

Art as a Weapon

Frans Seiwert and the Cologne Progressives

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Art has a long history of use as a propaganda weapon by the powerful, who have patronised particular forms of art and particular artists as a means of enhancing or glorifying their own position. The icon-like portraits of Queen Elizabeth I provide an obvious example, as artists were forbidden to paint other than an officially approved likeness. More recently, the harnessing of art to commodity production - to sell products and create a particular, favourable image of the multi-national corporation is a phenomenon we are all familiar with. Occasionally, however, attempts have been made to transform art into a political weapon; to use it as a means of overthrowing a cruel and unjust social system.

In order to achieve this, artists have had to periodically rethink the whole nature and language of art so that they could challenge the state and the dominant cultural values that underpin both state and economy. This is why new cultural avant-gardes have frequently been linked to anarchism or socialism, their radical politics informing their radical artistic stance. The post-Impressionists and the Surrealists provide ready examples. Attempts to construct a politically engaged art have usually been most successful during times of political ferment, when the culture of the ruling class is already under siege, as during the post First World War Weimar Republic (1918-1933) when Germany was deeply divided and torn by armed conflict.

Art historians have tended to focus mainly on the Expressionist movement and Dada during this period, overlooking the work of the political constructivists, the 'Cologne Progressives', a movement which grew out of Expressionism and Dada, and was a contemporary of both. As with Expressionism and Dada the Cologne Progressives were heavily influenced by anarchism, and many of the political constructivists contributed to a range of anarchist and socialist publications.

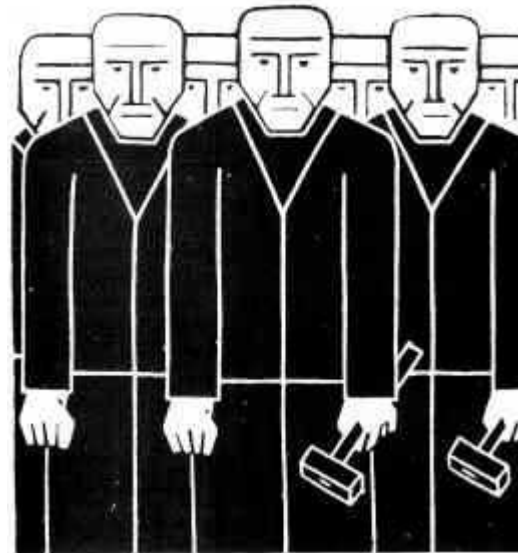


Fig 1. Hans Schmitz - Mass



Fig 2. Franz Seiwert - Solidarity

The Cologne Progressives were a loose grouping of artists initially centred on Cologne and Dusseldorf, which for the last years of its existence produced the radical art magazine *A bis Z* (1929-1933). Its aims and ideals were, however, shared by artists from elsewhere, and the group eventually included members in Prague, Moscow, Vienna, Amsterdam and Paris. The members of the Progressives all saw their primary purpose as developing visual weapons for the political and social struggle of an oppressed working class against the rich and powerful. They sought to express complex political ideas in simple visual terms, exposing not the nature of the capitalist system, but its causes, and suggesting revolutionary solutions.

Frans Seiwert, Heinrich Hoerle and Gerd Arntz, the principle members of this group were barely in their twenties when the war came to an end, and although they had already taken part in the anti-war movement, their period of major creativity only began with the Weimar years. They were among the most radical of the politically active artists of the time, identifying principally with the council communist organisation the Allgemeine Arbeiter Union, although they also had connections with the anarcho-syndicalist FAUD, the KAPD (Communist Workers Party) and the KPD (Communist Party). They were also active contributors to the journal *Die Aktion*, edited by the anarchist Franz Pfemfert, for which they provided title-page-illustrations, and articles. Their artistic influence lay in Expressionism and in the early religious art of their area. As Gerd Arntz

subsequently wrote about Seiwert:

He was very strong in his primitivism as the early Christians (ie Rhenish Primitives). We all came from the old paintings and the early woodcuts.

In fact Seiwert was originally a Catholic, who broke with the Church for its failure to condemn the horrors of World War I.

Although they displayed artistic links with the Dutch De Stijl, and with Russian Constructivism and Suprematism, the work of the Progressives differed from these movements in two ways; it was overtly political in its content, and it was almost exclusively representational and so retained an easy intelligibility - important because their art was not produced for the gallery, the art critic or other artists, but for ordinary people. The subject matter of their art, and the form in which it was executed was largely determined by their political beliefs. They also sought to break down the cultural exclusivity of art, by using an artistic language that could be easily understood, and which was widely disseminated in a form suited to the mass society created by capitalism. So they frequently utilised the woodcut or the linocut, which could be readily reproduced in the papers like *Die Aktion* and *Der Ziegelbrenner*.

The political constructivists were anxious to de-individualise art, and tended to concentrate in their work on groups and classes, and not on individual characters. Individuals are represented only to emphasise their powerlessness, or their subject position, concepts such as solidarity by grouping people together. (see figs 1 and 2) Figures were schematised to the point where they became completely anonymous - as anonymous and de-individualised as capitalism made them. This transformation of form was just as important as the transformation of content. Seiwert, who was the main theoretician of the Progressives, wanted to create a new art of the working class which would not just come from putting a proletarian prefix to bourgeois styles. Consequently the Progressives were determined to develop a new style which involved a rejection of gallery art:

If one correctly conceives labour as the maintenance of life of the individual and of the whole, then art is nothing other than the visualisation of the organisation of labour and of life. Panel painting, which was created not accidentally, but from an inner necessity coinciding with the rise of modern Capitalism, becomes inconceivable. Anyway, an individual work of art as confirmation of an egocentric type of person on the one hand, and, on the other, in the hands of its owner, as confirmation of his title as possessor, will no longer be possible. (Seiwert A bis Z 1932)

Rejection of panel, or easel painting, was also clearly seen in Seiwert's response to Kokoschka. During street-fighting in Dresden during the right-wing Kapp Putsch, a shot fired by defending workers damaged Rubens' painting *Bathsheba*. Ignoring the casualties (35 were killed and 151 wounded in the fighting) Kokoschka distributed a leaflet to defend the Rubens, beseeching the workers to fight elsewhere, because 'the saving of such elevating works of art was in the end much greater than any political action'. Seiwert's response was immediate. Rubens' art had long been dead, he wrote, 'For a few hundred years we have had enormous holes in gigantic frames'. Such art paralysed the will of the present generation: 'it weighs heavily on us and prevents us from acting'.



Fig 4. Franz Seiwert - Ret Marut



Fig 3. Heinrich Hoerle - Cover for *Die Aktion*

Seiwert's involvement with a number of anti-war groups during World War 1 was crucial in determining the later development of the Progressives. Franz Pfemfert, the editor of *Die Aktion* had achieved a remarkable fusion of art and politics in his determination to create a mass-circulation anti-war paper, and this combination was carried across into the work of the Progressives, who saw little difference between their art and their political activity. Indeed, the political trajectory of the Progressives paralleled that of Pfemfert and *Die Aktion*, as he moved from anarchism to council communism. Hoerle and Seiwert continued to contribute to *Die Aktion* up until their deaths. (see fig. 3)

Seiwert and Hoerle were close friends of Ret Marut, the editor of *Der Ziegelbrenner*, the fiery, clandestine anarchist magazine and some of Seiwert's first published graphics appeared in *Der Ziegelbrenner*.

Marut had been an active participant in the Munich 'soviet' of 1919, and had narrowly escaped the firing squad after the soviet's collapse. While he was in hiding from the counter-revolutionary death squads, Seiwert and several of the other 'Progressives' notably Hoerle, Freundlich and Hans Schmitz, helped with the production and distribution of the paper. Marut fled Germany for Mexico, where he became famous as the writer B. Traven. In order to protect his real identity he severed nearly all his contacts, the sole exception being Seiwert. Apart

from the illustrations for *Der Ziegelbrenner*, Seiwert also drew a sketch of Marut, and painted his portrait. (fig. 4)

Seiwert's contribution to the socialist and anarchist press also included many articles about the social role of art, commentary on the events of the time, and on anarchist themes, notably on the differences between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian communism, identifying himself with the latter. He also wrote an article on the anarchist writer Erich Mühsam, and with the French author Tristan Remy co-authored *Erich Mühsam: Choix de Poesie* (Lyon, 1924) which included an essay by him entitled *Erich Mühsam: the militant*.

Seiwert's most significant achievement was to co-edit, with fellow-artist Hoerle and Walter Stern thirty issues of the paper *A bis Z*, between October 1929 and January 1933. The first issue featured the work of fellow Progressives on the cover: a painting by Hoerle, another / by the Polish artist Jankel Adler, who later fled to Britain, and became involved with the group around *War Commentary* / *Freedom*, a connection for which the British government refused his application for citizenship. A sculpture by Otto Freundlich was also illustrated.

Freundlich had been connected with Seiwert since 1918 when they were both involved in working with the circle around *Die Aktion*: They had subsequently participated in the Congress of the Union of Progressive International Artists held in Düsseldorf in May 1922. Members of the Berlin 'Kommune' group, which included Freundlich, Raoul Hausmann, Adler, Stanislaw Kubicki and Malgorzata Kubicka, launched a fierce attack in the plenary session against art dealers, and against some artists who had supported the War. Seiwert and Gert Wollheim (another artist with anarchist sympathies) supported the attack by the 'Kommune' group. Freundlich's sculpture was singled out for criticism by the Nazis after they gained power and the catalogue for the Nazi exhibition of so-called 'degenerate art' *Entartete Kunst*, featured one of Freundlich's sculptures on the catalogue cover. Freundlich himself died in a Nazi concentration camp during the war.

Each issue of *A bis Z* reproduced the artistic work of the Progressives, or introduced readers to the various traditions that had influenced them: religious art, cave paintings and so on. The example of Pfemfert's *Die Aktion* was not lost, and writings on the social role of art appeared alongside extracts from Bakunin's writings, short reviews of books written by Mühsam and Alexander Berkman and articles on the theory of council communism. Raoul Hausmann, a pioneer of Berlin Dada in the magazine *Die Freie Strasse*, and an early exponent of photomontage, contributed articles on film and photomontage (Hausmann had previously contributed articles to the anarchist *Die Erde* and the *Stirnerite Der Einzige*) and the Hungarian Moholy-Nagy wrote about art and photography.

Artists who became identified with the 'Progressives' through *A bis Z* included Auguste Herbin (Paris), Wladimir Krinski (Moscow), Peter Alma (Amsterdam), August Tschinkel (Prague) and the photographer August Sander (Cologne) whose work was regularly featured in the magazine, as well as Schmitz, Hoerle, Arntz and Freundlich. During its first year of existence *A bis Z* was distributed to contacts in Austria, Switzerland, Poland, Russia, Turkey, Holland, Belgium, France, USA, Mexico, India and Palestine.

The common factor uniting these artists was the way in which their art became an extension of their political activities.

They were populist in their aims seeking to break down art's exclusiveness and develop new forms for art in order to facilitate communication of their ideas. They tried to develop a simple pictorial language which, they hoped, would be understood by the workers to whom their art was directed. This led some of the Progressives, like Gerd Arntz, an art teacher who became head of the Graphics Department of the Vienna Wirtschafts- und Gesellschaftsmuseum to develop the Vienna method of pictorial statistics (isotypes) originally formulated by Otto Neurath. Arntz's art became almost diagrammatic and his work on isotypes involved him in the production of a pictorial atlas in collaboration with Tschinkel and Alma.

Rather than caricature the class enemy, Arntz and the Progressives attempted to visualize the social relationships which gave the ruling class their power. Arntz explained his work like this:

Grosz ... draws the capitalist as an ugly and fat criminal. I did things differently. He can be good-looking, a decent family man with beautiful daughters ... I sought to show the position of the capitalist in the system of production – for that they need not be as ugly as Grosz made them.

and while Grosz showed the worker as a creature of misery, Arntz rejects this view:

We too show hits as miserable because he was a product



Fig 5. Gerd Arntz - War

of miserable circumstances. But with us he was also a revolutionary who tackled things. Our art was to make a contribution to tearing the old society apart. It was propaganda, it attempted to reveal social contrasts and show social opportunities, not just moralising criticism.

Arntz frequently split his pictures into various levels in order to contrast the superficial appearance of the social order with the way things really worked. So above ground the boss canoodles with a whore in a car while below the miners work and die. In Barracks (1927) while the soldiers parade in dress uniform, in the basement beneath them, a man is shot by a firing squad, his head depicted as a rifle-range target. Although Arntz divides some pictures in an obvious way, utilising a natural division between different floors in a building, the picture is sometimes broken in a more sophisticated way, by the beam of a searchlight, or the contrast between light and shadow. (fig. 5)

The use of contrasting areas of solid blacks and whites was a feature of the work of many of the artists grouped around A bis Z, partly because the technique lent itself easily to printed reproduction, and the widespread dissemination of images, partly because the use of solid geometrical areas of black emphasised the feeling of oppression by the industrial system. They saw society as deeply divided, polarised into right and left wing camps, and the use of black and white gave visual expression to that social polarisation.

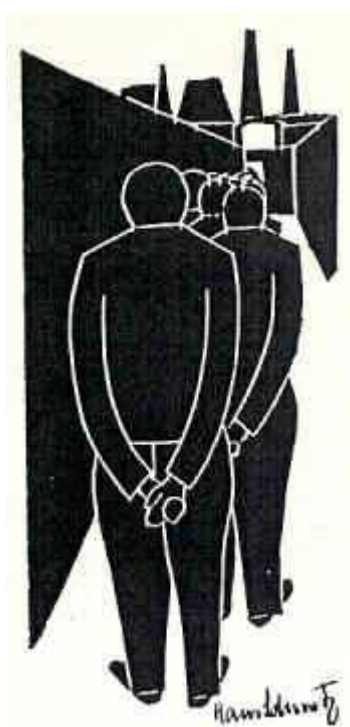


Fig 6. Hans Schmitz - Workers' Walk

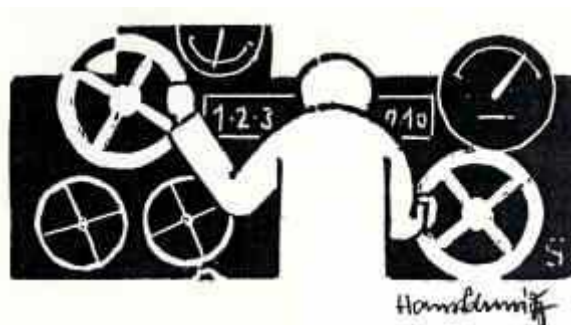
Hans Schmitz also utilised this contrast between black and white: the prison-like qualities of the factory are clearly expressed in Workers' Walk (1922) (fig. 6) its echoes of Van Gogh's La Ronde des Prisonniers reinforced by the heavy, oppressive dominance of the black walls.

Schmitz's studies were interrupted by his conscription into the army. With the revolution at the end of the War, he became a member of the Soldiers' Council in Cologne, and joined the Spartacus League, the left-wing break-away from the Social Democrats, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht which subsequently formed the nucleus of the Communist Party. After resuming his studies in Dusseldorf, he met Seiwert, and helped with the distribution of Der Ziegelbrenner, beginning a period of close co-operation with the Progressives which continued until 1933. In 1922 he was a delegate at an anarchist Congress in Berlin. The Nazi rise to power resulted in a break in his work, and much of his output was destroyed during the air-raids of the Second World War.

His surviving linocuts depict the dehumanised nature of the industrial system, with a physical environment that dominates the individual, rendering the worker an extension of the machine (see fig. 7)

Like the other Progressives Schmitz undertook solidarity work with the Communist International Workers Aid Committee, but as a rule the Progressives kept apart from the Communist Party, and the ASSO, the communist dominated Association of Revolutionary Artists. Seiwert explained the differences between them:

Just because its contents have a tendency to be 'proletarian', making statements about the struggle, solidarity, and class consciousness of the proletariat, bourgeois art has not by any means as yet become proletarian art. Form must be made subservient to content: content must recast form to become content. The work where this happens is created out of the collective consciousness where the self which creates a work is no longer bourgeois individualistic isolation, but a tool of the collective consciousness ... To maintain that when the content of a bourgeois art form makes a statement about proletarian problems this was proletarian art, seems to me a wholly Social-Democratic attitude, and in this context 'Social Democrats' includes those who are members of the Communist Party.



Figur 7. Hans Schmitz - Workers' Training

Seiwert then extends this critique into a more general attack on Communist methods:

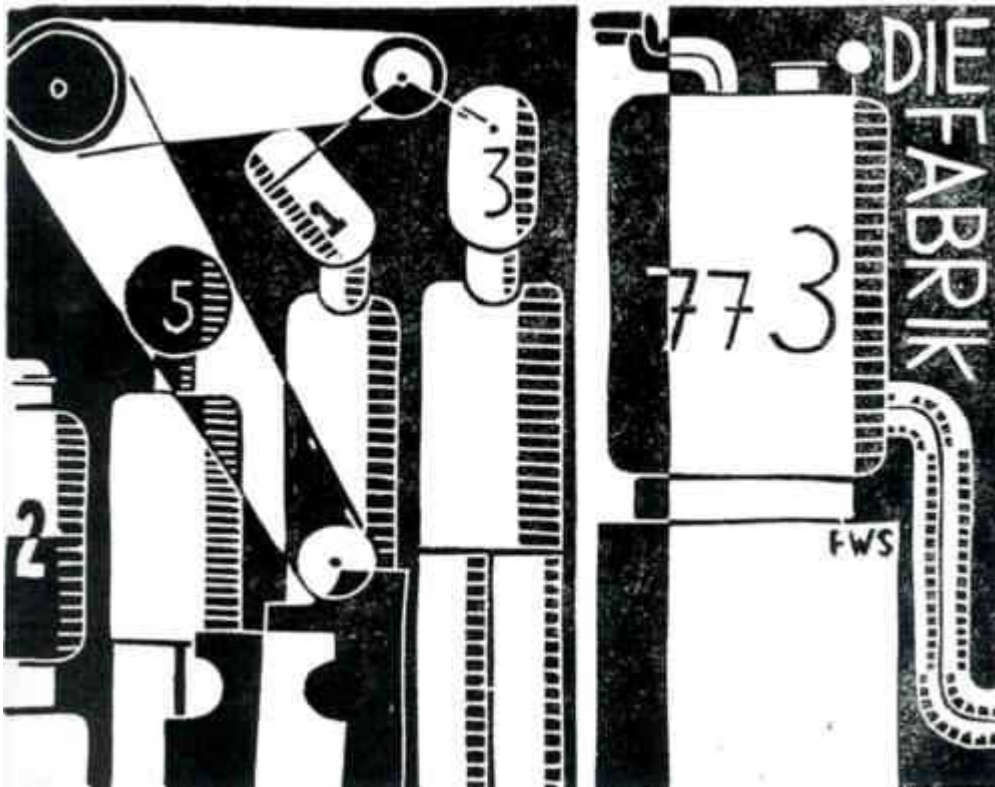


Fig 8. Franz Seiwert - Factory

It is exactly the same attitude which believes that the means of production, in the Capitalist sense, can be redirected from the control of those above to those below in a more far-reaching way than by the regulation of the means of production in a Communist society; the same attitude which believes in taking bourgeois technology from bourgeois industry and using it, in the hope that science developed in the service of the bourgeoisie can contain pure, independent, objective truth and, taken out of the hands of the bourgeoisie, can become science for the proletariat. Yes – science for the proletariat, so that it can remain the proletariat, but

no means by which the proletariat can rise up and free itself.

A Communist society, and with it Communist culture, cannot be created by taking over the positions of Capitalist society and of bourgeois culture. Proletarian art exists when its form is the expression of the organisation of the feeling of solidarity, and of the class consciousness of the masses ...

This statement, in spite of the terminology, encapsulates the anarchist rejection of authoritarian communist attempts to seize and use the state to direct a revolution, and reformulates it in terms of science, technology and culture.



Fig 9. Franz Seiwert - Gustav Landauer

In order to attack capitalist industrialism more effectively Seiwert resorted to a highly stylised representation, and the development of a simple pictorial language, which dialectically conceived, symbolised the opposing forces of capitalism and communism. A chimney, transmission belts, furnace, factory chimney and so on, stood for the inhuman aspects of industrialisation, whilst the sun, stars and trees have a positive value, pointing towards a better, socialist future. They can also have a negative significance, a crossed-out sun would strengthen the evil impression of the industrial scene. People are frequently depicted as being shaped or controlled by the system, and in many of Seiwert's linocuts a person's head is linked to the factory transmission belts to indicate that under capitalism the worker is only a part of the production process. (fig. 8)

Sometimes Seiwert's work was directly in a more political tradition, such as his icon-like portraits of Karl Liebknecht, and the anarchist-socialist Gustav Landauer. (fig. 9) Like Liebknecht, Landauer was murdered by reactionaries during the Revolution of 1918/19. Their portraits were among several of socialist martyrs produced in a small pamphlet *Lebendige*, by Peter Abelen, Anton Räderschneidt, Seiwert, and Angelika Hoerle, who died of tuberculosis when still only 24.

Seiwert also produced a remarkable linocut poster, commemorating the full horror of the execution of the Chicago anarchists in minimalist terms. (fig. 10)

The rise of fascism, and the subsequent war destroyed the group, although Seiwert died early in 1933, of an X-ray burn sustained at the age of 7, and which he suffered from all his life. His death came just before the Nazis could destroy his work, and in all probability, the artist himself.



Fig 10. Franz Seiwert - Chicago 1877

Seiwert and the Progressives tried to wrench art from its uneasy position as a commodity, and transform it into a weapon for communicating revolutionary ideas and ideals. In their attempt they have left us with an inspiring legacy of political images, a coherent, libertarian socialist theory of art, and a practical example of immense personal courage in the face of reaction.

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<http://replay.web.archive.org/20080626072348/http://www.kurasje.org/arksys/archset.htm>