start a 'Picasso-fashion'. Perhaps behind his effort is even the intention to avoid a Picasso-fashion.<sup>24</sup>

An awareness of fashions in art production and reception was intrinsic to the creative process, but even artists themselves expressed their concern about how influential fashion had become. In 1925 the George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde conceded sarcastically in their essay 'Art is under Threat':

Formal revolution lost its shock effect a long time ago.  
...Today's young merchant is ... ice-cold, aloof, he hangs  
the most radical things in his apartment. ... Rash and  
unhesitating acceptance so as not to be 'born yesterday' is  
the password. ... he understands only his merchandise, for  
everything else - including the fields of philosophy, ethics,  
art – for all culture there are specialists, they determine the  
fashion, which is then accepted at face value.<sup>25</sup>

Fashionability forced change, directed artistic agency and  
amplified the modernist imperative for innovation and  
originality. Art critics demanded that art should be 'zeitgemäss'  
– appropriate for the time - but that it should not merely fit into  
an established fashion. For figurative painters who considered  
themselves part of the avant-garde<sup>26</sup>, who had to evade mass  
appeal while simultaneously gaining approval from art world  
insiders, the navigation of these dynamics was as necessary as it  
was challenging. Trapped within an ideology that privileged  
newness, but working in the traditional medium of painting,  
they had to deal with fashion as an agent of 'contamination'<sup>27</sup>  
through mass culture in some way - ideologically or  
aesthetically - in order not to undermine their own status.

### **The Painter as Arbiter of Style**

A painter who changed his painting style as frequently as Otto Dix and was also a keen observer of clothing fashions in both his own appearance and his work, could find himself in a problematic position. Instead, one of his supporters, the influential art writer and until 1924 director of the Dresdner Stadtmuseum Paul F. Schmidt, celebrated Dix for this capriciousness by claiming in the catalogue of the artist's major solo-exhibition at Neumann-Nierendorf in Berlin in 1926: 'No contemporary artist has gone through such a multifarious and contradictory development; none has such an excessive variety in his production, such a multitude of unprecedented identities.'<sup>28</sup> Rather than merely duplicating fleeting surfaces phenomena or adopting existing trends in art production, Schmidt contended that Dix excavated what lay underneath; he could 'see through his time', providing 'an intersection of our time'<sup>29</sup> through his work. Dix was 'a Proteus himself, he changes objects, viewpoints, techniques', Schmidt contended, 'he is the shaper of our time'.<sup>30</sup> Dix, who became one of the most celebrated painters of the so-called Verist wing of the New Objectivity, is set up as protean - shape-shifting and prophetic both in his identity and his painterly style. A characterization closely aligned with fashion's intrinsic futuricity and instability. Schmidt had already singled out Dix in 1924 in a programmatic article about 'The German Verists' in *Das Kunstblatt* as having 'the eye for life and its present-ness'.<sup>31</sup> His stylistic pluralism

was seen as a sign of his great talent. Having closely studied the Old Masters during his formative years in Dresden, he used their formal vocabulary in some of his early paintings, but then made works in an impressionist, then an expressionist idiom, inflected with futurist elements. Around 1920 he went through a short Dadaist phase, before developing the old-masterly Verism he became most famous for. In 1925 his work was included in the famous *Neue Sachlichkeit*-exhibition in Mannheim, which confirmed the New Objectivity as the leading post-expressionist style in Germany. The art critic Curt Glaser described him as an artist with ‘a lot of skills, but probably too many, because he can do everything’.<sup>32</sup>

Otto Dix was an enthusiastic consumer of the distractions of Weimar Modernity’s mass culture, from cinema to cabaret shows, fairgrounds and dance halls, and had a particular interest in the grotesque.<sup>33</sup> Although his work engaged with social issues of the post-war era such as crippled soldiers, poverty and prostitution, he assumed, as James van Dyke writes, ‘the amoral habitus of the observant but uncommitted, critical but apolitical flâneur’.<sup>34</sup> Dix admired fashionable and creative women. Two of his early girlfriends were fashion designers and his wife Martha, whom he had met in 1921 and married in 1923, had many creative talents and shared his love of dancing, fashion and music. In his paintings of anonymous women, fashionable adornment was commonly used to caricature aging or

unattractive bodies, or to highlight vanity, such as in *Lady with Mink and Veil* of 1920 (*plate 4*). In his early paintings of Martha he expressed admiration for his fashionable wife (*plate 5*). Ilse Fischer wrote in her essay 'Der Dadaist (Otto Dix)' of 1922, which was designed to promote the artist's career and set him up as a fashion conscious amalgam of dandy and macho, that Dix was 'a slave to appearances' who loved 'anything eccentric' with a passion: 'eccentric women, eccentric dances, eccentric art'.<sup>35</sup> Fashionability played an important role in constructing Otto Dix's professional habitus, from his daily appearance to his staged self-portraits.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, too, he went through many transformations: from the romantic bohemian as a teenager, to the intense artist-dandy in the early 1920s, and finally the pose and appearance of a concentrated, but distanced, cool observer, smartly dressed and perfectly groomed 'American style' by 1925 (*plate 6*). As Ilse Fischer observed in 1922:

He has something American about him, ... in the cut of his suit: excessively wide, short trousers, padded upper arms, randomly high waist. Apart from that his wardrobe is a conglomerate of hand-me-downs from art-loving citizens or helpful friends, and a few individual pieces he bought himself and that betray a desire for extravagant elegance.<sup>37</sup>

Struggling financially, Dix had even given his work *War Cripples* (1920) to Paul F. Schmidt in exchange for an elegant suit from an upmarket menswear retailer.<sup>38</sup> In letters to his wife, Dix reveals himself as a keen observer of women's fashion trends as well. Writing in June 1924 from Berlin, he informs her that he has sent her the requested fashion magazines and that 'fashion is nothing fancy at the moment, one wanders around dressed in a very banal way. I see a lot of skirts with slits'.<sup>39</sup> The following day he advises: 'Very modern are brocade jackets with fur application, but they have to be made to order.'<sup>40</sup> Two informal drawings made in 1921 further underline the role fashion played in the couple's life, one showing them on a shopping trip, and in the other, Dix has designed an exaggerated version of a fashionable, high-waisted suit for himself (*plate 7*). Dix understood the importance of fashion as a tool to demonstrate an awareness of the latest developments in wider visual culture and his hairstyle played an important part in this. In 1919 the fashion magazine *Elegante Welt* had published 'The New Artist-Type', an article focused entirely on male artists' hair styling and facial features. Dix modeled himself on a type the article's writer, Paul Kraemer, had classified as the 'modern worker's head' with the hallmarks of an artist 'completely committed to his work'<sup>41</sup>: beardless, combed back hair, intense gaze, sharp nose and thin-lipped determination.

Dix took many calculated decisions within a wider cultural field to strengthen his position within artistic networks and his appearance and choice of fashionable subjects was just one of them. In 1922, during the difficult time of hyperinflation in Germany, Dix had moved from Dresden to Düsseldorf, where he had already established connections within the local artistic community, because it had a stronger market of well-off collectors. By 1924 he had his eyes on Berlin, the rapidly growing center of Germany's art world, and he finally moved there in November 1925. His dealer Karl Nierendorf had transferred his business operations from Cologne to Berlin in 1925 and Dix's first major solo-exhibition was scheduled there in Spring 1926. This exhibition was meant to demonstrate the artist's range of skills and to bring him and Nierendorf new business in portrait commissions.<sup>42</sup> Taking Nierendorf's advice, he had already started to create more portraits of people from the cultural world since 'to paint an important personality from the Berlin-scene, meant to be noticed by this scene.'<sup>43</sup> Anita Berber's portrait was most likely specifically created in preparation for this solo-show, based on considerations of its audience and locality.

During the period of hyperinflation between 1922 and 1924, Berlin had come to be seen as the center of a decadent, depraved culture and Berber one of its most provocative personalities. Klaus Mann remembers the inflation years in his

memoirs *Der Wendepunkt*: ‘Dance was a mania, an *idée fixe*, a cult. The stock market danced. ... Anita Berber – her face frozen to a shrill mask, her hair all in horridly purple curls – does the keitus dance ... Fashion becomes obsession and spreads like fever, uncontrollable, like certain epidemics and mystic compulsions of the middle ages.’<sup>44</sup> After meeting the choreographer and dancer Sebastian Droste who became her husband in 1922, Berber’s self-presentation and expressionist dance performances, in which the dancer did not play a part but was the embodiment of emotions, became more extreme. Their program *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, which included her solo-dances ‘Salomé’, ‘Morphium’ and ‘Cocaine’ (her signature pieces), focused on abject themes of drug addiction, lust, murder, suicide, degradation, excess and madness. For her dance ‘Salomé’ (1921) she emerged, as Toepfer writes, from an urn filled with blood.<sup>45</sup> Her contemporaries saw in Berber an anomic figure: someone who did not just live in opposition to the rules of society but outside them. This must have appealed to Dix, since, according to Ilse Fischer: ‘Whoever, like him, puts himself fearless outside of the law, can expect his unlimited admiration.’<sup>46</sup>

Berber’s outrageous behavior on and off stage had contributed significantly to her fame, and she ensured that scandal surrounded her. As Kate Elswith has argued: ‘Berber’s wildness coexisted alongside observations of how consciously



aware she was of her effect.<sup>47</sup> She and Droste deliberately chose the most fashionable commercial photographer of the time, Dora Kallmus' Atelier d'Ora to take new promotional pictures when their program premiered in Vienna in 1922. Berber was also in town because she was acting in the film *Die drei Marien und der Herr von Maranta* (1922) with Lya de Putti, directed by Reinhold Schünzel. The less daring of the photographs by Atelier d'Ora were published in *Die Dame* in January the following year. These images and a few others taken by another photographer in Berlin in 1923 are among the last photographs taken of Berber at a time when she was (like Kracauer's demonic film diva) only twenty-four years old.<sup>48</sup>

With the end of hyper-inflation, the stabilization of the economy and the return of a more conservative morality, Berber had started to lose many admirers. Droste left Berber at the end of 1923, taking her jewelry and furs leaving her destitute, and emigrated to America.<sup>49</sup> Her film career had gone from major to minor film roles because her drug and alcohol abuse had made her increasingly problematic to work with, perhaps also because her economic exchange value, based on her fashionability, was decreasing. Her function within the image and consumer economy slowly collapsed. In November, a newspaper journalist commented on her lack of film roles: 'Now Anita only dances, but when they engage her, the directors are always - as Berber reassures me - a little anxious.'<sup>50</sup> More and more negative

scandalous stories circulated and towards the end of 1924, Berber tried to reignite her career by marrying the young, up-and-coming American dancer Henri Châtin-Hofmann, and a few months later, she left Berlin for a tour of the German provinces. Here she was mainly known through fashion magazines, films and postcards, rather than live performances. The decline of her status in the capital was less well-known there, and she could still trade on her remaining ‘fashionable capital’, but did so without reinventing herself. She still performed acts from her previous program, developed in 1922, which had become part of her brand.

Negative assessments of her behavior on- and off-stage were now not only published in conservative newspapers (which added piquancy and would have raised her status among artists), but increasingly came from within artistic circles. Film critic and theorist Béla Balázs used Berber as an example of vulgarity in his appraisal of the film star Asta Nielsen in *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* in 1924: Asta Nielsen ‘is never shown unclothed; she does not show off her thighs like Anita Berber, (to the point where it is difficult to distinguish between face and backside)’.<sup>51</sup> Klaus Mann remembers her declining popularity: ‘People were pointing the finger at her; she was outlawed. Even for post-war Berlin she had gone too far. One went to see her on the cabaret stage to get the creeps: apart from that, she was ostracized.’<sup>52</sup> Early in 1925 Berber had

turned up to an artists-party in Berlin. When she was refused entry, she gave the host a slap in the face. Shockingly, he slapped her back. This host was none other than the Weimar Republic's foremost art dealer Alfred Flechtheim.<sup>53</sup> This incident made the decline of her status all too clear, and in this transitional time Anita Berber met Otto Dix. This notoriety would have appealed to him, and most of the visitors of his exhibition in Spring 1926 in Berlin would be aware of this incident. Rudolf Arnheim was less than impressed when he saw Anita and her partner Henri perform a year after the exhibition in the *Renaissance-Theater* in Berlin. In his review in *Die Weltbühne*, published in February 1927, Arnheim wrote: 'Henri – a white, bloated body, the marzipan imitation of a fatty goose, a slightly odd profile, in short: the *Konfektion* on the beach. Anita Berber – the lady from the window display at the hairdressers.'<sup>54</sup> The whole show, he concluded, was 'a senseless, unmusical muddle of conventional gestures without beginning and end'.<sup>55</sup>

### **The *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber*: An Exercise in Containment**

It is generally assumed that Martha and Otto Dix saw Berber perform for the first time in the summer of 1925 while still living in Düsseldorf. A postcard and two letters sent from Berber to Dix, often quoted in the literature about Berber, are

evidence of their friendly as well as strategic relationship. In two of them she requests a photograph of her portrait to send it to an American magazine, perhaps in preparation for an American tour that never materialized.<sup>56</sup> Berber's decision to send the reproduction of a disfiguring painting, rather than an attractive photograph to a magazine seems unusual for a dancer previously celebrated for her beauty. Dix was not known to produce flattering portraits, quite the opposite, which distinguished his work from more popular portraitists and was, as Johann-Karl Schmidt has argued, a form of 'self-protection, a way of maintaining his artistic ambitions, in order not to slip into the illustrative, pornographic, photographic or purely artistic'.<sup>57</sup> The subjects of Dix's portraits were not always happy with how they were represented,<sup>58</sup> unless they were supporters of new developments in painting and wanted to show this on the walls of their homes. Berber, most likely aware of Dix's growing status in the art world, would have considered such a portrait as beneficial for her career. In one of her letters (this one undated) she confirmed her declining status, financial struggle and the lack of public interest in her artistic output, while also mentioning that Dix had posed for a photograph with her: 'Have you seen the picture of you and me in the *Illustrierten Blatt*? I was so happy! .. We are screwed. No engagement, no money.'<sup>59</sup> Public interest in such a photograph of the two of them would have been created as a result of the exhibition of her portrait and

Berber's letter was therefore most likely sent in 1926.<sup>60</sup> Dix himself mentioned the reproduction of her portrait in the *Frankfurter Illustrierte* (another name for *Das Illustrierte Blatt*) in July 1926 in a letter to his wife from Düsseldorf.<sup>61</sup> Increased media interest might have been Dix's aim all along, particularly since he was also still facing financial difficulties – and it had succeeded. The artist and his subject were entangled in wider networks of exchange, connecting the painting structurally to a specific temporal, cultural and economic constellation. But can the painter's response to this constellation be identified in the painting itself?

The *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* shows a type of decadent beauty in decline, fashionable during 'that crazy, degenerate, fantastic Berlin immediately after the First World War'.<sup>62</sup> In one of the few pieces of sustained analysis of the Berber-portrait Susan Laikin Funkenstein has argued that Dix's portrait suggests a 'profound understanding of her artistic contributions' and 'meshes Dix's vision of the dancer with Berber's version of herself that she performed for Dix and the painting's viewers'.<sup>63</sup> The 26-year old icon is aged beyond her years, her haggard face with excessive make-up that of an old woman, while outdated photographs of her still circulated on postcards and event programs, creating issues of non-synchronicity. Her actual appearance is difficult to verify as no photographs made around this time were published in fashion

magazines or on postcards. However, one pastel made by Dix as a study, and a photograph published alongside a newspaper article in 1924 could suggest what her face might have looked like in 1925 (*plate 8* and *plate 9*). In both her face is puffy and much wider than in the painting, her eyes small slits, the make-up similar to her portrait in oil. The photograph fits with a description by Klaus Mann around 1924: 'I saw her without make-up for the first time. Her face was puffy, pitiable; but despite looking battered, it was still strikingly childlike.'<sup>64</sup> The delicate cabaret dancer, aged beyond her years, was a fashionable trope in contemporary novels and films, but these soft, fragile qualities are deliberately lost in Dix's programmatic oil painting. Furthermore, although she has never been mentioned or listed among the cast, I believe that Anita Berber made a cameo appearance in the film *Variété* by E.A. Dupont with Lya de Putti, released in in November 1925 around the time Dix was painting Berber's portrait. As mentioned earlier, Berber and de Putti had appeared in the film *Die Drei Marien und der Herr von Marana* together in 1922, de Putti supposedly admired the star and they had become close friends. Perhaps de Putti helped Berber to get this small opportunity.<sup>65</sup> Her appearance in *Variété* (*plate 10*) reveals that Dix almost faithfully copied Berber's make-up (which looked unusual even at that time) very closely rather than altering or exaggerating it (*plate 11* and *plate 12*). However, there is a sharp difference

between the strongly aged, deathly looking face in the painting and her actual face in the film. Her film appearance betrays the loss of her youthful, beautiful looks, which indicated further that Dix did not paint a fashionable celebrity who was still widely admired, but a woman and a type that was already quite outdated. He could not be accused of being seduced by fashionable beauty like van Dongen had been – he painted her as an anachronism, while accelerating her projected future decline.

In 1925 an exhibition review of the *Düsseldorfer Jubiläumsausstellung* had called for more intensity in art in order to reflect the ‘attitude of the time’ and singled out Otto Dix as the strongest in the show, because his portraits ‘align him with the great demon charmers in the history of art... Next to his obsessions, the diabolisms of others look like harmless play’.<sup>66</sup> In fact, Dix’s painting picked up wider cultural trends of the previous inflation years: a fashionability of the ‘demonic’ among the ‘caligarisms’ of the era, mediated and disseminated through a range of mass-cultural products, predominantly film. The ‘demonic’ as a fashionable trope was at the same time employed in illustrated magazines that reported on the latest celebrity gossip, and even by serious art critics to describe qualities of the work of expressionist and post-expressionist painters that ranged from Kokoschka to George Grosz<sup>67</sup> – aligning developments in fine art and mass culture that come

together in Dix's painting. In Berber's portrait, Dix has heightened such demonic qualities. Her painted image radiates a level of threat that her photographs do not contain, which links it to the themes of her performances and her excessive lifestyle, as Funkenstein has suggested. However, his painting does not simply intimate admiration and familiarity; her own position and what she represented within the temporal order is key. The painting's shock-aesthetics from its flaming red colors and imposing composition, to her dramatic pose, snakelike surface, claw-like hands and deathly looking face, align Berber with what the *Kunstblatt* had dismissed two years earlier as the 'spiritual pollutions of the hyper-expressive epoch'.<sup>68</sup>

Franz Roh, a prolific art critic in the 1920s, might have been thinking of Dix's portrait of Anita Berber when he identified three key types of femininity in post-expressionist portrait painting in 1928: 'the innocent childlike, the absolutely demonic, as we encounter her in the work of Dix, and finally the crossing ... of the shady animalesque with beauty bright as day'.<sup>69</sup> By avoiding the terms commonly employed to describe fashionable female variations of the 'New Woman' - such as *Vamp*, *Bubikopf* or *Girl* - Roh here implicitly drew a line between the female types represented in the mass media and those in artworks, even though they usually showed the same types of women. In Dix's portrait, Berber's meticulously sharpened fingernails did not just signify her threat, but also her



declining fashionability because vampire-like pointed fingernails had been en vogue in the immediate past, influenced by the release of expressionist horror films such as *Nosferatu* in 1922.<sup>70</sup> Dix confirmed in an interview in 1965 that he put particular effort into painting a hand because ‘it corresponds in its expression completely to the character of the portrayed’.<sup>71</sup> It is not just the position of Berber’s left hand, but also the almond shape it forms around a fold of her dress that deserves attention. As Dix said in 1955: ‘The folds in a person’s clothing, his attitude, his hands, his ears immediately give the painter information about the soul of a model.’<sup>72</sup> Berber’s hand gesture and positioning would perhaps not be particularly significant had Dix not used this gesture in a significant number of his works, from *Three Prostitutes on the Street* (1925), to his famous triptych *Metropolis* (completed in 1928) to *Triumph of Death* (1934). It is also engaged in two drawings of prostitutes posing as widows (or widows working as prostitutes)<sup>73</sup> of 1922 (*plate 13*). As a signal it connects two qualities that define Berber’s portrait: sexuality and deathliness. Dix employed symbolic formal strategies of the Old Masters and adapted their narratives for the culture and social realities of the Weimar era. As Olaf Peters contends, this type of *Neue Sachlichkeit*-painting combined ‘a contemporary iconography, a modernized traditional vocabulary of form and compositional tectonics of the Old Masters’.<sup>74</sup> Berber’s portrait is not just a prime example

of this, it takes the temporal implications of this strategy and the employment of a ‘contemporary iconography’ – always subjected to fashion - to a new level.

Dix’s direct engagement of a contemporary iconography, specifically images from celebrity and mass culture, is evidenced further by photographs of the actress Lya de Putti - the fifth most popular actress between 1923 and 1926, and therefore much more successful than Berber at the time.<sup>75</sup> De Putti has never been mentioned in connection with Dix’s portrait, but a photograph (*plate 14*), taken in June 1925 by the studio of Alexander Binder in Berlin,<sup>76</sup> suggests that Dix may have been inspired by her image, from the pose to the gesture and position of her hands, rather than entirely inventing it. Dix painted Berber’s portrait after seeing the dancer perform in the summer of 1925, therefore after de Putti’s picture had been distributed in a wider public sphere. Berber’s portrait could thus be conceptualized as a pastiche based on mass media images from several sources in addition to the painter’s familiarity with the actual person, combined with the pictorial vocabulary and techniques of the Old Masters to anchor his artwork outside a contemporary mass cultural realm. This will be discussed in more depth further on, but firstly the contemporary tropes employed by Dix to signal fashionability or outdated-ness need further investigation.

The difference in the treatment of the same signifiers of

fashionability between a self-portrait of Dix and his wife as glamorous dancers in 1922 and Berber's portrait exposes the decline of their exchange value, the painter's response to such processes, and complicates the indexical function of fashionable objects and appearances as markers of time in painting. The lost double-portrait *Doppelbildnis* (Fig 15), dated 1923 in the available literature, was most likely already completed by the end of 1922<sup>77</sup> since it was published in mid-January 1923 in the same edition of the popular fashion magazine *Die Dame* as photographs of Berber taken by the Atelier d'Ora, which is also an indicator of the artist-couple's own fashion and celebrity status. Furthermore, *Die Dame* introduced it as a painting from the 'Juryfreie Kunstschau' in Berlin which already opened in October 1922. In the *Double-Portrait* Otto and Martha mimic perfect shop window dummies, including the stiffened hand gestures, with the same style of make-up and pointed fingernails Berber still sports three years later. Both stark make-up and sharpened fingernails were also key characteristics in Martha's large solo-portrait in oil *Bildnis Frau Martha Dix* of 1923 (see plate 5), which plays with different surface textures. Commonly worn on stage and in films, the mask-like make-up is a signifier of artificiality and fashionability, while in Berber's portrait (and her actual appearance in *Variété*) it is not the contemporary fashion, it does not follow her facial features and is exaggerated to the point where - in combination with her greenish, madly

staring eyes and inflamed nostrils - it has become ugly. Martha's portrait shows fashionable beauty, but this extreme look had lost much of its appeal as a style worn 'off screen' by the end of 1925 (it still continued to be used in film and on stage).

Art critic and loyal supporter Willi Wolfradt praised *Doppelbildnis* in 1923 as important and programmatic, at the forefront of new stylistic developments in painting with its polished 'linearism'.<sup>78</sup> According to Wolfradt, the work showed representatives of an absolutely contemporary, extremely fashionable type, the product of an accelerated consumer society. He identified tropes created by the fashion, cosmetics and media industries, imposing an economic-political reading:

They are the typical vampiric people one encounters everywhere these days, automatons of want, polished and fitted out by ready-to-wear and cosmetics, heart-empty dolls with greedy instincts, representatives of a sphere where smart brutality counts as a badge of honour. [...] Their soullessness is expressed in the ornamental stiffening of their expressions.<sup>79</sup>

Wolfradt specifically singled out features of their appearance, from the patent leather boots, to the silk stockings, the combed back hair, the perfectly pressed trousers, the 'wooden' hands,

even the manicured finger nails, which give the overall impression of ‘the luxurious, the constructed, the automated’<sup>80</sup> and he links them to shop window displays and shopping catalogues. Willi Wolfradt’s previous review of the *Juryfreie Kunstschau*, published in December 1922 in *Das Kunstblatt*, but not cited in the research about this painting, of which only black and white photographs have survived, conveys an idea of its aesthetics: ‘Especially a double portrait, in the “terrible beauty” of his painterly style a piece of social critique, practically hypnotizes ... the more authentic art around it remains unimportant next to its shrill energy.’<sup>81</sup> The author speaks of ‘the stark smoothness of the facture’, the ‘crass sweetness of the colors’ in Dix’s works on display.<sup>82</sup> Although the painting can be read as a critical commentary on modern consumer culture, I argue that it was Dix’s strategy of ambiguity, that these tropes and pictorial details could be read simultaneously as signifiers of fashionability and coolness, depending on the attitude and identity of the contemporary viewer. With his double-portrait Dix claimed to represent the contemporary, the modern, by styling himself and his wife according to the latest trends in artistic circles. At the same time, he had developed a new painting style that corresponded in its restrained coolness to the smooth appearance and suggested character of the portrayed figures.

In the Berber-Portrait, three years later, Dix used the new ‘objective’ style of the New Sachlichkeit to paint a woman who embodied Expressionism. Style and subject were now antithetical, creating an intense temporal dialectic between the parallel processes of rise and decline. Expressionism had been around for a considerable amount of time and had trickled down into mainstream applications, from shop window displays to spaces of commercialized leisure such as the expressionist rollercoaster ride in Luna Park in Berlin. Although in film and dance Expressionism flourished for a significantly longer period of time (creating, to an extent gendered, issues of non-synchronicity), it had fallen out of favor with many painters and art critics from the early 1920s onwards.<sup>83</sup> Dix’s portrait enforced hyperbolic emotionality at a time when a ‘cool’ persona became the new ultramodern pose. As a result, this portrait stands out among Dix’s oeuvre not just because it deals with fashion and celebrity culture, but also the actual and projected trajectory of wider cultural developments.

In his fictionalized and dramatized Berber-biography *Dance into the Dark*, published a year after her death in 1929, , film critic Leo Lania’s describes how Anita and her partner Henri were perceived at the time Dix painted her portrait, commenting also on the role fashion and her association with an outdated cultural model:

Breslau, Leipzig, Hamburg, Dresden, Cologne – an endless string of scandals. ... Berlin - the new Berlin of 1925, showed them the cold shoulder. Passé, a long finished affair, believe me, nude is not modern anymore. ... Berlin: in no other city rise the waves of every new movement as high, nowhere is such little trace of them when the waves retreat. Here, you never have a new spiritual movement, only ever a new fashion. And fashions don't emerge from any need other than distraction. They are born to die. Cocaine was modern yesterday, and lesbian love, and nude dance and the erotic - now we had Neue Sachlichkeit.<sup>84</sup>

A look at Berber's dress in the painting confirms her located-ness in the past. It is similar to the one she wore for her dance *Suicide* in 1922 and in one of the staged photographs taken in Vienna, published in the same edition of *Die Dame* (plate 16) in 1923 as Dix's *Doppelbildnis*.<sup>85</sup> In 1922 it had been absolutely up-to-date: as the fashion magazine *Die Dame* confirmed in October that year, advising that 'the shell embraces the body more closely again and thereby gives the figure something elongated, snakelike.'<sup>86</sup> If Dix was inspired by Berber's own dress then he would have used outdated photographs or she still wore the same outfit three years later when he saw her perform. In both cases, what is signified is outdated-ness.

### **Temporal De-Anchoring and the ‘Nachleben’ of Images**

Dix also gives the woman in his portrait a different body to Berber's actual one. He slims and elongates it significantly and combines this with a belly and stance typical of German late Gothic and early Renaissance paintings and sculptures, further complicating the overlapping temporal and medial references constructed by the artwork. This anachronistic employment of the formal vocabulary of the late medieval period became itself a fashion that Dix's own success helped to popularize. He re-engaged a painterly idiom that could claim survival through time and origins outside modern mass media culture. Paul Fechter had already proclaimed in his popular book *Der Expressionismus*, first published in 1914 and reprinted in 1920, that ‘the gothic has come back into fashion’ for a new generation of artists who were looking towards the ‘true forefathers of German art, the *Gotiker* and the masters of the late 15th Century, in particular Grünewald.’<sup>87</sup> In a similar vein Paul F. Schmidt wrote in September 1928 in the short-lived, ambitious German edition of the high-end fashion magazine *Vogue* that architects and artists of the Gothic era had been ‘rehabilitated as the great fashion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’.<sup>88</sup> Dix adopted their themes and sentiment first in his expressionist work and then in a different way in his Verist paintings. Moreover, a cursory look into fashion magazines and art



journals can confirm that the 'gothic' was also a trend in wider visual culture at the time, from interior design, to art collecting and the topics and vocabulary of arts criticism.<sup>89</sup> Fashion magazines such as *Elegante Welt* and *Die Dame* published photographs of the apartments of well-known cultural figures that revealed them as collectors of Gothic wood sculptures, for example the celebrated German film stars Asta Nielsen in 1925.<sup>90</sup> Gothic art regularly featured in elitist art journals at the time and art critics used the term 'gothic' to describe qualities in expressionist art. The study of the Gothic had enjoyed increased popularity in academic art history from the 1910s onwards, and the influence of Wilhelm Worringer's widely-read publications *Formprobleme der Gotik* in 1911 and *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, published in 1908, continued long into the 1920s. Dix said later about his work of the 1920s that he had wanted the form in the image like a sculpture,<sup>91</sup> and the influence of Gothic sculpture specifically is also evident in the exaggerated length of the lower limbs and the sculptural quality of Berber's body in the painting, the draping and twisted posture. Hanne Bergius has described the references to the Old Masters in Dix's work in 1991 as a 'strengthening of modern art through historic forms and myths' and compared this cultural 'memory-work' to the efforts of Aby Warburg to document underlying structures, the 'continuity and restitution of forms of expression.'<sup>92</sup> By aligning Berber with historic pictorial iconography Dix's

portrait can also be read as an allegory or cautionary tale in the tradition of 'Eros and Death' - one of Dix's central themes throughout the 1920s. One could perhaps say that in her portrait 'Death and the Maiden' are merged into one. Berber herself had already introduced an anachronistic element when she performed her dance *Cocaine* to *La Danse Macabre Op.40* (1875) by composer Camille Saint-Saëns<sup>93</sup> - linking both her performance and Dix's painting to the medieval theme of the 'Dance of Death'. Klaus Widdig has previously linked the figure of the medieval witches' Sabbath to the chaos, dancing and spectacle of the inflation years and the traumatic experience of the New Woman.<sup>94</sup> Anita Berber, described by observers as a 'very evil Eve'<sup>95</sup>, personified this trauma. A photographed figure could not convey such qualities to future audiences, but Dix's portrait permanently inscribes these meanings - Kracauer's 'still-vacillating memory-image' - and connects her to timeless tropes in art history, motifs with a Warburgian *Nachleben*, to ensure the survival of his artwork. In fact, Paul Westheim, confirmed the overall impression of an allegorical painting in a review of Dix's retrospective in 1926. He complained that Berber's portrait was not just too driven by 'technical skills', but that it also reminded him too much of the Austrian symbolist painter Franz von Stuck, presumably referring to the latter's staple images of seductive but threatening female figures from Eve to Pandora.<sup>96</sup> The painting

is partially de-anchored from the present by turning a woman who had represented the height of fashion and beauty only a short time ago, whose images had been widely disseminated in mass media culture, into something threatening and ugly, combined with the traditional techniques of oil glazes on wood panel, compositional strategies, a body ideal and the allegorical narrative strategies of the early German Renaissance.<sup>97</sup>

### **Fashionability Engaged and Controlled: The 1926**

#### **Exhibition at the Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf**

The *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* draws on a wide range of images from both art history and the mass cultural sphere, each with their own shifting exchange value. However, the full impact of these complex temporal and inter-medial dialectics in the portrait cannot be understood without considering how it was displayed in Dix's first retrospective exhibition: It was positioned next to his self-portrait *Selbstbildnis mit Staffelei*, completed just before the exhibition in 1926, which showed him as detached, focused observer - a pose that corresponded to his dissecting approach as a painter (*plate 17* and *plate 18*). As Funkenstein suggests, as pendants these two portraits 'promoted each other's careers',<sup>98</sup> although the painting did not fulfill this promise for Berber. Such a hanging dramatized both protagonists' careful positioning within a temporal dialectic - a dialectic emphasized by the exhibition booklet where Berber's

portrait was reproduced opposite Dix's self-portrait as well.

In *Selbstbildnis mit Staffelei* Dix has abandoned the make-up that he wore in 1922 in his previous persona as artist-dandy and socialite in both *Doppelbildnis* and other works such as *An die Schönheit*. He is wearing a relatively conservative but contemporary suit and has abandoned the exaggerated style with excessive shoulder padding and high, narrow waist, which he had designed for himself in his informal drawing of 1921.<sup>99</sup> This style is still worn by his friend the jeweler Karl Krall in the *Bildnis des Juweliers Karl Krall* (plate 19), completed in 1923 and displayed on Berber's left in the exhibition. In Dix's self-portrait, the combination of objective painting style, cool expression and fashionable appearance (as a form of disciplining the self) demonstrated in a productive congruence that he and his art were *zeitgemäss*. As the fashion magazine *Elegante Welt* claimed in the feature 'The Elegant Gentleman on Stage and in Film' in 1920, a male artist's outfit underlined his professional credibility. The article argued that the contemporary focus on the silhouette created by clothing could be attributed to the influence of cinema. The writer and actor Robert Forster-Larrinaga was selected as an example of an artist who showed 'eccentricity not just in his poems. His way of dressing proves a strong personality that can create something original in every area it delves into.'<sup>100</sup> Although one could not generalize this fashion, the writer advised, one should keep in mind that 'every

elegant gentleman is keen to let the culture of his interior life be reflected in his suit'.<sup>101</sup> Krall and Berber represented the past, a dying fashion and artistic idiom, decadent identities that were out-of-sync. In contrast, the painter is in control of modernity, his finger on the pulse of the time not just in the way he fashioned himself but - by extension - in *what* he painted and *how* he painted it. Dix's strategies were so successful that he was later accused of having inspired trends in painting himself. Will Grohmann, writing about the *Internationale Kunstausstellung Dresden* in 1926, was keen to point out that the city could boast many talented emerging artists: 'and they are not just little Dixes'.<sup>102</sup> Paul Westheim accused the painter Georg Kinzer in his review of an exhibition of the *Deutsche Kunstgemeinschaft* in Berlin in 1928 of following a fashion without introducing anything that had not already been done by Dix, and then H. Fiedler of having decided to 'dixify' (*dixeln*) one his paintings.<sup>103</sup>

In another twist, Lya de Putti - Berber's good friend and admirer - wore a dress that resembled Berber's outfit in Dix's painting even more closely than the one Berber herself wore in her dance *Suicide* in publicity photographs for her film *The Prince of Tempters* (plate 20), which premiered in October 1926 in the US. Unfortunately it cannot be verified whether de Putti may have been inspired by the painting, whether she had seen Dix's painting before her departure to the US early in 1926 or

whether she saw a photograph of it around the time of its second exhibition in the summer 1926 while *The Prince of Tempters* was being filmed in America. In Berber's portrait, the skin-tight, highly impractical evening dress signified her out-datedness, however: made of glittering lamé or shiny satin, as worn by de Putti, this kind of outfit was starting to turn into a more stable filmic trope for Hollywood's *femme fatales*. In fact, by the 1930s the 'untranslatability' of spectacular female costume into mainstream fashion and its 'unwearability' had become a genre convention.<sup>104</sup> It transcended mainstream fashion trends, and now said less about what was fashionable or out-dated at the time of the release of the film.

After Berber's death one obituary attributed her decline to her 'libidinous creativity [that] could not be subordinated to the laws of rational economics without which lasting success cannot be achieved, even with great talent'.<sup>105</sup> Instead it is the male artist who, in a calculated move, intervened by shifting her into another site of the image economy. The loss of her 'fashionable capital' had made her less threatening as a subject for the ambitious painter, who aimed to situate himself within a line of historic artists that could claim timeless appeal. Ilya Parkins has argued in 'Fashion as Methodology,' that Modernity's 'orientation to the present and to future horizons of experience functioned to disenfranchise women, by excluding the symbolic realm of the feminine from the possibilities for becoming that

were seen to define the modern.’<sup>106</sup> Therefore, was Berber paying the price for the male artist’s fight for his position within the dominant temporal regime by being returned to an anterior, already historical realm?

### **Breaking up the Surface: The Painter as a ‘Synthesizer’ of Trans-Historical Temporal Dynamics**

Dix himself famously claimed in 1927 that painting could only be renewed through an expansion of the subject matter combined with the ‘intensification of forms of expression already contained in the Old Masters’.<sup>107</sup> The result of this strategy has been defined perhaps most appropriately by Uwe M. Schneede as Dix’s ‘synthetic image practice’,<sup>108</sup> developed out of his early Dadaist paintings with collaged elements. His Old Masterly technique functions as a trap for perception – a ‘Wahrnehmungsfalle’ - which the spectator had to overcome to realize that the pictorial reality was ‘put together, constructed, invented’.<sup>109</sup> The temporal aspects of Dix’s work have first been explicitly identified in 2005 by Frank Whitford, albeit only in a brief reference to Dix’s engagement of the pictorial strategies of the Old Masters. Whitford describes these as a ‘temporal anchor, to find something to hold on to in uncertain times’.<sup>110</sup> Most recently Matthew S. Witkovsky has considered the temporal aspects in one of Dix’s works in a little more detail in the exhibition catalogue *New Objectivity: Modern German Art*

*in the Weimar Republic, 1919 – 1933*. Witkovsky employs Dix's portrait of Max Roesberg (1922) in which the sitters appears aged beyond his years as an example to argue that Dix's portraiture blends 'three temporal frames: the present of their consciousness, the future of their appearance, and the Northern Renaissance past referenced compositionally and in Dix's chosen materials'.<sup>111</sup> Witkovsky further argues that Dix's image practice 'involved a construction of different temporalities, all conditioned by technological media, and tending toward fissured or multiple identities rather than a stable and singular self'.<sup>112</sup> Taking a cue from Devin Fore's *Realism after Modernism* and his discussion of formalist experiments he contends that Dix's work offers another version of the overcoming of the 'opposition of realism and montage' discussed by Fore, more specifically, Dix's work is a revisiting of 'montage to force the collision of different temporalities, and to break the grip of an eternalized present tense in modern life'.<sup>113</sup>

The concept of three temporal frames is indeed useful when looking at Dix's major portraits, but I would argue that the temporal organization of the artwork is exponentially more complicated when considering the referential palimpsest the viewer is faced with in the picture of former star Anita Berber. Fashion as an abstraction, temporal agent and as a critical term allows us to grasp the dynamics of simultaneous temporalities pulling into different directions in this painting. Dix's work



addresses the problematic character of temporal experience in modernity and has captured and intervened in these processes, negotiating the painter's position within the temporal regime of art history in the making. The *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* is a statement about the nature of painting in a transitional historical moment in which the future of portraiture was widely debated. In a late interview in 1955 Dix claimed: 'That portrait painting has been replaced by photography is one of the modernist, arrogant and naïve errors. ... A hundred photographs of one person would only give us one hundred different snapshots.... Only the painter can see and give form to the whole.'<sup>114</sup> This was reflected in the contemporary perception of Dix's work: In 1923 Iwan Puni singled out Otto Dix as one of a number of painters who used photography in a new way by engaging it as a 'spring board for the push away from photography', employing a strategy of heightening its 'static realism', its 'anti-artistic' qualities to the point where they become an 'artistic canon'.<sup>115</sup> Berber's portrait is an agent within this discourse because it demonstrated that painting was still capable of things the technological media were not. It showed a world not 'accessible to the photographic apparatus',<sup>116</sup> thereby challenging the problematic position of *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting and its return to figuration in relation to the historic avant-garde. Dix's portrait demonstrates that painting could produce what photography could not: an

aggregate of a plurality of external temporal structures, moments and media surfaces within one field of the visual. Although the painting revealed the modern artist still suspended in a state described by Baudelaire in 1893 - 'weighed down, every moment, by the conception and sensation of time'<sup>117</sup> - for his artwork Dix managed to achieve the opposite. As Paul F. Schmidt put it in 1927 in his essay 'Artist-Portrait - or Resemblance': 'The true artist does not create for the point of view of his contemporaries. Only those works will last in time and have convincing truth, that are not weighed down by temporal conditions.'<sup>118</sup>

While Anita Berber and her photographic image had become, in Kracauer's terms, 'powerless', a 'cast-off remnant ... reduced to the sum of its details like a corpse yet stands tall as if full of life' by the time the painting was shown in 1926, this past-ness was already contained in her painted portrait as a repository of time. The artwork is a condensation of what Simmel described as 'life according to fashion': it 'consists of a balancing of destruction and upbuilding'.<sup>119</sup> The painting participated in the destruction of the pictorial subject to support its painter's career, the destruction of Expressionism and the rise of Neue Sachlichkeit. Following Kracauer, only a painting as an 'object permeated by cognition', 'an artwork [that] also negates the likeness achieved by photography', could capture the 'consciousness' of this transitional historic moment.<sup>120</sup> As

Kracauer wrote in his essay on photography: ‘In order for history to present itself the mere surface coherence offered by photography must be destroyed.’<sup>121</sup>

Dix both engaged and controlled fashion in his own appearance, his self-portraits and his treatment of the *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber*. He did so to demonstrate his own position at the forefront of contemporary developments in art and wider visual culture, and to direct the portrait’s reception when it was first displayed in 1926 while simultaneously aiming to ensure its future position within art history. By offering a trans-historical vision of events, Dix simultaneously liberated his painting from the temporal anchoring in the present and achieved what any of the many photographs of Anita Berber could not. The result is a painting on whose surface different temporal and medial planes converged in a pastiche, the visualization of and itself a temporal configuration, a theoretical object in the discourse about the future of portrait painting.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Photography’, trans. and intr. Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Enquiry* 19: 3, Spring 1993, 422-423.

<sup>2</sup> Olaf Peters. *Otto Dix*. Munich/New York, 2010, 210.

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Strobl, *Otto Dix. Eine Malerkarriere der zwanziger Jahre*, Berlin, 1996, 247. The exhibition travelled to Galerie Tannhauser, Munich, from June to July 1926.

<sup>4</sup> Kracauer, ‘Photography’, 429.

- <sup>5</sup> Kracauer, 'Photography', 429
- <sup>6</sup> Kracauer, 'Photography', 429.
- <sup>7</sup> Kracauer, 'Photography', 430.
- <sup>8</sup> Kracauer. 'Photography', 430.
- <sup>9</sup> Sabine Hake, 'In the Mirror of Fashion', in Katharina von Ankum, *Women in the Metropolis. Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, 1997, 197.
- <sup>10</sup> Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935*, Berkeley, 1997, 86.
- <sup>11</sup> Topefer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, 83.
- <sup>12</sup> For examples see Mel Gordon, *The Seven Addictions and Five Lives of Anita Berber*, Los Angeles, 2006. Lothar Fischer, *Tanz zwischen Rausch und Tod. Anita Berber 1918-1928 in Berlin*, Berlin, 1996. And the historical material collected on Anita Berber in the Dance Archive, Cologne, file 226.
- <sup>13</sup> Fischer and Gordon include art works by Charlotte Behrend-Corinth, Harry Täuber, János Vaszary, Rolf Niczky among others.
- <sup>14</sup> Uwe Westphal, *Berliner Konfektion und Mode 1836-1939. Die Zerstörung einer Tradition*, Berlin, 1992, 83.
- <sup>15</sup> Klaus Mann, 'Erinnerungen an Anita Berber,' *Die Bühne, Wochenschrift für Theater, Tanz, Mode* 275: 7, 1930, 43-44.
- <sup>16</sup> Pawel Barchan, 'Van Dongen', *Elegante Welt*, 22, 1925, 25.
- <sup>17</sup> Barchan, 'Van Dongen', 25.
- <sup>18</sup> Georg Simmel, 'Fashion' in Daniel Purdy, ed., *The Rise of Fashion. A Reader*, Minneapolis, 2004, 298.
- <sup>19</sup> Simmel, 'Fashion', 295.
- <sup>20</sup> See Frederic Schwartz, *Blind Spots. Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth Century Germany*, London, 2005.
- <sup>21</sup> Paul Westheim *Für und Wider. Kritische Anmerkungen zur Kunst der Gegenwart*, Potsdam, 1923, 32-33.
- <sup>22</sup> Westheim, *Für und Wider*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Westheim, 'Kunst in Frankreich. L'Esprit', *Das Kunstblatt*, 6, 1922, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Westheim, 'Kunst in Frankreich', 15.

<sup>25</sup> George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde, 'Art is in Danger' in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Malden and Oxford, 2003, 469-470.

<sup>26</sup> To clarify the contested relationship of new realist positions to the historic avant-garde, Olaf Peters has described the *Neue Sachlichkeit* as a 'conscious reaction against the art of abstraction' and 'in this respect a kind of antagonist, counter-avantgardist avant-garde. Olaf Peters, 'Eine demokratische Kunst? – Aspekte der Neuen Sachlichkeit seit 1930' in Beate Reese, ed., *Zeitnah Weltfern. Bilder der Neuen Sachlichkeit*, Würzburg, 1998, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Huyssen has argued that the historical avant-garde was defined by 'an anxiety of contamination of its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture', but does not include realist painting or single out fashion. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, London, 1986, vii.

<sup>28</sup> Paul F. Schmidt, 'Otto Dix', *Otto Dix. Katalog der Gesamtausstellung 1926*, Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf, Berlin, 1926, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Schmidt, 'Otto Dix', 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> Schmidt, 'Otto Dix', 7.

<sup>31</sup> Paul F. Schmidt, 'Die deutschen Veristen', *Das Kunstblatt*, 8, 1924, 373.

<sup>32</sup> Curt Glaser, *Berliner Börsenkurier*, 4th December 1924, quoted in Strobl, *Otto Dix*, 98.

<sup>33</sup> See also Karsten Müller 'The Charleston and the Prosthetic Leg. Otto Dix and the Art of the Balancing Act', in Peters, *Otto Dix*, 164-177.

<sup>34</sup> James van Dyke, 'Otto Dix's *Streetbattle* and the Limits of Satire in Düsseldorf, 1928', *Oxford Art Journal*, 32:1, 2009, 49.

- <sup>35</sup> Ilse Fischer, 'Der Dadaist (Otto Dix)', *Das junge Rheinland*, 9/10, June 1922, 26-27.
- <sup>36</sup> On Dix's self-stylization in *To Beauty* (1922), see Änne Söll, 'An die Schönheit. Selbst, Männlichkeit und Moderne in Otto Dix Selbstbildnis von 1922', Annette Geiger, ed., *Der schöne Körper*, Cologne and Vienna, 2009, 149-166.
- <sup>37</sup> Fischer, 'Der Dadaist', 23. For a discussion of Dix's interest in dance and fashion see Susan Laikin Funkenstein, 'A Man's Place in a Woman's World: Otto Dix, Social Dancing, and Constructions of Masculinity in Weimar Germany', *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature and Culture*, 21, 2005, 163-191.
- <sup>38</sup> Dietrich Schubert, *Otto Dix. Mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Reinbek, 1991, 41.
- <sup>39</sup> Ulrike Lorenz, ed., *Otto Dix. Briefe*, Cologne, 2013, 80.
- <sup>40</sup> Lorenz, *Otto Dix*, 80-81.
- <sup>41</sup> Paul Kraemer, 'Der neue Künstlertyp', *Elegante Welt*, 8:5, 1919, 4.
- <sup>42</sup> Strobl, *Otto Dix*, 116-117.
- <sup>43</sup> Strobl, *Otto Dix*, 114.
- <sup>44</sup> Klaus Mann, *Der Wendepunkt*, 132, cit. and transl. in Bernd Widdig, *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany*, Berkeley, 2001, 207.
- <sup>45</sup> Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, 85.
- <sup>46</sup> Fischer, 'Der Dadaist', 26.
- <sup>47</sup> Kate Elswit, 'Berlin...Your Dance Partner is Death', *The Drama Review*, 53:1, 2009, 86.
- <sup>48</sup> There are a few exceptions, but these are all outdated images published alongside articles that present her as a dance star of the past.
- <sup>49</sup> Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, 86.
- <sup>50</sup> Wallisch, 'Anita Berber,' *Neue Illustrierte Filmwoche, Berliner Ausgabe*, 21, November 1924, 751.

- <sup>51</sup> Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, ed. Erica Carter, New York and Oxford, 2010, 87.
- <sup>52</sup> Klaus Mann, 'Erinnerungen an Anita Berber', *Die Bühne, Wochenschrift für Theater, Tanz, Mode*, 275:7, 1930, 43-44.
- <sup>53</sup> Peters, *Otto Dix*, 210.
- <sup>54</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, 'Anita und Henri', *Die Weltbühne*, 23:7, 1927, 277.
- <sup>55</sup> Arnheim, 'Anita und Henri', 277.
- <sup>56</sup> The event program for a show in Cologne in 1925 claims it is Berber's last engagements before a tour in the US. Dance Archive, Cologne, File 226.
- <sup>57</sup> Johann-Karl Schmidt, 'Otto Dix – Beruf Maler', in *Otto Dix. Retrospektiv. Zum 120. Geburtstag*, Gera, 2011, 132.
- <sup>58</sup> One client refused to pay because the portrait of her daughter was not a faithful likeness. Dix's lawyer Hugo Simons argued on behalf of artistic freedom and won the case. See Anne Grace, 'Portrait of the Lawyer Hugo Simons (1925)', in Peters, *Otto Dix*, 217.
- <sup>59</sup> Germanisches Nationalmuseum (GNM), Deutsches Kunstarchiv, Estate of Otto Dix, file IC64.
- <sup>60</sup> Funkenstein argued that a photograph of Berber and Dix 'in a mass-circulated paper implied the newsworthiness of the portrait and the fame of both artists and sitter.' Since the painting was first shown in Spring 1926 this letter cannot have been sent in the summer of 1925 as Funkenstein states. See Susan Laikin Funkenstein, 'Anita Berber: Imaging a Weimar Performance Artist', *Women's Art Journal*, 26: 1, 2005, 29.
- <sup>61</sup> Lorenz, *Otto Dix*, 89.
- <sup>62</sup> George Grosz, *The Autobiography of George Grosz: a Small Yes and a Big No*, transl. Arnold Pomerans, London, 1982, 107.
- <sup>63</sup> Funkenstein, 'Anita Berber', 26.
- <sup>64</sup> Mann, *Erinnerungen*, 43-44.
- <sup>65</sup> See Lothar Fischer, *Anita Berber*, 44. And Johannes Zeilinger, *Lya de Putti. Ein vergessenes Leben*, Vienna, 1990, 40. According to Fischer, Lya de

Putti, Anita Berber and Marlene Dietrich were friends and together a common sight on the social circuit in Berlin.

<sup>66</sup> H. W. Keim, 'Die modern Kunst in der Düsseldorfer Jubiläumsausstellung 1925', *Cicerone*, 17, 1925, 815.

<sup>67</sup> Franz Roh used the term 'demonic' repeatedly. See his articles 'Georg Schrimpf und die neue Malerei: Zwei Bildanalysen von Franz Roh', *Das Kunstblatt*, 9, 1923, 265. And 'Neue Graphik von vier Dämonikern, von Meyboden, Dix, Grosz, Scholz', *Das Kunstblatt*, 7, 1923, 254.

<sup>68</sup> H.H. Stuckenschmidt, 'Ausblick in die Musik', *Das Kunstblatt*, 7, 1923, 221.

<sup>69</sup> Franz Roh, *Der Maler Kurt Günther*, Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf, Berlin, 1928, 8.

<sup>70</sup> Compare also the vampiresque dancer Otto Dix's *To Beauty* (1922).

<sup>71</sup> Maria Wetzel, 'Atelier-Besuche XX: Professor Otto Dix. Ein harter Mann, dieser Maler', *Diplomatischer Kurier*, 14, 1965, 736.

<sup>72</sup> Otto Dix, 'Gedanken zum Porträtmalern', 1955, cit and transl. in Peters, *Otto Dix*, 210.

<sup>73</sup> 'Widows' veils were favourite modish accessories for prostitutes.' Rewald, *Glitter and Doom*, 220.

<sup>74</sup> Peters, 'Eine demokratische Kunst?', 26.

<sup>75</sup> Joseph Garnarz, 'Warum kennen Filmhistoriker viele Weimarer Topstars nicht mehr? Überlegungen am Beispiel Claire Rommer', in *montage/av. Zeitschrift für Theorie und Geschichte audio-visueller Kommunikation*, 6:2, 1997, 67.

<sup>76</sup> The photograph is reproduced in Peter Herzog and Romano Tozzi *Lya de Putti. Loving Life and not Fearing Death*, New York, 1993. Although dated March 1926 here this is unlikely since de Putti left for New York early in 1926. Two original postcards in my possession also show de Putti in the same outfit and are marked with the handwritten note '6/25'. One of them has the additional stamp 'June 1925' on the back, which confirms my dating



of the photograph before Dix painted Berber. Alexander Binder ran the biggest photographic studio in Europe at the time and specialized in celebrity photographs. See Johannes Moderegger, *Modedefotografie in Deutschland 1929-1955*, Norderstedt, 2000, 179.

<sup>77</sup> Kirsten Fitzke mentions an early, different looking version of the painting of which a photograph taken in July 1922 by Hugo Erfurth has survived. See Kirsten Fitzke, 'Eine Hommage an das Leben, den Tanz und die Liebe. Otto Dix' Gemälde *Selbstbildnis mit Martha, 1923*', *Otto Dix retrospektiv. Zum 120. Geburtstag*, Gera, 2011, 140.

<sup>78</sup> Willi Wolfradt, 'Ein Doppelbildnis von Otto Dix', *Cicerone* 15: 4, 1923, 173-178. Fitzke interprets Willi Wolfradt's reference to vampires in her essay as a response to the impact of the film *Nosferatu* by F.W. Murnau (1922). See Fitzke, 'Hommage', 141.

<sup>79</sup> Willi Wolfradt. 'Ein Doppelbildnis von Otto Dix', 177.

<sup>80</sup> Willi Wolfradt, 'Ein Doppelbildnis von Otto Dix', 177.

<sup>81</sup> Willi Wolfradt, 'Ausstellungen', *Das Kunstblatt*, 6:12, 1922, 543.

<sup>82</sup> Wolfradt, 'Ausstellungen', 543.

<sup>83</sup> For a discussion of the issue of Expressionism as a fashion see: Sherwin Simmons, 'Expressionism in the Discourse of Fashion', *Fashion Theory*, 4:1, 2000, 49-88. On the decline of Expressionism see Dennis Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism. The Art of the Great Disorder 1918-1924*, Pennsylvania, 1999.

<sup>84</sup> Leo Lania, *Der Tanz ins Dunkel. Anita Berber. Ein biographischer Roman*, Berlin, 1929, 186.

<sup>85</sup> Funkenstein refers to another photograph in which Berber wears the same dress, however this picture was most likely not taken around 1925 as claimed by Funkenstein, since it features the same chair as a prop in other photographs taken by Alexander Binder in 1922. Funkenstein, 'Anita Berber', 29.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Die Hülle schmiegt sich wieder enger an und gibt der Figur dabei etwas Langgestrecktes, Schlangenhaftes.’ In ‘Mode. Die neue Linie’, *Die Dame*, 50:1, October 1922, 9.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Fechter, *Der Expressionismus*, Munich, 1920, 33-34.

<sup>88</sup> Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, ‘Biedermeier-Bildnisse’, *Vogue*, German edition, 1:13, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1928, 36.

<sup>89</sup> Funkenstein has further pointed out that Berber and Droste’s expressionist performances and poems contained references to German and Italian Renaissance paintings. Funkenstein, ‘Anita Berber’, 27.

<sup>90</sup> Josef Melnik, ‘Bei Asta Nielsen’, *Die Dame*, 52:13, March 1925, 7. See also a photograph of Paul Westheim in his home in ‘Kunstschriftsteller in ihrem Heim’, *Die Dame*, 52:12, 1925, 4.

<sup>91</sup> Maria Wetzel, ‘Atelierbesuche XX’, 736.

<sup>92</sup> Hanne Bergius, ‘Dix – Dionysos in der Kälte. Spuren von Mythen and Alten Meistern im Grossstadt-Triptychon’, *Otto Dix zum 100. Geburtstag 1891-1991*, ed. Wulf Herzogenrath and Johann-Karl Schmidt, Ostfildern, 1991, 225.

<sup>93</sup> Kate Elswit, ‘Berlin ... Your Dance Partner is Death’, *The Drama Review*, 53: 1, Spring 2009, 87.

<sup>94</sup> Widdig, *Culture and Inflation*, 196.

<sup>95</sup> *Frankfurter Zeitung, Stadtblatt*, 15th September 1925, cited in Oliver M. Piecha, *Roaring Frankfurt. Mit Siegfried Kracauer ins Schumanntheater*, Frankfurt a. M., 2005, 115.

<sup>96</sup> Paul Westheim, ‘Dix’, *Das Kunstblatt* 10: 4, 1926, 146.

<sup>97</sup> Applying one of Nagel and Wood’s arguments in *Anachronic Renaissance*, Dix had turned the fashion portrait into a ‘structural object’ that reflected ‘on its own origins by comparing one origin myth to another’ – but in quite different terms than in Nagel and Wood’s study on the Renaissance, complicated and directed by the dynamics of fashion. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, Cambridge MA, 2012, 17.

<sup>98</sup> Funkenstein, 'Anita Berber', 30.

<sup>99</sup> In May 1920 *Elegante Welt* devoted a two-page spread to the high-waisted male suit: Wilhelm Clobes, 'Die hohe Taille. Ein Kapitel der Herrenmode', in: *Elegante Welt* 9:11, May 1920, 14 – 15. Note also Krall's pointed fingernails.

<sup>100</sup> 'Der Elegante Herr auf der Bühne und im Film', *Elegante Welt*, 9:21, 1920, 12-13.

<sup>101</sup> 'Der Elegante Herr', 13.

<sup>102</sup> Will Grohmann, 'Die internationale Kunstausstellung Dresden 1926', in *Das Kunstblatt*, 10:7, 1926, 267.

<sup>103</sup> Paul Westheim, 'Die Ausstellung der jungen Maler und Bilhauer in der Deutschen Kunstgemeinschaft, Berlin', in *Das Kunstblatt*, 12:1, 1928, 8.

<sup>104</sup> See: Jane Gaines, 'Wanting to Wear Seeing. Gilbert Adrian at MGM', in Adrienne Munich ed., *Fashion in Film*, Bloomington, 2011, 135-159.

Because the portrait of Berber was exhibited several months before the release of *The Prince of Tempters* (filmed in the US in the summer of 1926) it is unlikely that Dix could himself have been inspired by Lya de Putti's dress. However, the exact dates of de Putti's departure for America, the release of the publicity images for the film and the date when Dix finished his portrait of Berber cannot be confirmed.

<sup>105</sup> *Die Filmwoche*, 47, 1928, no page.

<sup>106</sup> Ilya Parkins, 'Fashion as Methodology', in *Time and Society*, 19:1, 2010, 101.

<sup>107</sup> *Berliner Nachtausgabe*, 3rd December 1927, cit. and transl. Matthew S. Wikovsky, 'Middle-Class Montage', in Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann eds, *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919 – 1933*, ex. cat., Munich, London and New York, 108.

<sup>108</sup> Uwe M. Schneede, 'Wer war Otto Dix?', in Ortrud Westheider and Karsten Müller eds., *Geisterbahn und Glanzrevue. Otto Dix. Aquarelle und Gouachen*. Hamburg, 2007, 14.

- <sup>109</sup> Schneede, 'Wer war Otto Dix?', 15.
- <sup>110</sup> Frank Whitford, 'Dix und die Weimarer Republik' in Ulrike Lorenz ed., *Welt und Sinnlichkeit*, Regensburg, 2005, 135.
- <sup>111</sup> Witkovsky, 'Middle-Class Montage', 108.
- <sup>112</sup> Witkovsky, 'Middle-Class Montage', 110.
- <sup>113</sup> Witkovsky, 'Middle-Class Montage', 108. Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism. The Rehumanization of Art and Literature*. Cambridge MA, 2012.
- <sup>114</sup> Otto Dix, 'Gedanken zum Porträtmalen' in *Internationale Bodensee-Zeitschrift*, 3, 1955, Amriswil, 59-60.
- <sup>115</sup> Iwan Puni, 'Zur Kunst von Heute', *Das Kunstblatt*, 7, 1923, 196.
- <sup>116</sup> Kracauer, 'Photography', 432.
- <sup>117</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'My Heart Laid Bare,' *Intimate Journals CXI*, trans. Christopher Isherwood, London, 1989, 56.
- <sup>118</sup> Gallery Neumann-Nierendorf, *The Problem of Composition in Contemporary Art*, 1927, 2-5. The exhibition did not include works by Dix.
- <sup>119</sup> Simmel, 'Fashion', 298.
- <sup>120</sup> Kracauer, 'Photography', 430.
- <sup>121</sup> Kracauer, 'Photography', 427.