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Louise Rösler's Die Strasse: Subjectivity as Existential Debate in 1950s West German Art

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Louise Rösler's *Die Strasse*

Subjectivity as Existential Debate in 1950s West German Art

By

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THESIS

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## Abstract

The end of National Socialism and the Second World War created a vacuum for German cultural identity in West Germany, leading to a philosophical discourse regarding the nature and future of that identity, a discourse in which visual aesthetics played a vital part. Hoping to create and reinforce the idea of a fundamental reshaping of society, philosophers, art critics, artists, and historians gathered in Darmstadt in July of 1950 to discuss “Das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit”, “The Image of Man in Our Time”. Seemingly only focused on aesthetic formalism, the Darmstädter Gespräche posed deeper existential questions about how a future, post-National Socialist identity would be shaped and reflected in visual art.

The following thesis argues that such works as Louise Rösler’s 1951 collage, *Die Strasse*, rather than evincing the indecision and lack of direction typically assigned to this period of West German art, show a pivotal and much needed grappling with the existential issues of the time, and form a vital part of how West Germany perceived itself and the path forward.

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## I. Introduction

Louise Rösler's (1907 - 1993) 1951 collage, *Die Strasse* (Fig 1),<sup>1</sup> hardly seems fitting for the company it keeps in Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum. At only 5 15/16 in x 12 3/4 inches, this collage of yellow, pink, and blue bounding across its cardboard surface, bordered by thin, black and purple lines of oil and gouache paint, the light bouncing off *Die Strasse's* re-assemblage of colourful candy wrappers attract the eye, but provoke questions about what relationship such mundane items have to a formal artistic setting. This diminutive artwork, however, thrives on such ambiguities, being surprisingly deeply connected not only to artistic practice during its time, but also to more substantial questions of West German cultural identity as it was conceived from the end of the Third Reich in 1945 to 1951. These surprisingly turbulent few years see significant conversations grappling with the inherent problem of identity reconstruction without a cohesive sense of history, a seismic intellectual rupture running parallel to the massive physical destruction sustained by both East and West Germany from 1940-1945.

Born to painters Oda Hardt-Rösler and Waldemar Rösler in 1907, Louise's studies were full of avant-garde teachers, from future president of the Deutscher Künstlerbund Karl Hofer (1878-1955), Ferdinand Léger (1881-1955), and German-American painter Hans Hofmann

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<sup>1</sup> Rösler, Louise. *Die Strasse*. 1951. Wax Paper, cellophane, on cardboard. Reisinger-Busch Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts.

(1880-1966),<sup>2</sup> painters at the forefront of their time. Until her death in 1993, Rösler's work evinces an engagement with both the modernist mode, as well as the abstraction developing in the second half of her life. After a turbulent period during the war, in which she lost many artworks during a 1943 evacuation, Rösler's most active period was from the late 1940s through the 1950s, though information on her today is scant outside of a website maintained by her daughter, Anke Kröhnke. It is her 1951 collage, however, which dynamically captures the spirit of its time at every level, combining and reconstructing the subject as part of a larger conversation about figuration and abstraction as a viable means of representation in a post National Socialist world. From its medium, to its materials, to its larger connection to the street as both a modernist and postmodern concept, we see how deeply Rösler connects this reconsideration of the subject with the symbolic meaning of damage sustained by Germany in the Allied bombing raids of 1940-1945. By seeing physical damage as analogous to the dismantled coherent history and reconstructing its meaning through collage, Rösler taps into the greater metaphorical meaning debris assumed during this time as West Germans sought to reconstruct a unified cultural narrative by mediating through her artwork.

Histories of immediate postwar Germany often begin with the damage inflicted by the repeated bombings which lasted from 1940 until 1945. Initially part of a strategic bombing campaign, the Royal Air Force attacks on Berlin in August 1940 to the Rostock bombings in

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<sup>2</sup> Museum Atelierhaus Rösler-Kröhnke. "Louise Rösler." *Museum Atelierhaus Rösler-Kröhnke*, Verein der Freunde und Förderer des Museums Atelierhaus Rösler-Kröhnke. <http://www.museum-atelierhaus-roesler-kroehnke.de/index.php?area=home> . Accessed 12 April, 2023.

1941-1942 were nowhere near effective enough to alter the course of the war.<sup>3</sup> By war's end in 1945, however, the tactical changes ordered by Archer "Bomber" Harris had left Dresden famously in ruins, along with cities such as Cologne and Dortmund sustaining significant damages.<sup>4</sup> Further south, estimates taken in Frankfurt am Main record a *Schuttberg* so big it was dubbed *Monte Scherbelino* for the preponderance of broken glass contained within.<sup>5</sup> That other cities such as Stuttgart also boast a *Monte Scherbelino* attests to the proliferation of Schuttberge peppering the German landscape and requiring years of large scale efforts to completely remove.

This physical destruction of the urban landscape and the preponderance of rubble was accompanied by a parallel feeling of depletion and confusion. Even as efforts began to clear away the rubble, reconsiderations about whether to resuscitate older architectural styles or urban layouts coloured the decisions about how to appropriately rebuild the cities, and, by extension, how Germany, East and West, would reestablish itself. Andrew Demshuk has dubbed these discourses "redemptive construction" in his book, *Three Cities After Hitler: Redemptive Construction Across Cold War Borders*,<sup>6</sup> describing how efforts at urban areas were connected to larger understandings of how deeply a city left its imprint on the individual. Creeping

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<sup>3</sup> Overy, Richard. *Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe, 1940-1944*. New York, Viking, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Clapson, Mark. *The Blitz Companion: Aerial Warfare, Civilians and the City since 1911*, London, University of Warminster Press, 2019, Ch 2, "European Cities under the Bomb: Nazi and Allied Bombing Campaigns, 1939-1945."

<sup>5</sup> Clapson, Mark. *The Blitz Companion: Aerial Warfare, Civilians and the City since 1911*, London, University of Warminster Press, 2019, Ch 2, "European Cities under the Bomb: Nazi and Allied Bombing Campaigns, 1939-1945."

<sup>6</sup> Demshuk, Andrew. *Three Cities After Hitler: Redemptive Construction Across Cold War Borders*. Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021, p 3.

dangerously close to the Romanticist notion of *Heimat*, in which the individual is emotionally and psychologically connected to a physical locale,<sup>7</sup> the mythologising potential of redemptive construction can be traced in the problematic and ubiquitous image of the *Trümmerfrau*, who embodied both the hopes of “wiping the slate clean” and re-emerging into the international community.<sup>8</sup>

This symbolic connection between the development of individual and collective identity and urban space, of the material and the figurative, permeated West German intellectual culture. As Rösler’s work shows, urban planners and architects were not the only ones contemplating how West Germany could best move forward. The resumption of dynamic intellectual life saw a deep engagement with questions of German guilt and how National Socialism had managed to take hold in Germany. Theodor Adorno (1903 - 1969), Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), and Joachim Ritter (1903-1974) stand out as contributing significantly to considerations of West German identity in the immediate postwar period . Although each of these theorists took a very different position, their works from 1945 to 1950, as well as works published in subsequent years, all evince the unraveling of a cohesive vision of how Germany (particularly West Germany) ought to move forward. In their works, from Adorno’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* in 1947,<sup>9</sup> to Karl

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<sup>7</sup> Blickle, Peter. *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002, p 6.

<sup>8</sup> Heineman, Elizabeth. ““The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany’s ‘Crisis Years’ and West German National Identity””. In *Schissler, Hannah. The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p 34.

<sup>9</sup> Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*. Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer Verlag, 1969.



Jaspers' *Die Schuldfrage* (also 1947),<sup>10</sup> and Ritters' *Landschaft. Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft* (1963),<sup>11</sup> the confusion about how Germany had taken such an incredibly dark turn, unpack the idea of complicity, and how to reestablish a new identity all leave out the fundamental question of what such a reestablishment looks like, remaining as a piece of rubble but not fully addressed in their larger philosophical works. Instead, this conversation was held in the most seemingly peripheral of places, the visual arts.

Those deeply entrenched in these ontological debates were joined by people like Rösler, artists, art historians and critics, in forming this integral aspect of West German intellectual life. Figures such as art historian Hans Sedlmayr (1896 - 1984), art historians and critics Franz Roh (1890 - 1965) and Gustav Hartlaub (1884 - 1963) all debated these existential questions through discussions of whether figurative representation was an ineffective means to establishing and contributing to a new social fabric,<sup>12</sup> or if this representation was in fact something with which society needed to be brought back into alignment. Their discussion over *das Menschenbild* was a passionate debate which attests to the enduring belief in the relationships between the embodied, material work of art, and its figurative resonance in shaping and influencing society. Some, such as Sedlmayr, thought that modern art in general was a symptom of social decay, a sign that

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<sup>10</sup>Jaspers, Karl. *Die Schuldfrage: Von der Politischen Haftung Deutschlands*. Munich, Piper Verlag, GmbH, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Ritter, Joachim. "*Landschaft. Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft.*" In *Subjektivität. Sechs Aufsätze*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974

<sup>12</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951, p 49.

society had lost what he called its “*führende Aufgaben*” or “central concern,”<sup>13</sup> while others, such as Franz Roh and Adorno, saw in figurative representation a lingering iconographic dependence on National Socialist constructs,<sup>14</sup> which after all, had been embedded in the National Socialist racial policy.

The growing dichotomy in art theory and criticism between 1945 and 1950 culminated in Dr Hans Gerhard Evers, professor of art at the Technischen Hochschule in Darmstadt,<sup>15</sup> initiating a conference in Darmstadt in July of 1950. Meeting intermittently between that year and 1975, this inaugural convening of the Darmstadt Conference was subtitled *Das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit*, and offered no less substantial a topic than the nature, value, and reconsideration of figural representation as part of a larger reconsideration of the social subject itself. Such ambitions are visible in the list of participants, including not only those from the art establishment, but also biologist Wulf Emmo Ankel (1897-1983) and theologian Adolf Köberle (1898-1990)<sup>16</sup>. The incorporation of those well outside aesthetic discourse aptly shows this was not only a formalist art conference, but one which took as its point of departure an understanding that the visual representation of *der Mensch* as an integral part of identity formation and potential participation in social justice. Accompanied by an exhibition of Accompanied by an exhibition of

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<sup>13</sup> Sedlmayr, Hans. *Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19 und 20 Jahrhunderts Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*. Salzburg, O. Müller, 1948, p 15.

<sup>14</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951, p 193.

<sup>15</sup> Crockett, Emily and Lee Sorensen. “Hans Gerhard Evers.” *Dictionary of Art Historians*. <https://arthistorians.info/eversh> . Accessed 19 April, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951, p 28.

contemporary art, both figurative and abstract, the conference focused on those such as Roh, Hartlaub, and especially Adorno replying to Sedlmayr's remarks about the decay which modern art signified for society.

Within this aesthetic discourse, figuration and its embodiment in the modernist prewar movements was supported by those who saw an ability to salvage what had been the progressive aspects of modernism and to reinstate them as part of a contemporary world. By contrast, those supporting abstraction, such as Adorno, saw a need for the complete restructuring of the social subject within visual art if society was to move forward without the possibility of a resurgence of fascism. Using the National Socialist *Menschenbild* as part of his argument, Adorno's support for abstraction was founded in the belief that the image of man had been corrupted through National Socialism's weaponisation of it and ultimately ruined beyond repair.<sup>17</sup>

Deeply embedded in the materiality of rubble, Rösler's collage turns the "Subject" of the paintings back onto the larger urban space in order to express an internal sense of loss and psychological depletion, especially evident in collage as a choice of medium.

Thomas P Brockleman, in his book *The Frame and The Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern* from 2001, compares the use of modernist photomontage and (modernist) collage as correlating roughly to the frame and mirror of the title, respectively.<sup>18</sup> Using a Kantian /

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<sup>17</sup> Mosse, George L. "Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations." *Journal of Contemporary History*. Vol. 31, No 2, Special Issue: The Aesthetics of Fascism. Apr 1996, pp - 245-252.

Mangan, J.A.. "The Potent Image and the Permanent Prometheus." In *Shaping the Superman: Fascist Body as Political Icon - Aryan Fascism*. Edited by J.A. Mangan. Portland, OR, Frank Cass & Co, Ltd., 1999, pp 11-22.

<sup>18</sup> Brockelman, Thomas P. *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern*. Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2001.

Lyotardian argument to discuss how collage and photomontage conform to Kant's construct of the beautiful and the sublime,<sup>19</sup> Brockleman discusses collage's reflexive nature, but fails to discuss the integral aspect of materiality within collage. Considering the increased symbolic potency of material, and especially debris, at this time, it is insufficient to focus solely on the theoretical and conceptual aspects, without offering a materialist analysis. Rösler's *Die Strasse* is a work entrenched in its materiality, with its roots in both the modernist anxiety of two different social/historical narratives, and its ambitions connected to offering a different perspective on the subject.

Works such as Rösler's *Die Strasse* reject the need for a human figure as central to the composition. Departing from artists such as Jeanne Mammen in her *Ohne Titel (Profile)* of 1945-6 (Fig 2),<sup>20</sup> Hans Uhlmann's *Männlicher Kopf* from 1942 (Fig 3),<sup>21</sup> and Ernst Wilhelm Nay's *Sibylle* (1945) (Fig 4),<sup>22</sup> Rösler's collage embraces abstraction both in its genre and in its elevation of detritus to artwork in its composition. From the act of collage-making, a form that is inherently connected to a stripping away and reconstruction of meaning, to its adoption of cast-off elements of consumer products, Rösler makes the theme of detritus and reconstructed meaning clear. Commenting on the dynamics of postwar West Germany, through the materiality

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<sup>19</sup> Brockelman, Thomas P. *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern*. Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2001, p 98.

<sup>20</sup> Mammen, Jeanne. *Ohne Titel (Profile)*. 1945-6. Oil and wire on Cardboard. Jeanne-Mammen-Stiftung, Berlin.

<sup>21</sup> Uhlmann, Hans. *Männlicher Kopf*. 1942. Steel Sheet. Lehmbruck Museum, Duisinburg.

<sup>22</sup> Nay, Ernst Wilhelm. *Sibylle*. 1945. Gouache on cardboard. Ernst Wilhelm Nay Stiftung, Cologne.

of her work, Rösler reconfigures the human subject not by making them the focal point of the art, but by drawing attention to their absence. When seen in combination with Brockleman's conceptual analysis of collage as mirror, the materiality renders Rösler's *Die Strasse* a symbolic work within the context of a culture struggling with the dark meanings the end of the Third Reich held for its cultural tradition, both in the most recent past and in terms of the immediate future. Seeking to rebuild itself, it questioned which aspects of the past two hundred years could be salvaged, and what could be done differently. Visual art played a vital role in these discussions, as can be seen in the plethora of formal styles emerging immediately after the war. As the literature review will show, this period in German art is often dismissed due to its inability to conform to a specific intellectual path. Indeed, the artwork of this period lacks the bold decisiveness of Expressionism, or the drama of an intellectually diverse field being stifled by a suffocating fascist regime. Certainly, there is some truth to this claim. The artwork of this period, as well as the Darmstädter Gespräche, had its limitations. One glaring limitation is the near total absence of women at the conference. Even in the exhibition, women's art is only represented by six out of 79 painters,<sup>23</sup> despite active participation of women elsewhere. Although scholars such as Marsha Meskimmon frequently study German women artists,<sup>24</sup> they remain chronically under-represented in scholarship concerning intellectual life.

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<sup>23</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951, pp 15-18.

<sup>24</sup> Meskimmon, Marsha. *The Art of Reflection: Women's Self-Portraiture of the Twentieth Century*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1996.

—. *We Weren't Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999.

Yet, it is in its very liminality, and its very material nature, Rösler's small collage offers us a window into how West Germans were trying to answer important existential questions about who they were, questions that would form the intellectual foundation of the Federal Republic.

In order to keep the emphasis on the liminality of this time, the bulk of this study will concern the transcript of the Darmstädter Gespräche of 1950, and will exclude any primary texts written past the 1951 timeframe. Although Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>25</sup> and his unequivocal praise of Beckett's existentialist play, *Endgame*,<sup>26</sup> richly illuminate information regarding his views on the subject relatively close to the time period under consideration, they detract from his views specifically devoted to visual art, and in the case of *Aesthetic Theory*, were not published until 1970, which is dramatically outside of the timeframe under consideration. Sadly this also excludes Alexander Mitscherlich's *Inability to Mourn* (1967), which also offers some interesting insights into non-Jewish German constructs of the immediate postwar period. The tendency of memory to revise itself with the progression of time renders this work entirely unsuitable for this project, albeit regrettably so. Instead, the present study will focus on his remarks made at the 1950 Darmstadt Conference, along with other publications released within the 1945-1950 time period. Details surrounding the analysis of Louise Rösler's work will be laid out below.

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<sup>25</sup> Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Edited and Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Adorno, Theodor and Michael T. Jones. "Trying to Understand Endgame." *New German Critique*. No 26, Spring-Summer 1982, pp 119-150.

## II. Literature Review

Even within a narrow time frame of five years, investigating either East or West Germany from 1945 to 1955 offers an array of periods and a vast, if disparate, assortment of resources, making organisation a unique challenge. Some rough lines can be drawn, however, such as linguistic ones, with German scholarship being smaller and focusing more on aesthetic aspects of media, while English language scholarship predominantly, though not exclusively, approaches this period through the lens of Cold War political policy. A look into the English language scholarship offers further subdivisions, which include art/ historical studies of influential German émigrés such as the controversial figure of Charlotte Weidler (1895-1983). Such books as *Echoes of Exile: Moscow Archives and the Arts in Paris, 1933-1945*, edited by Ines Rotermund-Raynard, offer a generous chapter to the art historian's life,<sup>27</sup> but scholarship tends to focus on artists themselves, which, while not surprising, certainly overlooks the role administrators play in curating and influencing taste.

While the world of German émigrés offers dramatic stories, scholarship surrounding them understandably focuses on America. Although the German-American postwar intellectual milieu is interesting, the purpose of this thesis is to examine the works and intellectual life of postwar Germans, which is far less studied.

Studies specific to West Germany often focus on the 1955 exhibition *dokumenta* held in Kassel. This pioneering exhibition deserves further mention but lies outside the scope of this

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<sup>27</sup> Rotemund-Raynard, Ines, Ed. *Echoes of Exile: Moscow Archives and the Arts in Paris 1933-1945*. Berlin, Germany : Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2015. Pp 105-122.

study. The first international exhibition for West Germany, it has so far received little beyond the chapter by Walter Grasskamp in the volume *Histories in Conflict: Haus der Kunst, 1933-1955*<sup>28</sup> and Andrew S. Weiner's 2009 article, "Memory under Reconstruction: Politics and Event in "Wirtschaftswunder" West Germany."<sup>29</sup>

One persistent problem with scholarship on German art of the immediate postwar period is the almost stubborn refusal to see the arts as part of a larger intellectual culture. Such a view is obvious already in 1974 with an anthology edited by Charles E. McClelland and Steven P Sher, simply titled, *Postwar German Culture: An Anthology*.<sup>30</sup> Otherwise a rich source of information, the anthology makes its low estimation of art's role clear in its meagre 37 page section, in comparison to the generous 51 pages afforded to "Part Two: Philosophy, Science, and Religion," and 85 afforded to fiction in Part Three.<sup>31</sup> While it is not surprising that the anthology should focus on literature due to language's semiotic nature, the paucity of space offered to other art forms suggests these operate completely within their own orbits, if not a vacuum, and neglects the role of the arts in shaping cultural identity.

Schulze-Vellinghausen's "The Situation in German Painting since 1945," which appeared in Paul Schallück's *Germany: Cultural Developments since 1945*,<sup>32</sup> published in 1971, does,

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<sup>28</sup> Grasskamp, Walter. "The First Documenta, The Time of Return." In *Histories in Conflict: Haus der Kunst and the Ideological Uses of Art, 1937-1955*. Pp 215-235.

<sup>29</sup> Weiner, Andrew S. "Memory under Reconstruction: Politics and Event in "Wirtschaftswunder" West Germany". *Grey Room*, No 37, Fall 2009, pp 94 - 124.

<sup>30</sup> McClelland, Charles E, Ed, Steven P Sher, Ed. *Postwar German Culture: An Anthology*. New York, E.P. Dutton & Co, Inc, 1974.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p Table of Contents.

<sup>32</sup> Schulze-Vellinghausen, Albert. "The Situation in German Painting since 1945." In *Germany: Cultural Developments since 1945*. Edited by Paul Schallück, München, Hueber Press, pp 135 - 141.



however offer interesting insights into how even those publications focusing on art saw visual art as a pale copy of its prewar counterparts. Indeed, the only contemporary painters Schulze-Vellinghausen deigns to acknowledge are those that will come to be used in heavy rotation in art discourse, Fritz Winter (1905-1976), Anselm Kiefer (1945-), and Gerhard Richter (1932-). Writing in 1951, Bernard Myers' "Postwar Art in Germany," focuses on the problem of occupation and prewar art trends such as New Objectivity and groups such as *Die Brücke*.<sup>33</sup> Joining him is Alfred Werner's 1957, "The Miracle of Postwar German Art", who only mentions Fritz Winter in discussing any contemporary German artists. While Hans Jaenisch receives a brief mention, the vast majority of Werner's article is devoted to prewar traditions, often stretching as far back as Kaiser Wilhelm II<sup>34</sup>.

Artists such as Anselm Kiefer (1945 - ) and Fritz Winter (1905-1976) continue to dominate in English scholarship and art criticism. Writing about postwar German art in 1983, Grace Glueck described the dominant trend as "Neo-Expressionism", and is dismissive in describing the work of other contemporary artists as "...not innovative or resonant enough to create a major movement," though, "...they have certainly arrived on the international scene as artists of power and originality."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Myers, Bernard. "Postwar Art in Germany." *College Art Journal*, vol 10, No. 3, Spring 1951, pp. 251-256+260.

<sup>34</sup> Werner, Alfred. "The Miracle of Postwar German Art." *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 17 No. 3, 1957. Autumn, 1957, pp. 366-373

<sup>35</sup> Glueck, Grace. "Art: German Painters from Postwar Period." *New York Times*, 7 October, 1983, p 22.

Additionally in the 1980s, Germanists Jost Hermand and Bidy Martin's article, "Modernism Restored: West German Painting in the 1950s," (1984) make their view unambiguously clear in their enthusiastic reception of the work of these specific artists<sup>36</sup>, as does Eric L. Santner in the 1992 article "The Trouble with Hitler: Postwar German Aesthetics and the Legacy of Fascism".<sup>37</sup> Delving into the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), read at the 1987 exhibition of Kiefer's work, Santner circles back to the problematic nature of Hölderlin's so called "*vaterländische Umkehr*" used to describe Kiefer's work to deftly underline the caution and care are needed when lauding German art. While Santner offers some very enlightening thoughts, their scope can cause them to lose their connection, emphasising breadth rather than depth.

The unequivocal praise of Kiefer and Richter lingers in the work of Heather Matthews and Mia Lee from 2006 and 2014, respectively. While both Mia Lee and Heather Matthews challenge this unequivocal view to some degree, as seen in Matthews' 2006 thesis, *Making Histories: The Exhibition of Postwar Art and the Interpretation of the Past in Divided Germany, 1950-1959*,<sup>38</sup> and in Lee's 2014 article, "The Return of the Avant-garde in Postwar West Germany,"<sup>39</sup> both ultimately frame German art from 1945 - 1955 as being stuck in the past, as

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<sup>36</sup> Hermand, Jost and Bidy Martin. "Modernism Restored: West German Painting in the 1950s." *New German Critique*, Spring-Summer, No. 32, 1984, pp 33-41.

<sup>37</sup> Santner, Eric L. "The Trouble with Hitler: Postwar German Aesthetics and the Legacy of Fascism." *New German Critique*, No. 57, Autumn, 1992, pp. 5-24.

<sup>38</sup> Matthews, Heather Elizabeth. *Making Histories: The Exhibition of Postwar Art and the Interpretation of the Past in Divided Germany, 1950-1959*. Thesis. University of Texas at Austin, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Lee, Mia. "The Return of the Avant-garde in Postwar West Germany." *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, September, 2014, pp 405-415.

opposed to the future-seeking endeavours of the three artists mentioned. However, both Matthews and Lee's works complicate this by seeing the art as a result of contemporary diplomatic policy. Matthews, in particular, traces the ideological complications the Museum of Modern Art faced in daring to support German art during the 1950s, an act which was fraught with political consequences because of the Third Reich.

An additional lens is added by scholarship focusing on the influence of Cold War politics in art. Seeking to marry both intellectual and Cold War history, Paul Bett's "The Bauhaus as Cold-War Legend: West German Modernism Revisited" from 1996 examines how the Bauhaus was seen during the Cold War, and how views of the Bauhaus reflect a longing of West Germans to resurrect a relatively politically progressive aesthetic movement as a statement about its cultural history.<sup>40</sup> Another scholar focusing on the Cold War is political scientist Cora Goldstein. Having published three works from 2003 to 2009, "The Control of Visual Representation: American Art Policy in Occupied Germany, 1945 - 1949" (2003),<sup>41</sup> "Before the CIA: American Actions in the German Fine Arts" (2005),<sup>42</sup> and *Capturing the German Eye: American Visual Propaganda in Occupied Germany* (2009),<sup>43</sup> Goldstein shows varying degrees of interaction between the Allied occupational governments and aesthetics. In her 2003 article, in particular,

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<sup>40</sup> Betts, Paul. "The Bauhaus as Cold-War Legend: West German Modernism Revisited". *German Politics & Society*. Vol 14, No 2, (39), Summer 1996, pp 75-100.

<sup>41</sup> Goldstein, Cora. "The Control of Visual Representation: American Art Policy in Occupied Germany, 1945 - 1949." *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 18, No, 2, 2003, pp 283-299.

<sup>42</sup> Goldstein, Cora. "Before the CIA: American Actions in the German Fine Arts." *Diplomatic History*, Vol.29, No.5, 2005, pp 747-778.

<sup>43</sup> Goldstein, Cora. *Capturing the German Eye: American Visual Propaganda in Occupied Germany*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009.

Goldstein emphasising the lack of interest and initiative taken on the part of the US occupying government to orchestrate an organised direction for the visual arts.

Following Goldstein is Andreas Huyssen's simply titled "German Painting in the Cold War" from 2010, in which Huyssen carefully draws an analogy between Theodor Adorno's return to West Germany and Homer's *The Odyssey*. Huyssen's mention, in the same paragraph, of "violence" and "sacrifice" certainly retain their epic tone throughout the article, which is perhaps a bit hyperbolic to be taken as objectively as it could be.<sup>44</sup>

Standing out amidst the Cold War lens is Stephanie Barron's massive *Art of Two Germanys - Cold War Cultures* from 2009<sup>45</sup> seeks to not only use the Cold War as a visual metaphor through the layout of the book, but also attempts to consider the aesthetic debates which formed part of the nascent states, and reflect how both the ethos of the state and aesthetics shaped the lives of its citizens. Visually impressive, and scholastically strong, Barron's work is comprehensive, even if the phantom of the Cold War continues to linger throughout the book. In contrast to Gordon Johnston's 2010 article, "Revisiting the Cultural Cold War", which focuses mostly on the Allied political interests expressed in visual aesthetic form,<sup>46</sup> Barron's examination of uniquely German concerns helps lay the groundwork both through its visual use of lesser

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<sup>44</sup> Huyssen, Andreas. "German Painting in the Cold War." *New German Critique* 110, Vol 37, No 2, Summer 2010, pp 209-227.

<sup>45</sup> Barron, Stephanie. *Art of Two Germanys - Cold War Cultures*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg; Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Johnston, Gordon. "Revisiting the Cultural Cold War." *Social History*. Vol 35, No 3, August 2010, pp 290-307.

known works, and through its division by era, with the 1945-1949 period receiving particular attention.<sup>47</sup>

The appeal of seeing the arts as part of a larger Cold War ideology is easily recognisable as a fairly accessible means of understanding art during this time. Certainly, the division of Germany into four zones had a significant effect on the artists in each zone. In his book from 2007, *Fault Lines: Art in Germany, 1945 - 1955*, John-Paul Stonard makes liberal use of this perspective in his exploration of how each of the British, French, and American zones encouraged West Germans to see modern art through the examples of their own national contemporary canon.<sup>48</sup> Stonard echoes Goldstein, however, in stating that American occupying forces showed little interest in promoting visual art, at least in comparison to the British and French zones, who quickly set their own canons as examples for West Germans to follow.

Ultimately the Cold War perspective, however, emphasises larger political forces at the expense of German painters and members of the art establishment themselves, supporting a view of the actual artists as lacking agency or discourse. The view that art policy arises only from the occupying forces disregards the reality of how the artists, critics, historians, among others saw their art and its potential contribution to a postwar world. As Barron's book demonstrates both East and West Germany had lively discussions about the nature and role of aesthetic

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<sup>47</sup> Barron, Stephanie. *Art of Two Germanys - Cold War Cultures*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg; Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2009, p 15-16.

<sup>48</sup> Stonard, John-Paul. *Fault Lines: Art in Germany, 1945 - 1955*. London, Ridinghouse; Manchester: Distributed by Cornerhouse, 2007.

representation as a whole, indicating that such representation continued to play an integral role in the concept of cultural identity construction.

Of the available works in English, several stand out as substantially discussing the existential value of aesthetic questions as part of existential discussions, beginning with the aforementioned *Fault/Lines* from 2007. While his phrasing can be slightly condescending,<sup>49</sup> John-Paul Stonard's book does go beyond its Cold War discussion into German policies and a variety of exhibitions and debates. Stonard's somewhat cynical tone is in stark contrast to the surprisingly deep examination of art criticism by Czech art critic and historian Joseph Paul Hodin (1905-1995).<sup>50</sup> In "German Criticism of Modern Art since the War"<sup>51</sup> from 1958, and "Art and Criticism: On the Problems of Living Art Criticism" from 1955,<sup>52</sup> Hodin points the reader to contemporary remarks on aesthetics from such philosophers as Karl Jaspers, from whom we will hear more below, and in the latter tackles the problem of guilt and the potential for resolution, a concept those in the art establishment would also consider.

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<sup>49</sup> Stonard, John-Paul. *Fault Lines: Art in Germany, 1945 - 1955*. London, Ridinghouse; Manchester: Distributed by Cornerhouse, 2007, p 141.

<sup>50</sup> Lazar, Alexandra. "J.P. Hodin: A Bridge Between Europe and Britain." [alexandalazar.com](https://alexandalazar.com/art-archive/j-p-hodin-a-bridge-between-europe-and-britain-2/) <https://alexandalazar.com/art-archive/j-p-hodin-a-bridge-between-europe-and-britain-2/> Accessed: 19 April, 2023.

Sorensen, Lee. "J.P. Hodin." *Dictionary of Art Historians*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20120616073842/http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/hodinjp.htm> Accessed 19 April, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Hodin, J.P. "German Criticism of Modern Art since the War." *College Art Journal*. Vol 17, No 4, (Summer, 1958), pp 372-381.

<sup>52</sup> Hodin, J.P. "Art and Criticism: On the Problems of Living Art Criticism". *College Art Journal*. Vol 15, No 1, Autumn 1955, pp 18-33.

Of all the English language scholarship, no single scholarly work comes so close to considering these more formalist debates as part of that wider social consciousness and cultural identity as strongly as Yule Heibel's 1995 book, *Reconstructing the Subject*.<sup>53</sup> Widely cited, Heibel's work stands out in its recognition of this time period as pivotal in cultural construction. The one problem of Heibel's text is his single use of Nay's portrait as a blueprint for the entirety of visual art. It is thus difficult to imagine Nay's work as part of a larger context of questioning artists.

Heibel's work stands next to the exhibition catalogue of the Busch-Reisinger Harvard Art Museum's 2018 art exhibition, *Inventur*, as representative of a larger social, intellectual, and aesthetic project. Compiled by curators Lynette Roth and Ilke Voermann, the art exhibition named after Günter Eich's 1945 poem was an expansive effort, offering a rich view of the multiplicity of formal theories from 1943-1955.<sup>54</sup> Fully appreciating how aesthetic theories met larger social and intellectual needs in this era, the massive exhibition catalogue and Heibel's text are, together, an excellent foundation for the topic of this thesis.

While English-language scholarship places heavy emphasis on the Cold War aspects, Nikola Doll's edited volume *Kunst nach 1945: Kontinuität und Neubeginn*,<sup>55</sup> for example, leans heavily into the West-German-French aesthetic relationship, while Klaus Herding's

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<sup>53</sup> Heibel, Yule. *Reconstructing the Subject*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995.

<sup>54</sup> Harvard Art Museums. *Inventur: Art in Germany, 1943-1955*. Lynette Roth. Cambridge, MA. 2018. Exhibition Catalogue.

<sup>55</sup> Doll, Nikola. *Kunstgeschichte Nach 1945: Kontinuität und Neubeginn*. Köln, Böhlau Verlag, 2006.

“Humanismus und Primitivismus: Probleme früher Nachkriegskunst in Deutschland”<sup>56</sup> focuses more on sculpture. Finally, and most pivotally, Dorothea Schöne’s *Freie Künstler in einer freien Staat: Die amerikanische Förderung der Berliner Nachkriegsmoderne*<sup>57</sup> from 2016 provides an excellent picture of the American support, including financial, political, and administrative, for the arts.

The present study attempts to examine West German art from 1945-1950 on its own terms, situating it as a period of liminality and ambivalence.

### **III. City and Psyche: Redemptive Reconstruction as Imagined Community**

Despite efforts on the part of the RAF, a change of tactics in the Allied bombing campaign was needed in order to present Germany with a more decisive opposition. While the bombing campaigns of Berlin, Lübeck, and Bremen in 1940 did some damage, their result was largely superficial and did not demonstrably alter Germany’s position. It was not until both the change in policy brought about by Archer Harris and the incorporation of the USAAF in February, 1942, that damage sustained by Germany changed dramatically. Three months later the so called Thousand Bomber Raid dropped 1,455 tons of bombs on Cologne overnight on the 30-31 May,<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Herding, Klaus. “Humanismus und Primitivismus: Probleme früher Nachkriegskunst in Deutschland”. *Jahrbuch des Zentralinstituts für Kunstgeschichte* Vol 4, 1988, pp 281-311.

<sup>57</sup> Schöne, Dorothea. *Freie Künstler in einer freien Staat: Die amerikanische Förderung der Berliner Nachkriegsmoderne*. De Gruyter, Berlin, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Clapson, Mark. *The Blitz Companion: Aerial Warfare, Civilians and the City since 1911*, London, University of Warminster Press, 2019, Ch 2, “European Cities under the Bomb: Nazi and Allied Bombing Campaigns, 1939-45.”



resulting in damages to 3,300 buildings and in 19.2% - 21.4 % of the population fleeing. In Würzburg an estimated 89% of built-up areas were destroyed, with 83% in cities such as Remscheid and Bochum.<sup>59</sup> Also significant was the damage sustained in Hamburg, where 79.5% of housing was damaged, with an estimated 49.2% destroyed.<sup>60</sup> Subsequent raids in 1943 on Duisburg, Stuttgart, Dusseldorf, Aachen, Munster, Munich, Krefeld, Essen, Dortmund, Wuppertal, and Nuremberg, and Frankfurt am Main,<sup>61</sup> left behind 11.7 million cubic tonnes of rubble, with 23.5 cubic metres in Nuremberg, 22.4 in Essen, and 30.9 in Dortmund.<sup>62</sup>

Evacuations, such as Louise Rösler's from Berling to Königstein im Taunus in 1943, were far from uncommon. Indeed, Elizabeth Heineman's chapter, "The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany's 'Crisis Years' and West German National Identity" points out that the raid on Hamburg in the summer of 1943 left 750,000 people homeless,<sup>63</sup> and estimates the total number of evacuees from German cities during this period at ten million. Rösler's evacuation was thus quite typical of the experience of women at the time, especially those with small children.

Yet, reciting the statistics of damages is inadequate to describe the situation in which both East and West Germany now found themselves. Although the physical rubble was cleared away

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<sup>59</sup> Diefendorf, Jeffery. *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities After World War II*. New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 11.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p 11.

<sup>61</sup> Clapson, Mark. *The Blitz Companion: Aerial Warfare, Civilians and the City since 1911*, London, University of Warminster Press, 2019, Ch 2, "The RAF Bombing Campaigns against German Cities."

<sup>62</sup> Diefendorf, Jeffery. *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities After World War II*. New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 15.

<sup>63</sup> Heineman, Elizabeth. "The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany's 'Crisis Years' and West German National Identity". In *Schissler, Hannah. The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p 26.

fairly quickly in some cases (cities such as Hamburg were able to restore 80% of their industrial function within five months),<sup>64</sup> the psychological effects of the destruction of the cities remained. As late as 1949, a social work journal reported, “Ruins are a general phenomenon. Just as concretely as they lie on the street corners, so are they present inside the people”.<sup>65</sup> Even this anecdotal evidence suggests that beyond the physical destruction lay a greater sense of loss and estrangement connected to the function of urban space as a sign of industrial achievement, one deeply connected to the construction of German identity as a whole.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines nationalism as a dynamic growing out of a finite number of individuals and extending further to an imagined, unknowable number of people.<sup>66</sup> The community is thus large enough to encompass imaginary aspects which are physically impossible for an individual to know, and the reality of the finitude which defines the “community” as a unique or specific group. This combination of knowable reality and unknowable abstraction is one fundamental aspect of marking a group as large enough to bear ideas projected onto it, and small enough to retain specificity, and dovetails nicely into the views of Peter Blickle’s understanding of *Heimat* as a concept deeply embedded in physical space, yet also containing abstract or theoretical aspects. Blickle tellingly, however, uses the term “spiritual” to discuss the emotional and psychological connection existing between the concept

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<sup>64</sup> Diefendorf, Jeffery. *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities After World War II*. New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 19.

<sup>65</sup> “Eheberatungsstelle in Hannover,” *Neues Beginnen* 4,1 March, 1949, p 3. In Heineman, Elizabeth. “The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany’s ‘Crisis Years’ and West German National Identity”. In Schissler, Hannah. *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p 35.

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London, Verso, 2016, pp 5-7.

of physical space and identity construction.<sup>67</sup> In Blickle's analysis, space is "based on a spatial conception of identity,"<sup>68</sup> which is reinforced through the imagination. Such a view emphasises the intensely discomfiting feeling of alienation through the removal or loss of a physical space. In particular, Blickle singles out Kant's understanding of space as a mental ordering of phenomena, imbuing space with both physical and psychological attributes.<sup>69</sup>

Blickle's analysis offers an intriguing way in which to see the evolution of *Heimat* within an industrial society. Although he takes pains to emphasise *Heimat's* "regressive," utopian, or anti-modern tendencies, saying at one point that it is a "...toothless German critique of modern Western civilisation,"<sup>70</sup> taking the idea of an identity, a sense of self linked deeply to, and being constituted in relationship to, one's physical space changes the reading of the imagined community of nationalism emerging at the end of the nineteenth century to one in which the identity of the individual is bound up with the physical reality of the city. As the nineteenth century progressed, and the change from an agrarian to an urban population took place, accompanied by a growing cohesion into a nation in 1871, the locus of identity construction would therefore fall upon the city instead of the country, a move for which cities such as Berlin were uniquely suited.

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<sup>67</sup> Blickle, Peter. *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002, p 7.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p 15.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p 16.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p 20.

The use of physical space for both individual and national purposes has been covered by historian Eric Hobsbawm in his article “The Nation as Invented Tradition.”<sup>71</sup> Writing about the emergence of the Second Reich in the late nineteenth century, Hobsbawm discusses how monuments came to symbolise not only Prussia’s stature as the seat of authority in the nation, but also were used to codify an invented history. While emphasising its militaristic bent, Hobsbawm goes into detail about the new Reichstag building (1884-94), emphasising the use of oak leaves and the historical depictions on its façade.<sup>72</sup> Hobsbawm further reports on the large-scale processions carried out by Gymnasium students during the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Franco-Prussian War. Describing their procession throughout different points of the city, culminating in the planting of an oak tree.<sup>73</sup>

These ceremonies and processions utilising the city thus, far from evincing an idea antithetical to *Heimat*, emphasise how the modern, urban city came to embody the “invented tradition” of which Hobsbawm speaks. The city thus becomes not an antagonist to *Heimat*, but becomes an additional site of identity for a modern, urban, industrialised identity.

If the rise and development of the urban space became synonymous with the new, modernist identity, its total destruction in the 1940s meant far more than mere buildings. The metaphor of rubble being “inside the people as well” implies a far greater destruction than an urban legend; it signals that the very coherence which the city symbolised, the achievement and perhaps even the victory over an agrarian *Heimat*, was destroyed as well. Indeed, this is evident

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<sup>71</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric. “The Nation as Invented Tradition.” In *Nationalism*. Edited by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p 80.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p 81-2.

also in the visual art of the period, which took inspiration, as Rösler did, from the ambient destruction seen around them. Works such as Wilhelm Rudolph's woodblock series *Das Zerstörte Dresden (1945-6)*<sup>74</sup> (Figs 5-7) and Erwin Spuler's *Zerbombte Häuser (1945)*<sup>75</sup> (Fig 6), attest to the proliferation and deep psychological meaning of the destruction.

The near total destruction of this physical embodiment of culture, civilisation, and progress threatened the utopian possibilities of a previously constructed identity, engendering both anxiety and ambivalence about the meaning of these cities. Claudia Mesch, in her article tracing the dé-collage performance works of Wolf Vostell calls the postwar city a “mnemotechnic space,”<sup>76</sup> a physical place which served as the locus for the process of urban reconstruction as analogous to identity reconstruction. She describes the indecision of this time “the simultaneous desires for salvage of historical structures of the city but also for reinstating the tabula rasa of modernisation and progress....”<sup>77</sup> As Andrew Demshuk points out in his definition of “redemptive construction”, the possibility of rebuilding, whether that meant wholeheartedly going ultra-modern, staunch preservation, or some mixture of the two (for no city could afford to do either wholly, as Diefendorf points out),<sup>78</sup> had meanings well beyond merely erecting living

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<sup>74</sup> Rudolph, Wilhelm. *Zerstörtes Dresden*. 1945-1946. Pen and ink on paper. Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

<sup>75</sup> Spuler, Erwin. *Zerbombte Häuser*. 1946/1948. Oil on Plywood. Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Germany.

<sup>76</sup> Mesch, Claudia. “Vostell’s Ruins: de-Collage and the Mnemotechnic Space of the Postwar City.” *Art History*, Vol. 23 No. 1, 2000, pp. 88-115.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p 88.

<sup>78</sup> Diefendorf, Jeffery. *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities After World War II*. New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 43.

spaces. Modernist architects attached to implementing prewar architectural styles, as well as those wanting a completely contemporary or postmodern design in line with other urban centres all had ideological struggles which were reflected in the care of new physical space.

This conflict between the desire for the reassuring Kantian teleology of imminent progress which the city embodied on the one hand, and a desire for a totally new reconstruction was mediated on a large-scale societal level by the emergence of the *Trümmerfrau*. As part of a statistical reality, the *Trümmerfrau* hauled the rubble away, but the reality behind this figure is far from its ideal image. Both Heineman and Diefendorf point out the reality of clearing away the rubble as hard, repetitive labour.<sup>79</sup> Heineman in particular points out the disparity between the hyperbolic praise bestowed on the *Trümmerfrau*, even as her work did nothing to advance women either socially or economically in more prosperous times to come<sup>80</sup>. Initially only chosen if directly tied to National Socialist organisations, it was mostly circumstance which made this women's work. With 17 women to every 10 men between 25-30,<sup>81</sup> this image is partially driven by simple postwar demographics. But the disparity between the positive image and the reality did not end there. As Heineman points out, the figure of the *Trümmerfrau* is that of a woman who seems to come to existence, clean up the rubble, only to slip quietly into the urban scenery thereafter. She has, as Heineman says, no past, no complications, and no future. Her ubiquity and almost iconic status, is predicated on her having neither identity nor agency, no past or future

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p 22-23.

<sup>80</sup> Heineman, Elizabeth. "The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany's 'Crisis Years' and West German National Identity". In *Schissler, Hannah. The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p 37.

<sup>81</sup> Grebing, Helge, Peter Pozorski, Rainer Schulze. *Die Nachkriegsentwicklung in West-Deutschland: 1945-1949*, vol. 1, *Die wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen*. Stuttgart, JB Metzler, 1980, p 19.

with which to complicate matters.<sup>82</sup> This oversimplification hints at a larger problem within the German, particularly the West German, public to quickly remove the real pasts and agency of its citizens as quickly as it removed the 400 million cubic meters of rubble.<sup>83</sup>

Despite her symbolic role as purifier of the urban landscape, West Germany was plagued by an inability to either fully reinstate the past or to fully embrace the future. As the work of both Diefendorf and Andrew Demshuk show, reconstruction efforts involved ideological confrontations about how to organise public / national space. As Demshuk points out, places which held national significance were frequently restored,<sup>84</sup> but this constant ambivalence between modernist/industrial past and the adoption of completely new parameter frequently came with a host of realistic problems and complications, as described by Diefendorf. Rather, many of these decisions were made with some practical aspects in mind, such as how badly damaged, or how recently these buildings had been built in the first place.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, reconstruction was not only based on practical or logistical terms.

From the figure of the Trümmerfrau to the offices of urban planners, reconstruction proved to be not only a reestablishment of buildings, but had metaphorical aspects as well. Prewar concepts of urban organisation and its double meaning as the embodiment of nationality

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<sup>82</sup> Heineman, Elizabeth. "The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany's 'Crisis Years' and West German National Identity". In *Schissler, Hannah. The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p 34.

<sup>83</sup> Mombauer, Annika. "Trümmerfrauen: contested memories of Germany's 'rubble women'". *Medium*. Open Learn, 10 December, 2017. <https://openlearn.medium.com/trümmerfrauen-contested-memories-of-germanys-rubble-women-d258fa92ba6>. Accessed: 10 April, 2023.

<sup>84</sup> Demshuk, Andrew. *Three Cities After Hitler: Redemptive Construction Across Cold War Borders*. Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh University Press, p 54.

<sup>85</sup> Diefendorf, Jeffrey. *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities after World War II*. New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 43.

prized so highly by modernism were weighed against the desire for a completely new conception of the city and, by extension, national identity.

For many, the city had embodied the teleology of progress which had been part of the grand récit of Western civilisation for about two hundred years. Its mnemotechnic corporeality had been shaped and moulded through a succession of movements, intellectual currents, and technological change which had dramatically altered the political, social, and economic landscape, beginning in the 19th century. Indeed, by 1945 the city had supplanted the countryside as the locus of social and individual identity. Initially supporting an anti-modernist, staunchly agrarian dynamic in which the self possessed an organic relationship to their immediate location, *Heimat* slowly shifted to the urban space, in which the imagined, nationalist community could be perceived, if not immediately seen, through the monuments and buildings which recorded an invented tradition and history. By the time Germany unified under Prussian hegemony in 1871, the transformation was complete. With its large-scale processions, which linked the body of the individual to the projected history of the city, and the representation of history on the façades of national buildings, the city came to link the individual to a larger whole through its architecture. As will become clear, this potency of the image reflected back to the individual to form a relationship, both physically real and intellectually captivating.

The embodiment of the city as *Heimat* made its destruction between 1940 and 1945 seem more than just the erasure of a building. Rather, it shook, if not shattered, the faith in the Kantian teleology of progress which the city had come to embody. Within the questions about reconstruction of identity, whether through architecture, visual art, or pure ontological thought, the collapse of the National Socialist regime and the city with which that Kantian dream had



ended, put the entire concept about the possibility of humanity evolving into a moral society, in which justice would be universally applied, into question. As West Germany sought to reestablish a collective identity, the figure of Kant as the philosopher who had proposed such a view of politically and socially applied harmony continued to overshadow ontological debates about West Germany's future.

#### **IV. Questioning Kant: Postwar Intellectual Life**

##### **Destruction of the Enlightenment Dream: German Philosophy Mid-Century**

The destruction of collective identity as seen through the architecture of urban space, caused a crisis of individual subject-hood. With *Heimat* being the intellectual or psychological culmination of the individual's interaction with space, through their location, and time, through the histories presented to them within that space, the progressive nature of that identity came into question in the immediate aftermath of the war. Two works in particular, one by philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and the other by Karl Jaspers, demonstrate how the reality of National Socialism initiated larger questions about the possibility of human progress.

Published first in 1944, and again in 1947, *Dialectic of Enlightenment (Dialektik der Aufklärung)* bitterly critiqued the unequivocal faith in the Enlightenment movement to inspire human change. Adorno and Horkheimer do not wade in slowly, either. From the start, they utilise some potent metaphorical language to describe both the promise and the reality of the enlightenment and its teleology. Opening with a description of Enlightenment as a movement in

which, "...advance of thought...aimed at liberating human beings from fear..."<sup>86</sup> and comparing it to their contemporary state, as being "redolent with human calamity,"<sup>87</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer go on to end this description of enlightenment's "corrosive rationality..."<sup>88</sup> as rendering the movement ultimately "totalitarian."

Throughout the text, Adorno and Horkheimer mostly critique enlightenment's excessive reliance on human reason, which is how they see the path from a supposedly liberating movement to one of totalitarianism, as well as what they see as its founding myth, which they describe as the human's attempt to enforce itself upon nature.

Although Adorno and Horkheimer critique the entire Enlightenment project here, the liberating-to-totalitarian path is most memorably personified in the works of Immanuel Kant (1724- 1804), whose *Idea for Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* of 1784 best personifies the Enlightenment social / civic philosophy which Adorno and Horkheimer critique here.<sup>89</sup> In this work Kant traces the interactions of the individual within their social sphere, a dynamic which he begins by asserting that, without mentioning in the text any contradictions, "All the natural capacities of a creature are destined sooner or later to be developed completely and in conformity with their end."<sup>90</sup> From the beginning, thus, Kant predicts a resolution between the individual and their world, a proposition which ignores the various socio-economic

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<sup>86</sup> Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p 1.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p 4.

<sup>89</sup> Kant, Immanuel. "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose." In *KANT: Political Writings*. Edited by Hans Reiss, Trans. HB Nisbet. Cambridge, England, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp 41-53

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p 42.

circumstances on which Adorno, Horkheimer, and the Frankfurt School more broadly focus. But it is this assumption on Kant's part of resolution, that eventually, the individual will fit into their society, which emphasises the confidence in the end quite literally at the beginning, which characterises the mentality of the Enlightenment project. For Kant, further trial of reason is supplied by the society existing outside the individual. Through social interaction, the individual can shape and refine their reason in such a way which will lend itself to progressively more productive thinking.<sup>91</sup> For Adorno, while reason certainly produces thoughts, the nature of these thoughts is by no means certain. Defining reason in "Juliette, or Enlightenment and Morality," Adorno says that reason is "the organ of calculation, of planning."<sup>92</sup>

Speaking later in the text, he says of reason, "it (Reason) became a purposiveness without purpose, which for that very reason could be harnessed to any end."<sup>93</sup> The deification of reason and Kant's unwavering faith in its ability to progress appeals to a better self, a constantly ethical self in which no negative, cruel, or otherwise immoderate motives exist.

Kant's complete confidence the outcomes of the process of logic and reason never admit contradiction or complication. He ends his ideal society with the prediction that these developments will culminate not just into a society of those who can function together, but into a moral whole, in which "justice will be administered universally,"<sup>94</sup> to which Adorno and

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p 42.

<sup>92</sup> Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p 69.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Kant, Immanuel. "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose." In *KANT: Political Writings*. Edited by Hans Reiss, Trans. HB Nisbet. Cambridge, England, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp 41-53, p 45.

Horkheimer protest that the Enlightenment concept of justice, with its unyielding and mechanic nature, allows for no outside circumstances, which it cannot imagine.

The inability of Kant to imagine the cruelty with which “reason” could be put to use is directly mentioned in Karl Jaspers’ 1946 *Die Schuldfrage (The Question of German Guilt)*,<sup>95</sup> in which the author deals directly with the problem facing West Germany. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, Jaspers is not preoccupied with critiquing the Enlightenment in general as much as he is with the liminal state in which Germans, particularly West Germans, now found themselves. Written around the same time as the Nuremberg Trials, Kant’s sense of justice universally administered failed in the case of the Third Reich, which not only included circumstances of obvious, direct culpability, but also circumstances less directly contributing the vast number of lives lost. Speaking about the unique circumstances of the postwar era, Jaspers describes the problems of attempting to administer justice in the Kantian sense as impossible, saying, “Kant’s injunction, that nothing must happen in war which would make reconciliation impossible, was first rejected by Hitler Germany”.<sup>96</sup> The Enlightenment / Kantian schema, therefore, fails to apply to any of these circumstances, and Jaspers spends most of the text rebutting and engaging with his own arguments. Splitting the concept of German guilt into four categories, Criminal Guilt, Political Guilt, Moral Guilt, and Metaphysical Guilt,<sup>97</sup> Jaspers lingers over metaphysical guilt, in which he says that all humans are somewhat responsible for one another, and thus must share in some of the guilt of the Third Reich and its actions.

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<sup>95</sup> Jaspers, Karl. *Die Schuldfrage: Von der Politischen Haftung Deutschlands*. Munich, Piper Verlag, GmbH, 2012.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p 47.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p 31.

Jaspers' text is an intriguing one, both for its frankness in confronting the realities of how National Socialism has permanently changed West Germany, but also in its stated search for "Purification" (*Reinigung*) from such guilt. In this chapter, he lays a number of different ways in which Germans can accept their guilt and work toward rebuilding a new identity, which include rejecting the collective thinking by which the National Socialist regime subsumed the individual for the sake of the larger collective. In this chapter, Jaspers states:

"Auch hier müssen wir gegen das Kollektivdenken als ein Denken in Fiktionen uns wenden. Alle wirkliche Verwandlung geschieht durch einzelne, im Einzelnen, in zahlreichen Einzeln, unabhängig voneinander oder in bewegendem Austausch."<sup>98</sup>

This rejection of collectivity runs counter to the Kantian ideal in which the individual is perfected, or whose progress is at least supported, by the supposed morality of their fellow citizens or community members. Here, Jaspers' says that in order to avoid a resurgence of National Socialism, we must be able and willing to reject the extreme amount of collective thought. Indeed, National Socialism thrived through this consumption of the individual into the collective, and as we shall see relied upon a strong visual and physical element through which the individual completely identified with the collective. These visual and performative connections were reinforced by the racialised policies, which were also heavily supported with visual imagery (for example, Fig 9).<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Jaspers, Karl. *Die Schuldfrage: Von der Politischen Haftung Deutschlands*. Munich, Piper Verlag, GmbH, 2012, p 88.

<sup>99</sup> A plate from Alfred Vogel's text "Erblehre und Rassenkunde in bildlicher Darstellung". 1938. National Holocaust Museum.

For Jaspers, it is this ideology of complete sacrifice of the individual into the collective which is the backbone of National Socialist ideology. This implies that Jaspers' view, at least at the time, was that in order to maintain Kant's understanding that society and the individual would refine reason and thus society, and for reason to truly fulfil its potential, a distance must be maintained between the I as embodied social subject and the larger whole,<sup>100</sup> a significant step away from Kant, who believed that interaction with society would ultimately refine individual thinking.

Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Jaspers states that the problems facing Germany today, more specifically West Germany but neither philosopher makes any distinction between the two countries, are not problems for which we can use any previous models. Because the depths of cruelty and ethical transgressions National Socialism are unique and already violate all of Enlightenment's, and especially Kant's, assumptions about how and to which lengths reason would be applied, a new model would have to be found, both for collective and individual identity construction, in order to construct a world in which National Socialism could not reoccur. The nature and consideration of this individual, however, was not only considered in terms of German guilt, or even purely philosophical, ontological terms, but found some of its most fertile ground for discussion in the field of visual arts.

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<sup>100</sup> Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p 103.

## Visualisation of Identity: The Aesthetic Experience and *das Menschenbild*

Adorno reserved his harshest critiques in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for the culture industry. Throughout the book, his critique of Kant included the socio-economic realities which the Industrial Revolution had brought about. Within this text, however, he was particularly harsh. Although primarily aimed at the entertainment industry, or mass culture, Adorno's critique rings true in the field of formal or "high" art, as well.<sup>101</sup> At different points in the book, Adorno and Horkheimer take issue with the introduction of capitalism and socio-economic constraints upon art, saying at one point they force art to become "useful,"<sup>102</sup> by which he means art ceases to have a purely aesthetic purpose, and is instead only able to thrive if it can participate within the capitalist economy. Adorno and Horkheimer critique the aesthetic devaluation of art entailed by commodities with exchange value which shape needs and fail to provide a critical attitude toward the status quo.

Adorno and Horkheimer's tone, palpable in his piece on the culture industry, is one in which the author's attitude can easily be traced. For Adorno and Horkheimer, as for Kant, the need of art to be critical and to produce distance, is necessary in order to provide a critical vantage point and to form a truly free opinion. Similar to the reflection of justice, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasised that enlightened thought, critical thought, is necessary.

Adorno's Marxist critique of the Enlightenment, and the culture industry especially, display the focus on particular aspects of social life which was an integral part of the Frankfurt

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p 104.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 14.

School, which resumed its operations in West Germany postwar. The focus of the school on the examination of socio-economic conditions attests to a growing understanding about how particular aspects of social and civic life influence the social reality of the individual. While Marx's work obviously had existed since the mid-nineteenth century, Adorno's critique of the complete Enlightenment is significant in intellectual history. As we have seen, the enlightenment teleology and Kant's theories contained a teleology which Western civilisation had used as means of reassuring itself of progress. As Adorno criticises, reason, and particularly the Enlightenment version of a world in which the outcome is ultimately positive and universally applicable, left no challengers. As Adorno states, reason and its ability to be applied to a variety of ends, left nothing to question the means or the logic applied. Although not, as Hans Sedlmayr was, a theorist grounded in a particular religious tradition, Adorno nonetheless emphasises that reason alone cannot be relied upon to make universally beneficial decisions. As seen in the reality of National Socialism, reason can be abused and manipulated, which makes an opposition to it imperative if legitimate critical thinking is to be applied.

Equally concerned about the lack of what one might call "spirit" is the work of Joachim Ritter, and the philosophical school which arose around him in Münster postwar.<sup>103</sup> Influenced by Heidegger and Hegel, Ritter occupies an interesting, ambivalent place in philosophical thought, exemplifying as he does what is called a "progressive conservatism," which seeks to bridge appreciation for institutions while acknowledging the individual.<sup>104</sup> Like many at the time, Ritter saw the unchecked and unchallenged role of reason in Enlightenment thinking clearly not

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<sup>103</sup> Di Liberto, Nicolas E.. *Overcoming the Empty Years: the Role of Philosophy and the Humanities in West Germany after 1945*. Dissertation. University of Pennsylvania, 2009, p 309.

<sup>104</sup> Puhle, Hans Jürgen. "Conservatism in Modern German History." *Journal of Contemporary History*. Vol 13, No 4, A Century of Conservatism, Oct. 1978, pp 689-720.



to be the only answer to improving society. For Ritter, a secular set of ethics skirted dangerously close to the same mechanism of reason which had characterised the Enlightenment. Ritter, Adorno, and Jaspers all criticised the Enlightenment for having deified reason, but also the heavy reliance on reason alone, all the while assuming a positive outcome.

Jaspers', Ritter's, and Adorno and Horkheimer's critiques of Enlightenment are most visible in their understandings of subjectivity in the visual arts. Ritter's views on subjectivity, while they can be traced in his lectures throughout the 1940s, can be seen most clearly in his essay of 1963, *Landschaft. Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft*,<sup>105</sup> Ritter states that the aesthetic experience of the landscape is the most grounded in the ideal. For Ritter, the aesthetic experience provides an outlet within an otherwise mechanised world. Within the pictorial world of the landscape, the individual can transcend their physical world into an intellectual, psychological space, in a process Ritter calls compensation.<sup>106</sup> Through its extreme aestheticised state, the landscape compensates for the mechanisation otherwise present in the larger society.

With the aesthetic world compensating for an outside mechanised one, Ritter implies art has an almost escapist purpose, which is diametrically opposed to the critique offered by Horkheimer and Adorno, in which the aesthetic experience is only fulfilling a purpose if the subject reserves some distance for critical appraisal. These two contradictory views imply differing degrees to which subjectivity can resolve the distinction between the individual and society.

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<sup>105</sup> Ritter, Joachim. "Landschaft. Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft." Aschendorff, Münster, Westfalen, 1963, p 8.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p 15.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Die Schuldfrage*, Adorno and Horkheimer and Jaspers respectively seek to understand how the individual with society function together, or at the very least side by side. For Kant, the social subject was an individual whose reason led them to both act and be acted upon by their environment. As we have seen, the ideal society for Kant was one in which justice could be administered universally because the social subjects had agency and influence over their world through the exercise of their reason.

For both Jaspers and Adorno, the exercise of reason meant a distance and a limit to the identification of the individual with the larger collective. Although the philosophy of Joachim Ritter (1903-1974) is far more conservative than that of either Jaspers or Adorno, he avoids the construction of a utopia by saying that aesthetics offers the discontented citizen a way out. Together, Ritter, Adorno, and Jaspers offer some concepts integral to how immediate postwar West Germany saw the state of subjectivity, and how the individual ought to function successfully within their larger social world.

## **V. Aesthetics as Ethics: Figuration and Abstraction at the 1950 Darmstädter Gespräche**

### **Darmstadt and Postwar Culture**

The ontological grappling with the identity of the individual in the face of guilt led to an impressive array not only of philosophical schools, but also artistic achievement. In the immediate postwar period, Darmstadt emerges as a major centre of creativity, with the beginning of the Darmstadt summer music courses attracting a wave of new music. Indeed, in 1953 Austrian-British musicologist Hans Keller enthusiastically praised the resurgence of music

performed from 16 to 30 July of that year.<sup>107</sup> A few years later, in 1958, *Die Zeit* would report on a literary conference held in April of that year,<sup>108</sup> expressing optimism about the future of literary production. These examples imply that Darmstadt was a particularly fertile for aesthetic discussions within various disciplines, including the visual arts.

With its very own artists' secession group having been originally founded in 1919,<sup>109</sup> Darmstadt already boasted a modernist artist's colony from the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>110</sup> The city was thus a natural choice for Hans Gerhard Evers to host a conference to resolve growing tensions among artists and critics alike. Fuelled initially by Rösler's previous teacher and future president of the Deutscher Künstlerbund Karl Hofer's anxiety about the breakaway of abstract art, the Darmstädter Gespräche was a means through which the nature of subjectivity could be examined and could, in turn, contribute to a new sense of humanity. His arguments with art critic Will Grohmann (1887-1968) have been examined by John-Paul Stonard in his book, *Fault/Lines*,<sup>111</sup> but Evers' hope was that the conference could resolve the question of representation which abstract and figurative art seemed to pose. A lifelong supporter of modernism, Grohmann's support of contemporary art after the war was part of a growing consensus that art created before the war had been created in a paradigm which no longer fit a hoped-for, progressive future.

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<sup>107</sup> Keller, Hans. "New Music at Darmstadt." *The Musical Times*, Vol 94, No 1328, October 1953, p 476.

<sup>108</sup> Leonhardt, Rudolf Walther. "Darmstadt ist ein Gespräch Wert." *Die Zeit*. 3 April, 1958, p 1-4. <https://www.zeit.de/1958/14/darmstadt-ist-ein-gespraech-wert> Accessed 19 April, 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Plumley, Gavin. "Entartete Musik." *Entartete Musik*, <http://entartetemusik.blogspot.com/2012/09/the-darmstadt-secession.html> Accessed 19 April, 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Stonard, John-Paul. *Fault Lines: Art in Germany, 1945 - 1955*. London, Ridinghouse; Manchester: Distributed by Cornerhouse, 2007, p 141.

For those who attended the conference, visual art was not only part merely of a rarified environment, but was rather a significant factor in the construction of a social identity. As shown through the work of Anderson, Hobsbawm, and Blicke, along with Immanuel Kant, the ways in which the individual interacts with their immediate environment have a profound effect on how they construct their sense of being. This sense of the image, the outside modernist landscape, and the individual all being linked together in a collective experience was part of the construction of identity for well over one hundred years, as seen through the work of all four social theorists. By the time of the Darmstädter Gespräche in 1950, however, artists, art historians, and critics had a far darker sense of what had previously been a generally benign association.

Gathering together in mid-July of 1950, the gathering of art establishment professionals, alongside an exhibition of contemporary art mounted by the Darmstadt Secession, those participating had the recent abuse of the image of man (*das Menschenbild*) by the National Socialist regime squarely in mind. Between 1933 and 1945, National Socialist uses of the *Menschenbild* had been weaponised at the individual, social, and communal level to emphasise a theory in which the individual was consumed by the collective as part of the racialised ideology of the state. As we shall see, while some maintained at least a connection to this process as the ideal bond between individual and larger society, others found in this an abusive practice which needed to be completely eradicated through the use of abstraction as a means to completely reshape a world in which National Socialism could not recur. While this study does not focus exclusively on the previous regime, a brief understanding of the pervasive use of the individual's image and its relation to the larger collective is helpful for a general understanding of how this

bond was emphasised, and how its practice continued to hold a place in the ideologies of postwar West Germany.

### ***Menschenbild* in National Socialist Identity Construction**

While I cannot deal with all the dimensions of this far-reaching phenomenon here, Christopher Hutton, George Mosse, as well as Thomas Saunders, Claartje Wesselink all offer valuable insight into the use of *das Menschenbild* within National Socialism.<sup>112</sup> Not all of them shall be discussed here, but there are nonetheless some key remarks which are required in order to fully appreciate the depth to which visual representation had played, and why it was thus a topic of such heated and passionate debate.

As discussed, the Enlightenment, and especially Kant, had proposed a potential harmony between the individual and their social environment. While not a direct outgrowth of any one specific philosopher, the ideal of *Heimat*, as it arose during the early 19th century, deepened this harmonic ideal by proposing a link between the physical space of said individual, and projected ideals, a dynamic which evolved throughout the Industrial Revolution to also include urban, and not only rural spaces. The cohesion of nationalist thinking through the embodiment of history in

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<sup>112</sup> For example, see Hutton, Christopher. "Racial Ideology as Elite Discourse: Nordicism and the Visual in an Age of Mass Culture." *Social Semiotics*. Vol 1 27, No 3, 2017, pp 335-347, Mosse, George L. "Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations." *Journal of Contemporary History*. Vol. 31, No 2, Special Issue: The Aesthetics of Fascism Apr 1996, pp - 245-252, Saunders, Thomas. A "New Man": Fascism, Cinema, and Image Creation." *International Journal of Culture, Politics, and Society*. Vol 12, No 2 Winter 1998, pp 227-246, and Wesselink, Claartje. "On 'The New Man': The Interpretation and Function of a National Socialist Painting in the Past and Present." *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, Vol 60, No 2, 2012, pp. 144-165.

buildings, created a reflection of nationalism in which the individual and their social / civic space combined into a national narrative, as per Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson. National Socialism took this one step further, as they were wont to do, by further incorporating the individual and attempting to dissolve them into the collective, as the motive behind Karl Jaspers' critique of collective thinking shows. Both visually and performatively, the individual was subsumed into the collective, linking them on all three levels. Karl Toepfer and Susan Manning delve into this performative phenomenon in their books, which detail the mass dances which linked the physical body of the individual to their collective identity.<sup>113</sup> Incorporating the efforts of several modernist dancers, among them Mary Wigman, these physically imposing formations offered a model of collective identity, a kind of extreme version of Kantian resolution.

This connection between the individual and the collective was reflected visually, as well. Nina Lübbren discusses how Nazi culture utilised a sort of quasi-neoclassicism in order to depict the individual both as the heir to a Classical tradition,<sup>114</sup> still having prestige and moral authority in the West, but with a distinctly Germanic twist: these images depicted the nude male as the epitome of Germanic spirit. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the work of Arno Beker, Hitler's favourite sculptor. Although virtually any one of Beker's sculptures could be used, the example of his 1937 *Bereitschaft* (Fig 10)<sup>115</sup> serves our purposes here. Classically nude, yet

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<sup>113</sup> See Toepfer, Karl. *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1997, p 314-320, and Manning, Susan A. *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1993, p 170-202.

<sup>114</sup> Lübbren, Nina. "Authority and Ambiguity: Three Sculptors in National Socialist Germany." In *Art and Resistance in Germany*. Edited by Elizabeth Otto and Deborah Asher Barnstone. London, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018.

<sup>115</sup> Breker, Arno. *Bereitschaft*. 1937. Bronze. Formerly at the Zeppelinfeld, Nuremberg.

given a German title, Beker's male figure is both subsumed into the collective of his tradition, despite his solitary presence, and remains an individual reflection of the ideals of the regime.

The visual manner in which National Socialism bound the individual to the collective continued the emphasis on both aspects as part of an idea of identity construction brought up by the ideal of *Heimat*, and provided a crucial aspect of National Socialist ideology. The place, thus, of the *Menschenbild* was not considered to be only situated within a rarified segment of society. Rather, the pivotal role it played, both in art museums and as part of the physical performativity of collective identity, imbued the human figure with a potency it may have otherwise lacked. Through such an extreme level of orchestrated identity construction, National Socialist ideology placed the image of man front and centre, and dissolved him into a physical as well as visual collective.

### **Hans Sedlmayr and the Postwar Menschenbild at the Darmstädter Gespräche**

Art Historian Hans Sedlmayr's controversial 1948 book, *Verlust der Mitte: die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*, along with its staunchly conservative author, was a pivotal text within the Darmstädter Gespräche. Indeed, one can discern in the number of times Sedlmayr speaks both a clear indication of his prominence as a scholar, and how controversial his works proved to be at the time.<sup>116</sup> However, some background is necessary to understand his ideas of the *Menschenbild* and why other attendees found them so objectionable.

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<sup>116</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951, pp 48-62, 101-110 as examples.

Born in 1896 and becoming a student of Baroque architecture, Hans Sedlmayr's initial works are surprisingly avant-garde for his era.<sup>117</sup> Like Alois Reigl (1858-1905), whose study of the Romantic preoccupation with ruins remains a key text of considering this form, Sedlmayr believed that the inherent intention of the artwork was both knowable and able to be studied.<sup>118</sup> For Reigl, the intent of the art, or *Kunstwollen*, was what connected it to its time and place, in both material and intellectual terms. While *Kunstwollen* remains a loaded concept, encompassing several different meanings, the addition of "wollen" implies an internal, powerful exertion or intent from one object to another. Understanding *Kunstwollen* in this way emphasises exactly *how* Sedlmayr understands art as something intricately connected to its context that shapes how he assesses a particular way in which art exists in relation to its outside world. For Sedlmayr, both as an architecture student and as someone who believes in a latent intent within the artwork which, in turn, links it to its outside context, art possesses a social purpose combined with its appearance in particular artworks.

Sedlmayr's intimate engagement with architecture, and especially with the view of architecture containing a latent internal and external relationship to its context, makes it unsurprising that he would reject modernism, and especially postmodernism. Nor did his actions during the Third Reich imply he would take such a radically modern position. Although none of Sedlmayr's writings are obviously antisemitic, or actively support National Socialist aesthetic policy, his expertise in Baroque art does not obviously contest them. His career, also, does not

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<sup>117</sup> Morgenthaler, Simon. "Zu einer strengen Kunstwissenschaft' - eine Programmatik der Kunstwissenschaft in ihrem Kontext." In *Formationen einer Kunstwissenschaft Text- und Archivstudien zu Hans Sedlmayr*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 215-283. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110615524-007>

<sup>118</sup>Reigl, Alois. *Der Moderne Denkmal: Sein Wesen und Seine Entstehung*. Kessinger Verlag, 2010.



show any opposition to National Socialist policies. Remaining at the University of Vienna throughout the war, he was forced to relinquish his chair in 1945 and only resumed teaching in 1951, when he became a professor at Ludwig-Maximilian University, a position he held until 1964.

The best-known work which Sedlmayr published, and which was most hotly contested at the Darmstädter Gespräche in 1950, was his book, *Verlust der Mitte*. The 1948 book seeks, as many other volumes and conversations did, to understand the state of West Germany and German society through its art. In keeping with his architectural focus, the book follows a well-known chronicle of art history, beginning with the building of the Gothic cathedral,<sup>119</sup> and continuing on with the subsequent centuries up to the present. In his volume the philosophy of Reigl is alive and well, with *Kunstwollen* being a powerful axis, if not mentioned directly. Instead, Sedlmayr utilises the theme of “central problem,” which has some similarities to Reigl’s term.

The “Central problem,” or the eponymous lack thereof, is essentially the concept which drives the book. While modern and early modern canonical views of art history attempt to sweep the Middle Ages under the proverbial rug, Sedlmayr holds them up as the epitome of artistic creation, mostly because of the strong ability to gather the community at the time.<sup>120</sup> Thus embedded in the social fabric, the Gothic cathedral answers the “central problem” of the age. Both in its community engagement, and in its architectural form.

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<sup>119</sup> Sedlmayr, Hans. *Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19 und 20 Jahrhunderts Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*. Salzburg, O. Müller, 1948, p 24.

<sup>120</sup> Sedlmayr, Hans. *Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19 und 20 Jahrhunderts Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*. Salzburg, O. Müller, 1948, p 16.

Sedlmayr's heavy emphasis on architecture as civic engagement places a high value on the collective as part of what gives the individual meaning. Especially in his description of modern architecture as a divergence from what had been a harmonious collective force, criticisms are not only present in his 1948 book, but also in his remarks during the Darmstädter Gespräche.

Opening with remarks from modernist artist Johannes Itten (1888-1967), the Darmstädter Gespräche start with "Die Möglichkeiten der Modernen Kunst,"<sup>121</sup> on a note of optimism and progression into the future. Noting the "vielgestaltig", stemming from "viele Gesichtspunkten,"<sup>122</sup> Itten goes through the recent history of German Modernism, and establishes the artwork as that which is "gesammelt und von ihm gestaltete Spiegelungen oder Reflexionen seiner real-materiellen oder surrealist-immaterialen Welt..."<sup>123</sup>

Itten thus emphasises the nature of art as collected from material around the artist and reflected and projected back out into the world. In a modernist sense, this view of the artist as an active agent also affects and is affected by his making of the artwork itself.

Itten's faith in the ability of art to reflect the exterior and interior of the artist's world emphasise the value placed on the subjective experience. While Itten does not engage in art as an intended reshaping of society, his analyses of the fourteen paintings, from Manet's *Erschießung Kaiser Maximillians von Mexiko* (1867) to Salvador Dalí's *Le Spectre du sex appeal* (1934)<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951, p 31.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p 32. "...which are collected and reflective of his material or surreal, "immaterial" world..." (Translation mine).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p 35-46.

discuss the interaction between the artist and their material world. While none of the paintings Itten analyses focus on materiality as distinctly as Rösler's work from 1951, this interaction as the site of creativity emphasise a familiar connection between the creation of art and the creator of art.

Itten's open-ended and generally positive remarks concerning the possibility of visual art to interact with its time, or as he says, its "...erweiterter Horizonte", have the potential to "... (etwas) Neues zu schaffen..."<sup>125</sup> stands in stark contrast to Sedlmayr, who responds to Itten's remarks with a lengthy address concerning what he sees as the dangers of modern art.<sup>126</sup> Beginning by rejecting the labelling of his book as Art History, Sedlmayr instead insists that his book is about the modernist art as an aberration of history itself,<sup>127</sup> a diversion from what he considers a godly society, merely expressed through art, which protects from man's errors.<sup>128</sup>

For Sedlmayr, the abstraction of art reflects a rupture in the wholeness of the human subject, not "progressive" or "expanded horizons," but a deviation from positive collectivity, which Sedlmayr sees as integral to society. This physical embodiment, and by that Sedlmayr means a very clear and obvious one, is reflective of the cosmic order which he sees in various types of architecture, as well as symbolised in various kinds of music, which he posits as integral to a healthy society.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p 47, "...expanded horizons and new creations." (Translation mine)

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p 48-62.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p 48.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

Reports of the Darmstädter Gespräch discuss this set of opening remarks as garnering alternating jeers and “Heil Hitler”,<sup>130</sup> which hint at how close Sedlmayr comes to reinforcing the previous regime’s heavy-handed ideals of the individual finding their purpose in being subsumed within the collective. Sedlmayr’s connection drawn from the collective body of the people to the architecture of the larger society only underscores his insistence on a very direct and, in his view, organic relationship between the individual and their larger physical space.

Sedlmayr’s remarks echo those of Eric Hobsbawm<sup>131</sup> in his detailed analysis of how the body of the individual was reinforced through both large scale pageantry on ceremonial occasions, and how these processions reinforced the individual’s integration into their larger social space. This almost reflexive dynamic is what bound the imagined community together in terms of nationalism, a performative nationalism which was used throughout National Socialist Germany to give meaning to the place of the individual. In Sedlmayr’s reading of Reigl’s *Kunstwollen*, the negation of the subject means there is no connection, nothing with which to bind the individual to their larger society. Because this is where Sedlmayr sees the building as part of the society, both in its purposefulness, in the sense of serving the wider community, and in its method of resolving the “central problem” of that community, visual art, but especially architecture, complete a connection in which collective identity can flourish, and in which both find meaning through their respective positions.

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<sup>130</sup> Fehl, Philipp. “Review: Das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit”. *College Art Journal*. Vol 13, No 2, Winter 1954, pp 145-147.

<sup>131</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric. “The Nation as Invented Tradition.” In *Nationalism*. Edited by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith. Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp 76-83, pp 80, 81-2.

Sedlmayr's deeply conservative analysis, while not surprising, stands in stark contrast to the responses of other conference attendees. Other than the theologian Adolf Köberle, the deep spiritual element in Sedlmayr's analysis attracted harsh criticism, visible in both the amount of time he occupies in the transcript of the conference, as well as in the heated responses he receives. In response to Sedlmayr's initial address, art critic and historian Franz Roh responded that while he recognised the limitations of representation and of various epochs, Sedlmayr's assessment of new art was "too negative".<sup>132</sup> In his response, Roh contests Sedlmayr's pessimism on spiritual grounds. Pursuing this line of critique, Roh proposes that Sedlmayr cease to see the world as embodied by strict dichotomies.<sup>133</sup> For Roh, the visual arts, including the formal uses of figuration and abstraction, arise from different perspectives and this diversity, which Sedlmayr finds to be an unsettling divergence, is part of a fundamental difference in worldviews.

A lifelong advocate of modernism from the turn of the twentieth century, Roh published extensively about movements such as expressionism and surrealism.<sup>134</sup> An avid photographer whose works are available to view on the Getty Museum website, Roh's appreciation for and interest in the arts developing along their own lines became an integral part of his theoretical work. In his addresses to Sedlmayr throughout the transcript, it is clear Roh sees the development of (then) contemporary art as part of a larger intellectual questioning of the social subject, in which paradigms such as Sedlmayr's no longer apply. For Roh, the biggest problem

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<sup>132</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951, p 88.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p 88-92.

<sup>134</sup> Getty Museum Collection. "Franz Roh". <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/person/103KD4> Accessed 19 April, 2023.

with Sedlmayr's demand for a central theme deprives the individual painter of meaning and consequence. Ultimately seeing the individual painter as able to present their own ideas and worldview through their work is the highest and most "positive" outcome of the rationalist movement.<sup>135</sup> In Roh's analysis, contemporary art of the time is not torn asunder from some presumed whole, but part of an expression of that whole. In Roh's analysis, works such as Rösler's would not present a fundamental break with an established cosmos, so much as a different construction and understanding of that cosmos, in which a different dynamic is being constructed. As with Itten's analysis, artists such as Rösler confronted a material world and projected back out to it their own internal vision which would have enraged historians such as Sedlmayr, because Sedlmayr saw the cosmic order as being reflected back to the individual and, by implication, becoming part of their identity.

Sedlmayr's implied need for the individual's view of the cosmic order to be reaffirmed and reflected back to them through their larger social environment imbues the image with an extreme amount of agency. While they may have disagreed about everything else, Sedlmayr and his opponents Johannes Itten and Franz Roh all saw the Menschenbild as possessing a capacity to contribute to the purpose and identity of the individual.

If Sedlmayr and Roh found themselves in opposition to one another, the remarks of Theodor Adorno quite possibly sent the former reeling. Sedlmayr's analysis about the place or, one might say, purpose of art within the larger society is an emphatic, even extreme version of the Kantian understanding of the vision of how the individual and society interact and

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<sup>135</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951, p 90. "...das Sedlmayr bei den modernen Künstlern gegenüber feststellt. Kann man dies aber auch positiv bewerten?"

contribute to the identity of one another. While Adorno's philosophy certainly critiques the deification of reason during the Enlightenment as a problem in itself, his solution to this in the visual arts runs diametrically opposed to Sedlmayr. For, instead of a return to the full human figure within visual art, Adorno advocates for an entirely abstract art. Although they both have as an undercurrent an acceptance of the visual image as a vital part of the contribution to identity formation, they see the resolution for that rupture in different ways.

Already in his remarks at the Darmstädter Gespräche, we can see the beginnings of a theory of engagement, and engaged art, which would be developed and published in subsequent years.<sup>136</sup> For Adorno, the neoclassicism so beloved by National Socialists was the epitome of abuse of reason, an abuse which necessitated a complete reconsideration of the image, and how that image was to be projected. The extreme extent to which National Socialism took the image violated his freedom of the subject remained critical. Breaking this form of representation is the only way to encourage the viewer of art to remain critical, and to engage in a legitimately enlightened manner with visual art.

In his analysis, this means the social subject, through abstraction, is reshaped and completely able to be shaped anew. In confronting the abstract piece of art, the viewer is able to remain critical and is thus able to think about the truth within the representation. Relying on such aspects as technical skill or harmony only allow for a superficial engagement.<sup>137</sup>

Such an analysis renders new art forms, such as collage, an outward reconsideration of pictorial space in general. If the human subject is to be reshaped through this abstraction, the

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p 193.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p 195.

complete reconsideration of other media are also under consideration, and reconfiguring them implies a reconsideration of the self completely. Removing the medium from the canvas as the locus of pictorial space not only challenges traditions in Western art observed over the past several hundred years, but also, in Adorno's analysis, poses a new viewpoint regarding the fundamentals of how subjectivity is constructed and seen. By focusing on the material world of her immediate environment, Louise Rösler's collage from 1951, *Die Strasse*, takes up Adorno's advocacy for the reshaping of self through its absence of obvious human representation, and through its multiple challenges to the canon of Western art. As we will see below, Rösler's collage functions on a different foundation, providing a connection to concepts more than an embodied social subject as seen through familiar figuration. Indeed, for Rösler, as for Adorno, the corporeal presence so integral to Sedlmayr's ideal bond between visual representation and outside manifestation was merely an act of dissolution of the individual into the larger collective, which dulls, rather than sharpens, the legitimate use of rational thought and appreciation.

As Roh stated, the contemporary art of the Darmstädter Gespräche posited a number of differing worldviews and foundations from which an artist, as Itten mentioned, would draw, as they project their material or immaterial world back out into the larger society. For both Roh and Itten, such works as Rösler's collage represent a dynamic in which the artist and the outer material world interact yet in which the subjectivity of the creator would act as an active, critical force. If seen through their analysis, Rösler's work becomes a far more dynamic, rather than a static, medium, while in the analysis offered by Sedlmayr it becomes a deviation from what Sedlmayr considers a positive bond.



In Sedlmayr's view, collage works such as Rösler's are an example of the lack of connection between subject and outside environment. In her depiction of candy wrappers along the street, Rösler's references, as well as her challenge of artistic practice through her rejection of canvas as the site of reference for the painting, to say nothing of her use of found objects which do not conform to an organic, clearly ordered whole, would lack all significance to a theorist such as Sedlmayr. For him, the *Menschenbild* was part of a sacred order which, in its symbolism throughout the larger society, allowed the individual to form a connection to their larger environment. Without one of these elements, the visual becomes an aberration, a dangerous deviation from that whole, lacking, as it does for Sedlmayr a "central problem." As we will see, however, by looking through the various layers, especially focusing on the materiality of the work, Rösler's work does indeed have a central understanding of subjectivity, one reconsidered through her challenge of the Western Art tradition, her use of the debris of everyday materials, and, finally, through her references to the street as part of the larger modernist societal landscape.

## **VI. Louise Rösler's *Die Strasse* (1951)**

Rösler's 1951 collage is part of a world in which the materiality of wartime destruction corresponded to a psychological crisis of self. As we have seen with Karl Jaspers' *Die Schuldfrage* and Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, the crisis of accountability and complicity was part and parcel of a crisis of identity and coherence in West German culture as a whole. The role of figurative representation, thus, involved larger questions of the relationship of the social subject as an autonomous, agentized individual able to affect their

larger world. Within these aesthetic discussions, the role of figuration and its value came into question, as embodied by prewar art movements, such as Expressionism, Cubism, and, especially, Surrealism. Challenging the representational strategies of these of these movements diminished the human subject or omitted it altogether, in favour of representing a circumstance or state of being.

Given this moment of crisis of self-conception, Louise Rösler's 1951 collage amplifies this ambivalence with all aspects of her collage, pulling its modernist references into a new state in which the reality of this crisis is fully visible in the street itself. Indeed, each one of her layers, from its medium to its understanding of the social subject, exemplifies layers of ambivalence regarding human subjectivity and definitions of the art object as a whole.

The examination of a work of art through its materiality invites several challenges to those seeking to use its physical composition as a basis for understanding. The most obvious would be the lack of anchoring in the theoretical tradition in general. Although throughout time many artists have produced works which emphasise the material conditions that shape their work, the theoretical underpinnings for such a project have yet to find a firm footing within the art historical discipline. There is no single tome which outlines or has decided an approach. While artists as diverse as Picasso, Hannah Höch, and Michael Rakowitz all utilise found objects as part of their artistic practice, there is no "manifesto" or major text on which to base a materialist analysis. There is, however, an organised and succinct set of guideposts offered by Dr Michael Yonan, who has offered a helpful understanding of the path of materialist analysis. While giving a lecture on Chinese porcelain in 2017. In his analysis Yonan describes the materialist approach thus:

One aspect of materiality is in fact its medium. It matters enormously if the work is made of oil, acrylic, or tempura, and the possibilities that each medium allows and the limits that it proscribes. But once a work of art is made, it becomes incorporated into the broader materiality of its culture, which is better described as how medium creates the status of the artwork as a thing, and how that interacts with other things to form a specific material world. ... within that material world different materialities interrelate, clash with each other, or otherwise inflect how individuals understand how the world functions.<sup>138</sup>

By examining the dynamics of Rösler's *Die Strasse*, the materiality of its content, and the reconsideration of its subject in terms of a larger question of representation through presence and absence, we come to see how this work bridges both the material and abstract elements even by means of its diminutive form.

In examining the materiality of an artwork and its links to its material world, the medium or form in which this object is presented gives us a fundamental understanding of how collage's advantages and limitations co-constitute its meaning. In this pursuit, we must first acknowledge the open-ended nature of collage as a dynamic medium, one whose creation involves the active dismantling of previous contexts and the reshaping of those objects into another space, thereby becoming part of a newly constructed meaning. We must also acknowledge the challenge to European art which collage presents. As Christine Poggi points out in her book, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage*, the medium defies the illusionistic

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<sup>138</sup> Yonan, Michael. "Porcelain as Sculpture: Medium, Materiality, and the Categories of 18th Century Collecting." YouTube, uploaded by The Frick Collection, 19 May, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0rqilTmFFE&t=418s>. Accessed 19 April, 2023.

approach to European art.<sup>139</sup> Through its collection of a variety of objects, the collage renounces the idea that the work of art is required to follow a pattern in which a multitude of objects are subsumed into the overall composition. Thus, the final work could thus easily be imagined as an embodiment of this process of dismantling and reconstructing, a process already discussed in the context of rebuilding German cities.

In her collage Rösler depicts a more individual experience in her collection of candy wrappers in a mixture of German and English (Figs 11-14), which she combines with oil and gouache paints on woven paper. Having collected the candy wrappers from trash, Rösler repurposes them and creates a new text in which they become the material of a street, changing them from trash into the subject of contemplation as part of a new subject.

Throughout the process of collage, the viewer is suspended between a previous context and a new one. In Rösler's work, for example, the artist does not even bother to change most of the wrappers. Indeed, although some are obviously cut, many are simply glued onto the paper whole, such as the white unfolded XOXO wrappers. This suspension of the viewer from a finished, polished artwork limits collage, however, as does its denial of completion, of closure. Within the collage dynamic, the trace of the previous context, such as the unfolded wrapper, intrigues the viewer in its novelty but denies them the satisfaction of having an easily grasped closure of meaning. While its bits and pieces add colour and vibrancy, the images do not offer the obvious satisfaction of, say, photomontage, which also dismantles meanings with the purpose of reconstructing them within a different context.

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<sup>139</sup> Poggi, Christine. *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993, p 5.

This utilisation of smaller pieces, drawn from a variety of contexts and reconstructed together at the core of collage and photomontage as aesthetic strategies, echoes the crisis of self facing both modernist and postwar artists. Among artists as varied as Hannah Höch (1889-1978) and Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), collage came to form an integral part of their oeuvre. Indeed, both Höch's and Schwitters' oeuvres retain collage up at least until 1950, demonstrating how effective the medium is at expressing the subject within contexts of larger cultural crossroads. Hannah Höch's 1919 work, *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands* (Fig 15),<sup>140</sup> uses the image of rotating wheels, photos of groups and individuals, as well as fragments of words to comment on the change in socialisation from the state of *Gemeinschaft*, a community in which one is organically and intrinsically rooted through physical location, to *Gesellschaft*, an anonymous and often hostile idea of society, in which individuals are regulated by machinery and through external forces. Höch's use of newspaper and the juxtaposition of individuals and groups reveal a duality of experience to say the least, whereas Rösler's use of newsprint completely rejects individual representation altogether. Both artists use collage and photomontage, with Höch seemingly engaging in a modernist struggle in which two competing narratives, one pre-industrial and one Industrial, vie for control. Given the struggle between the construction of the self within the rural *Heimat*, the *Gemeinschaft*, and the urban *Gesellschaft* of Höch's time, *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser* faithfully captures the modernist anxiety about modernity and, in particular, the collapse of the previous social hierarchy and the attempt of the Weimar Republic to establish greater stability.

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<sup>140</sup> Höch, Hannah. *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die Letzte Weimarer Bierbauch-Kulturepoche Deutschlands*. 1919. Paper on Cardboard, Collage. Staatliche Museen zur Berlin. Berlin, Germany.

Höch is joined in her commentary on the divergence from a pre-Industrial, agrarian society to a modern, industrial one by artist Kurt Schwitters, whose utilisation of collage lasted until a year before his death in 1948. Both his 1919 piece *Merzbild Rossfett* (Fig 16)<sup>141</sup> and his *Die Heilige Nacht von Antonio Allegri Gen. Correggio...* (Fig 17)<sup>142</sup> from 1947 attest to a continued fascination both with the rejected, discarded pieces of society and with the potential of the medium to express this cleaving of self. The latter work, in particular, evinces this, a work in which bureaucratic forms are combined with body pieces of the body of the Madonna attest, like Höch, to the jarring juxtaposition between connection through representation and the strictly formulaic lines categorising industrial life. Although Schwitters does offer a clear view of the mother holding her child, a leg and hip, as well as two heads, are scattered around the composition, snippets emphasising how modernity has cut into the wholeness and completeness of life.

With this composition, completed just four years before *Die Strasse*, it is clear Schwitters consistently felt the need to express a feeling of estrangement or discord within his environment. Like Höch, Schwitters expresses this friction through the use of clearly representational and much more anonymous sources, all joined together in an uneasy whole.

Where Höch expresses modernist ambivalence to expanded socio-economic opportunities and the disintegration of previously unquestioned social relationships, Rösler uses wrappers, both German and English, to obliterate the subject. In *Die Strasse*, she uses the materials to imply a conceptualised, abstract subject, rather than resorting to representations of individuals.

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<sup>141</sup> Schwitters, Kurt. *Merzbild Rossfett*. 1919. Collage. Private Collection.

<sup>142</sup> Schwitters, Kurt. *Die Heilige Nacht von Antonio Allegri Gen. Correggio....* 1947. Collage. Private Collection, Lugano.

Indeed, in comparison to the modernist collages examined by both Poggi and Brockelman, Rösler's work stands out in its outright rejection of representational figures. Whereas Picasso and Höch fold, cut, and otherwise seek to render the image immediately recognisable to a viewer, Rösler rejects all such offers. In Picasso's 1912 *Glass Bottle and Suze* (Fig 18),<sup>143</sup> the rendering of the bottle is very clear. Höch's juxtaposition of and use of newspaper clippings may not present a representational work akin to the Renaissance, but her figures remain easily recognisable as people. For Rösler, by contrast, the subject is completely abstract. She uses not only the street as a meeting place, but, as we shall see, also uses the collection of candy wrappers as a statement about what remains of the subject.

In his analysis of modernist collage, Brockelman discusses the difference between such works as Rösler and Höch's, emphasising her modernism, reminding us that, "modern subjectivism demands a vision of the world as both constituted for an observing subject, and as determining the subject."<sup>144</sup> As we have seen through the emergence of the city as the locus of the modernist *Heimat*, this reciprocal relationship can be viewed in Höch's work. Rösler's *Die Strasse*, on the other hand, negates the human subject completely, emphasising the postmodern crisis of self as one which must be completely reconstituted. In *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern*, Brockelman offers an interpretation of photomontage and collage as differing in their treatment of the subject. As was discussed in the Darmstädter Gespräche,

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<sup>143</sup> Picasso, Pablo. *Verre et bouteille de Suze*. 1912. Charcoal, collage, gouache, cardboard. Washington University Gallery, St Louis, MO, US.

<sup>144</sup> Brockelman, Thomas P. *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern*. Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2001, p 94.

Rösler anticipates the trend toward abstraction by instead shifting the focus off the subject and completely abstracting it altogether.

Rösler's *Street*, covered and littered with candy wrappers, while cheerfully coloured, also assumes greater meaning when all its aspects are taken into consideration. Although the obvious place to start for a discussion of everyday, even vulgar items elevated to the position of art is Duchamp's ready-mades, considering the different nuances of discarding is more intriguing. In her analysis of the use of newspaper, Poggi discusses the use of decaying newspaper in collage as "one form of decay commenting on another".<sup>145</sup> This is further complicated by the reconstruction of these objects into another context, by the act of using them to establish something different, and elevating the detritus into something far more valuable. Yet we should also consider the limitations such objects have. Despite their ubiquity, wrappers are not prized on their own. Their sole purpose is to be discarded in search of what they contain.

The utilitarian nature of the candy wrapper assumes greater meanings as it becomes an object of aesthetic value. Placing them as she does at the centre of the composition, Rösler's candy wrappers attest to more than just a form of decay. Indeed, since they begin as decay and become part of a newly constructed meaning, the dynamic suggests the viewer is supposed to meditate on them, that they elicit more than a comment on a uniform direction. Even their position, on a street, which has multiple meanings, suggests a more dynamic and multifaceted set of associations and meanings.

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<sup>145</sup> Poggi, Christine. *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993, p 157.



In his artworks, Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz uses discarded food wrappers as a basis from which to construct models of destroyed monuments.<sup>146</sup> For Rakowitz, the proliferation of these everyday discarded objects attests to the continuation of everyday life in spite of the destruction of monuments, an affirmation of the presence of the people who live in the area, and an assertion of their value over internationally valued objects. Rösler uses her wrappers in a similar way, although in the context of American Occupation the wrappers take on a more charged meaning. Wreathing the much more colourful patches of yellow and magenta are the simple, black-and-white newsprint on which the names of the United States are clearly seen (Figs 11-14). This presence of America alongside the German advertisements for Kaiser Honig-Toffee has assumed a greater significance in light of the nascent cultural tensions growing both politically and in a socio-cultural sense between West Germans and Americans. Not only did they ultimately chafe under American political and economic occupation, but far more pernicious to West (and East) Germans was the growing presence of American culture in formal, “high” art production, as well as consumer culture. In his article, “Recasting Bourgeois Germany”, Volker R. Berghahn describes how America influenced cultural resurgence in economic, as well as cultural terms. Although the role of the Third Reich as a “Social Revolution” remains contested<sup>147</sup>, Berghahn argues persuasively that “...there is evidence that this reconstituted German Bürgertum also differentiated itself from other social groups with regard to its norms,

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<sup>146</sup> Forster, Ian, and Carina Martinez, Ed. “In the Studio: Artist Michael Rakowitz uses everyday objects to render lost artefacts into ghostly new forms.” Art21, <https://art21.org/read/in-the-studio-michael-rakowitz/> Accessed 19 April, 2023.

<sup>147</sup> Berghahn, Volker R. “Recasting Bourgeois Germany.” In *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968*. Edited by Hannah Schissler. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p 327.

values, and social conventions...”.<sup>148</sup> Berghahn goes further by explaining an analogous aesthetic tension growing in the economic sphere, with as he puts it, “...the problem of quality production for an elite market versus ‘cheap’ production for the ‘masses’.”<sup>149</sup>

This growing fear at a time when Germans, both East and West, were attempting to rebuild a sense of cultural coherence and identity leaves no small chance that the clash between the vibrant wrappers holding sweets and the drab black-and-white newspaper print are emblematic of a persistent tension and ambivalence between the two cultures, despite their gathering in the same social arenas. As with the photomontages and collages of Hannah Höch and Kurt Schwitters, respectively, the two media are part of a whole, but invite questions as to how warm they truly are. Thus, Rösler’s candy wrappers not only attest to the continuation of life, but also expose some continued tensions and signal that all has not been resolved between the two.

Nevertheless, Rösler’s use of discarded candy wrappers both affirms the presence of continued life long after the destruction, and ultimately new beginnings through this process of transformation of discard. The duality of stasis in destruction and persistence in presence, and finally through its reconstructed meaning as a piece of art. These layers of meaning reaffirm collage as a dynamic art and imply a sense of being suspended in a state of ambivalence corresponding to the state of West German identity of this time period. The uncertain nature of that identity and how it could be reconstructed was the main subject of the Darmstadt conference, and Rösler also captured these possibilities through her title, *Die Strasse*.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 329.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 329.

Until her death in 1993, Rösler maintained the abstraction beginning in the immediate postwar period. While she occasionally came close to more figurative work, the vast majority of her creations possess the same vibrant colours and dynamic brush strokes apparent in the small lines of purple and black swirling around the wrappers. Yet, *Die Strasse* showcases a unique reconsideration of subjectivity at a vulnerable time for German identity. Her work, despite its small size, has a great deal to offer the viewer as they contemplate how identity and its potential reconstruction was seen by artists who were both inside an art establishment rich with tradition, but also citizens sharing in the same need to rebuild as politicians and philosophers.

Rösler's collage presents an interaction of activity in its depiction of ambivalence, and stasis in its suspension, its life inside this crisis of the subject. As a medium, collage allows for both, complicating the meaning for the viewer, but Rösler makes her intention clear through the title of her work. With its roots inside the modernist experience, *Die Strasse* anchors the viewer in materiality and also projects a new understanding of subjectivity. As a thoroughfare and a favourite place for the depiction of alienation, the street was a favourite subject of those experiencing the Industrial Revolution, from its contest with premodern, agrarian communities, to its embrace as part of the construction of individual, modern identity.

While modernism did not begin with Baudelaire, his well-known poem, "Le Cygne", captured the spirit of change. It depicts a swan roaming the streets of Paris until it perishes. As a symbol of beauty and, as is obvious in the poem, the natural world, the experience of change from agrarian to industrial society did not lack for pictorial counterparts. Camille Pissarro's *The*

*Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning* from 1897 (Fig 19)<sup>150</sup> is only one such example of the embrace of urban life, with the carriages and black umbrellas running parallel to the designated streets.

In a contrary attitude, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Der rote Turm in Halle*<sup>151</sup> from 1915 (Fig 20) shows streets lined in bright red and yellow-orange, cutting through the otherwise blue and white tinted nature. With modernist implications, the street is depicted as being capable of going in multiple directions, as well as having the embedded duality of alienation and identification. This duality of the street embodies the need for a complete reconsideration of the subject, and the vast changes which characterised the discourse of West Germans during this time.

Despite its small size, Louise Rösler's collage *Die Strasse* engages with the larger ontological questions West Germans were asking themselves as they rebuilt both their cities and their identities. Her dynamic collage challenges the canvas-based pictorial space held up by Western art for several hundred years. She deploys her material in a fluid process during which one meaning is dismantled in the reconstruction of another. The utilisation of candy wrappers, discarded in favour of what they contain, reinforces the multiplicity of meanings contained within the work. Partially a comment on the decay and abandoned nature of the material, and partly a visible effort at intentional reconstruction of meaning, the use of these everyday, ubiquitous item attests to the presence of life and culture. Rösler's reshaping them into a work of artwork elevates the detritus of the everyday into a greater, more substantial whole, while each piece maintains its individuality.

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<sup>150</sup> Pissarro, Camille. *The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning*. 1897. Oil on Canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<sup>151</sup> Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Der rote Turm in Halle*. 1915. Oil on Canvas. Museum Folkwang, Germany.

Finally, Rösler's use of the street as a modernist space loaded with duality evinces the place West Germans found their identity from 1945-1950. The Darmstädter Gespräche sought to codify these discussions into a conference which would resolve the complex issues facing citizens as the cities resumed their presence and reconstituted their meanings. As Rösler's work shows, abstraction and a complete reconsideration of the subject was an effective expression for the variety of ontological questions, compressing them into a small, yet effective, piece of art.

## **VII. The Human Subject Reconsidered: The Limitations of Reflection**

Throughout this study we have seen how visual art has replaced the figurative human subject with an abstraction, placing them in the various attributes of the city as part of a larger tendency toward abstraction. We have also seen how this was reflected in, and influenced the conversations at, the Darmstädter Gespräche held in July 1950.

As Rösler's work shows, reconsideration of the subject, and an embrace of abstraction was already underway by the time the Darmstädter Gespräche took place. In retrospect, the convergence of concretion and abstraction was a complete reconsideration of the social subject and the aspects of life which affect our experience of life, as seen through the newfound concentration on materials and the substance of the composition of artworks. By looking at an artwork with a focus firmly trained on its materials, all of which contribute to the meaning of the work, we can see how this questioning of the subject, and its hoped-for reconsideration, took hold in postmodern art.

While the art movements of the second half of the twentieth century deem abstraction the clear winner of this debate, the immediate response to the Darmstädter Gespräche were mixed. Although Liza Kaaring cites one reference, a search in the archive of *Die Zeit* could not locate it.<sup>152</sup> However, Two articles published in the *Badische neueste Nachrichten*, one on the 20 July and the other a bit later, in November of the same year, seemed optimistic. They praised the avant-garde nature of the conference, eager to pepper the well-established names, such as Johannes Itten and Willi Baumeister, on their pages. Kasimir Edschmid, however, is less optimistic. In his article, he criticises the seemingly random amalgam of artworks. The transcript of the conference, which includes several full page illustrations, most of which are highly figurative works, and not necessarily abstract works.<sup>153</sup> Writing in winter 1954, some four years later, Philipp Fehl reviews the exhibition catalogue of the event, but he remains unimpressed by the passionate arguments and what could be described as a resignation on the part of the attendees. In describing Sedlmayr's remarks, for example, he protests that they remained effectively "unchallenged."<sup>154</sup> Such a review is highly suggestive of an almost dismissive tone, but research shows otherwise.

Those who attended the conference offered some resistance to Sedlmayr's Christian conservatism. Figures such as Werner Haftmann and Willi Baumeister would continue to influence and contribute significantly both to art history and to the development of art in general.

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<sup>152</sup> Kaaring, Liza. "The Elephant in the Room: Post-war Portrayals of Man in Denmark and Germany." *Perspective*, September, 2019. <https://perspectivejournal.dk/en/elephant-room-post-war-portrayals-man-denmark-and-germany> Accessed 19 April, 2023.

<sup>153</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951, pp 19-27.

<sup>154</sup> Fehl, Philipp. "Review: Das Menschenbild in unserer Zeit". *College Art Journal*. Vol 13, No 2, Winter 1954, pp 145-147.

Haftmann was particularly prolific, writing multiple volumes about modern art, and diverging greatly from his contemporaries in his pursuit of seeing art history thematically. His inaugural exhibition as curator of the Hamburger Kunsthalle would reinstate Caspar David Friedrich as a postwar figure by bringing the political tumult of the Romantic period into his politically and socially charged reading of Friedrich's paintings.<sup>155</sup>

The goals of the Darmstädter Gespräche were ambitious. The entire reconsideration of human representation would require more than one conference in Darmstadt to reimagine them. Yet, those who participated confronted exemplified the problems and concerns about the role of the social subject of their time period. During this time they called for a massive reconsideration of identity, and reinforce the understanding that aesthetics continued to play a vital role in the construction of cultural identity. Far from being peripheral, they were significant in their attempt to reimagine the relationship between subject and object, and how art could help reshape that vision.

## VIII. Conclusion

The physical destruction of Germany and the end of National Socialism brought with them a crisis in individual identity. Long tied to the physical space, projected outward onto an imagined community, the ideal of *Heimat* had been an integral part to the German construction of the self, especially as that self related to a larger social whole. Throughout the nineteenth century, the idea of *Heimat* changed from one resisting modernist industrialisation, to one to one embodied by it

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<sup>155</sup> Haftmann, Werner. *Caspar David Friedrich: Kunst um 1800*. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Prestel, 1974.

in the figure of the city. The destruction of this urban space also signified the destruction of the Enlightenment teleology of inevitable progress, which became a philosophical preoccupation in the immediate postwar years. Theodor Adorno, Joachim Ritter, and Karl Jaspers all grappled with the weaknesses inherent within the Enlightenment assumption of progressive reasoning, and did so most obviously in their works on subjectivity. While Jaspers concentrated on the importance of guilt and potential atonement, proposing a continuous process of rejection of collective thinking, Adorno concentrated on the problem of deification of reason, as it had been relied upon during the Enlightenment. His focus on the socio-economic conditions which Enlightenment failed to address, in addition to the ethical crimes of National Socialism allowed him to focus on the Culture Industry as another social form which encouraged collective participation at the expense of critical thought. Stating that the individual must remain slightly distant from an aesthetic experience in order to consider it in a truly rational way, Adorno's understanding of the Culture Industry is easy to trace in his remarks on human representation at the Darmstädter Gespräche in 1950.

In contrast, Joachim Ritter's understanding of art, as seen through the medium of the landscape, is one in which the aesthetic experience compensates for the mechanical processes brought on by modernist society.<sup>156</sup> His view of art and the aesthetic experience as seemingly existing outside of the larger social environment is diametrically opposed to Adorno's, whose remarks at the Darmstädter Gespräche in 1950 reflect a view, shared by the other attendees, of

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<sup>156</sup> Ritter, Joachim. "Landschaft. Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft." Aschendorff, Münster, Westfalen, 1963.



visual representation as being integral to the individual's relationship to the larger community, and to the national community as well.<sup>157</sup>

Having a firm place in the avant-garde modernist movements of the early 20th century, Darmstadt resumed its cultural activities after 1945, hosting both a summer music school showcasing modern and postmodern music, in addition to literature and visual art.<sup>158</sup> The conference of 1950, attended by theologians and sociologists as well as artists, art critics, and art historians, discussed the importance of *das Menschenbild*, a subject of grave concern for its recent abuse by National Socialism. During the Third Reich the *Menschenbild* had been used to bind the individual into the collective. Both through sculpture, and through large scale choreography during ceremonial occasions, the figural representation not only required the individual to relate to their larger social environment, but caused the individual to dissolve into the collective.

Picking up this emphasis on the collective, art historian Hans Sedlmayr's 1948 *Verlust der Mitte* saw a link between the individual and collective through architecture.<sup>159</sup> Considering modernist art to be an aberration, a deviation from the supposed symmetry of the reaffirmed narrative offered through the physical embodiment of social space, Sedlmayr advocated for the return to figuration as a means of reestablishing a prewar ideal of identity. For Sedlmayr, this symmetry was necessary in order to establish the bond between the individual and the collective,

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<sup>157</sup> Evers, Hans Gerhard. *Das Menschenbild in Unserer Zeit*. Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlag, 1951.

<sup>158</sup> Leonhardt, Rudolf Walther. "Darmstadt ist ein Gespräch Wert." *Die Zeit*. 3 April, 1958, p 1-4. <https://www.zeit.de/1958/14/darmstadt-ist-ein-gespraech-wert> Accessed 19 April, 2023.

Keller, Hans. "New Music at Darmstadt." *The Musical Times*, Vol 94, No 1328, October 1953, p 476.

<sup>159</sup> Sedlmayr, Hans. *Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19 und 20 Jahrhunderts Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*. Salzburg, O. Müller, 1948.

and the purpose of both the individual and their outside space fulfilled their abilities in their purpose to one another.<sup>160</sup>

Such an extreme emphasis on the collective was what Adorno wanted to reject. In his remarks at the conference, Adorno proposed abstraction as a means of rejecting any possibility of the individual becoming so consumed by figural representation that they could not maintain a critical distance.<sup>161</sup>

Such an emphasis on abstraction can be seen in works from the period, such as Louise Rösler's collage *Die Strasse* from 1951. Through her challenge of the pictorial space, her use of discarded candy wrappers, and her depiction of the street, Rösler utilises both modernist and postmodern representations of the subject to present an abstract work which exposes the malleability and strong ambivalence of West German identity at this time. With one paradigm of identity destroyed, the need for a new one is concretised in her work. Her reconsideration of the frame proposes a challenge to subjectivity, which her materials and her subject matter redouble. Together, all these elements capture the ambivalence and indecision of the time. Far from being peripheral, Rösler's work offers a new way to see the subject at a pivotal time in German intellectual history.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>161</sup> Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, p 104.

## Artworks



Fig 1. Louise Rösler. *Die Strasse*. 1951. Wax Paper, cellophane, on cardboard. Reisinger-Busch Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts.



Fig 2. Mammen, Jeanne. *Ohne Titel (Profile)*. 1945-6. Oil and wire on Cardboard. Jeanne-Mammen-Stiftung, Berlin.



Fig 3. Uhlmann, Hans. *Männlicher Kopf*. 1942. Steel Sheet. Lehbruck Museum, Duisinburg.



Fig 4. Nay, Ernst Wilhelm. *Sibylle*. 1945. Gouache on Cardboard. Ernst Wilhelm Nay Stiftung, Cologne.



Fig 5. Wilhelm Rudolph. *Mathildenstraße*. 1945-6.  
Woodcut. Städtische Galerie, Dresden.



Fig 6. Wilhelm Rudolph. *Zöllnerstraße*. 1945-6.  
Woodcut. Städtische Galerie, Dresden.



Fig 7. Wilhelm Rudolph. *Zöllnersraße (later state)*.  
1945-6. Woodcut. Städtische Galerie, Dresden.



Fig 8. Erwin Spuler. *Zerbombte Häuser*. 1946/1948.  
Oil on Plywood. Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe,  
Germany.



Fig 9. A plate from Alfred Vogel's text "Erlehere und Rassenkunde in bildlicher Darstellung". 1938. National Holocaust Museum.



Fig 10. Arno Breker. *Bereitschaft*. 1937. Bronze. Formerly at the Zeppelinfeld, Nuremberg.



Fig 11. Louise Rösler. *Die Strasse*. 1951. Wax Paper, cellophane, on cardboard. Reisinger-Busch Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts.



Fig 12. Louise Rösler. *Die Strasse*. 1951. Wax Paper, cellophane, on cardboard. Reisinger-Busch Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts.



Fig 13. Louise Rösler. *Die Strasse*. 1951. (Detail). Wax Paper, cellophane, on cardboard. Reisinger-Busch Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts.



Fig 14. Louise Rösler. *Die Strasse*. 1951. (Detail) Wax Paper, cellophane, on cardboard. Reisinger-Busch Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts.



Fig. 15. Hannah Höch. *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands*. 1919. Paper on Cardboard, Collage. Staatliche Museen zur Berlin. Berlin,



Fig. 16 Kurt Schwitters. *Merzbild Rossfeldt*. 1919. Assemblage. Private Collection.



Fig. 17. Kurt Schwitters. *Die Heilige Nacht von Antonio Allegri Gen. Correggio*. 1947. Collage. Private Collection, Lugano.



Fig 18. Picasso, Pablo. *Verre et bouteille de Suze*. 1912. Charcoal, collage, gouache, cardboard. Washington University Gallery, St Louis, MO, US.





Fig 19. Camille Pissarro. *The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning*. 1897. Oil on Canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US.



Fig 20. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Der rote Turm in Halle*. 1915. Oil on Canvas. Museum Folkwang, Germany.

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