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## Touch, Absorption, and Radical Politics in the Magazine

The Case of John Heartfield

Imagine a reader of the April 1931 special issue of the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (AIZ) «Life and Struggle of the Black Race» thumbing through the compellingly designed pages of this radical Left photography magazine. (Figs. 1–2) Her eyes may linger over certain jolting picture layouts and intently absorb particular passages of text, or they may skim over the material swiftly and restlessly, until her right hand turns the page. Her warm flesh animates the inert paper, leafing it from right to left, or possibly in reverse from right to left, perhaps doubling back every now and again to return to a specific page. Each gesture, whether forward or backward, displaces the visual provocations of one two-page layout by overlaying it with another one. She does so until she reaches the final page, allowing the last leaf of paper to join the others, their union secured by the magazine’s binding. The back cover then vies for her attention. Perhaps it succeeds, and she lingers; perhaps it does not, and she puts the magazine aside, her attention directed elsewhere. Unfolding in time, this process of reading can be variously slow or hurried, absorbed or distracted, progressive or reversed, depending on both internal and external circumstances. Though, the material limitations of the thin printed paper will encourage a modicum of leisure, for turning the pages too quickly will tear them. More than just an optical and cognitive process of decoding text-image combinations to decipher their meaning, reading the magazine is an active, embodied prac-



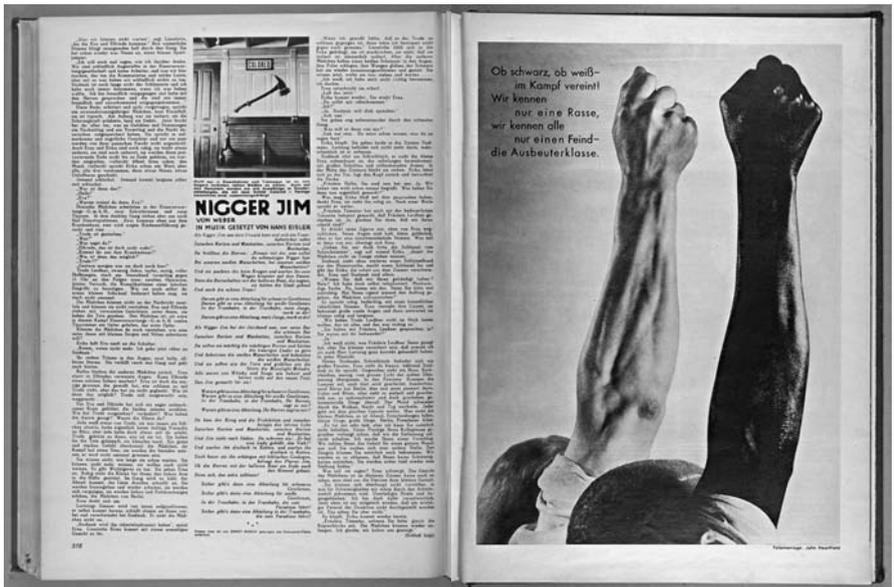


2 «Die schwarze Rasse stößt zur roten Front!», AIZ 1931, vol. 10, no. 26, p. 510–511.

tice of temporal duration, involving repetitive movement, touch, and emotional response. This combination of sensate experiences, I will argue, is an operation anticipated and harnessed by the AIZ for the purposes of political persuasion.

Immersed in the minutia of this AIZ's contents – which includes both uplifting accounts regarding African empowerment and counter-imperial struggle and disturbing photo-essays about backbreaking labor, physical transgression, and exploitation – the reader is arrested by an emphatically simple, visually bold photomontage by John Heartfield on page 517, the fourth leaf of the magazine. (Fig. 3) Two muscular, male arms – one white, one black – thrust forcefully and in unison along the right-hand side of the page, their fingers clenched in tight fists. They are anchored to two bodies, though only the backs of their heads are visible in the lower left. A third fist and forearm enters her field of vision. It is her own limb, clasping the page and enfolded right alongside it, inadvertently joining in the display of solidarity and assimilating the real body within the territory of photographic illusionism. Though she may be oblivious to the operations of this montage, the accompanying poem, printed in clean, sans-serif typeface, further weaves her into the experience of solidarity. Not only does its declarative «we» implicitly include the reader, its proclamatory cadences and rhythmic meter amplify the marcato of robust unity in the photomontage, the text an amplification of a visually-experienced state.

Whether black, or white –  
 in struggle united!  
 We know  
 only one race  
 We all know only one enemy –  
 the exploiting class.



3 John Heartfield, «Wheather Black or White...», *AIZ*, 1931, vol. 10, no. 26, p. 516–517.

The photomontage adroitly incorporates the unselfconscious act of holding and reading the *AIZ* into a political act, transforming bodily gesture into an inadvertent endorsement of Communist politics. The depicted figures present a proletarian *Rückenfigur*, a visual echo of the reading head, which is slightly turned to the right page, and of the holding hand that encloses the magazine. The motif of the clenched fist, the symbol of communist solidarity, was repeatedly invoked in Heartfield's photomontages and duplicated by the reader's own hand which grasps the journal along its right edge, effecting a continuity between photograph and the beholder's body. Their message of cohesion became all the more urgent after the consolidation of fascism in Europe and the rise of the Popular Front, the *AIZ* reader quite possibly in exile. When not on the cover or back page, Heartfield's montages were printed on the right hand page of the journal, often within the first few pages, clasped in the reader's hands and then turned in the direction of reading, thereby subtly binding the active reading body into the orbit of the picture.

This essay interrogates the sentient practice of reading magazines as component of their aesthetics – and here I invoke the sensorial, embodied breadth of the term, which originally meant «perceptive by feeling», not solely judgments of beauty.<sup>1</sup> In view of the burgeoning literature on artists' magazines, I aim to complicate the discourses surrounding their historical contexts and intertexts, production and reception, by expanding the frame of inquiry from studies of form and content to the material and sensorial aspects of perception, aided by the growing scholarship on affect. In the instance of Heartfield's contributions to the culture of magazines in interwar Germany, this has been a productive avenue of investigation, revealing a complex practice of subjective interpellation and political persuasion through a mechanically-replicated mass medium. Instrumental in the conception and production of Berlin Dada magazines, Heartfield continued

to explore the affective potential of photomontage in the context of left-wing magazines and book jackets throughout his career. The photomontages that he published in the *AIZ* represent a sustained exploration of his efforts and provide instructive case study for the affective dimensions of magazine reading. What follows is a fragment of a forthcoming book-length study of John Heartfield's *AIZ* photomontages, intertwining touch and vision, the body and perception in the context of reading a magazine.<sup>2</sup>

In the instance of the April 1931 issue, the photographs, texts and their accompanying layouts do their utmost to summon an empathic reader response on a haptic, intuitive register. This edition is about human skin: its color, its fragility, its pain, and its power (or imposed lack thereof). The large cover photograph depicts a black man who has been shackled to an iron gate. His head hangs heavily, and his ignominious prison attire, printed with bold, horizontal black-and-white stripes, is formally repeated by the vertical metal bars through which his hands have been thrust and handcuffed. The experience of bodily vulnerability is replayed within the magazine through stories of suffering, demeaning physical inspections, grinding labor, and human subjugation; we see raw flesh at the mercy of steel chains, heavy parcels, stinging whips, and coarse hangmen's nooses. In this context, Heartfield's picture of upthrust arms resonates powerfully: it deliberately proposes an empowering counterpoint to the misery of the surrounding pages. The clenched fists repeat and enlarge the defiant gesture of Lamine Senghour two pages previously (page 511), who died an agonizing death in a French prison. (Fig. 2) Reproduced at approximately 80% of a life-sized limb, the two forceful arms inspire the viewer to join in uplifting, indignant solidarity. Though mechanical replication blocks out the minute details of the African arm, the surface detail of the Caucasian arm – the textures of flesh, concavities of musculature, even the rough skin of the elbow – summons corporeal proximity through photographic likeness. Touch, visual perception, and sensory empathy fold into one another, inflecting the beholder's reception in a manner that seeks to move, inspire, and galvanize a mass audience, one reader at a time.

I have argued extensively elsewhere that Heartfield's *AIZ* photomontages endeavor to summon the embodied viewer haptically, optically, and psychologically in order to agitate on behalf of the radical Left.<sup>3</sup> Their goal was to create a community of revolutionary-minded citizens who would actively contribute to radical social change. The beholder of the photomontage completes the work, a cognitive operation woven into the conception of Heartfield's project. By deliberately repressing the traces of manufacture in his photomontages, Heartfield conjured an organic pictorial world that enticed his readers to indulge, however briefly, in a seamless illusionism that simultaneously imitated and parodied the interwar photojournalistic culture industry. In a labor-intensive process, Heartfield eliminated the overt traces of making a photomontage, which necessitates physical cuts in the photographic surface that has been excised from its original context with a sharp blade. In contrast to his earlier Dada photomontages, which reveled in the disjunctive, occasionally violent, fissures between extracted parts, Heartfield's method for *AIZ* montage production involved mending those interstitial rips like a surgeon sutures a wound. He first flattened any visible seams by pressing and reworking the montages between glass plates. The montages were then retouched to further conceal the seams of rupture, smoothing transitions

and heightening tonal contrasts to create the illusion of a continuous reality. That seamless illusionism was augmented by the magazine's process of production and reproduction, which involved re-photographing the preparatory artwork and replicating it through the copper-plate photogravure process in which the *AIZ* was printed. The result was a photomontage characterized by a continuity of surface, bound into and integral with the aesthetics of the mass-circulation journal, in critical dialogue with the photographs and photo-reportages that preceded and followed it – occasionally in content, but primarily through imitation of their form.

Drawing on the term «suture» in film theory, I have examined how Heartfield's photomontages summon their beholder, somatically and psychologically, in the service of leftist agitation. In its most basic sense, suture pertains to the ways in which the viewer is made to be unaware of the filmic experience as constructed, for the presence of the filmic apparatus – invasive cameras, blinding lights, multiple retakes, performative artifice, the time-consuming process of editing – has been suppressed, or sutured, in order to weave the viewer into a fictional totality. This is what Walter Benjamin termed the «equipment-free aspect of reality».<sup>4</sup> That «weaving» or «binding» of the viewer into identification with characters and narrative occurs through various psychological, ideological, and mechanical tactics, including desire, empathy, aversion, fear, incompleteness or lack, through the use of photographic close-ups, cropping, shifting narrative voices, shot-to-shot relationships, etc.<sup>5</sup> Transferring and adjusting these concepts to Heartfield's *AIZ* photomontage provides a framework for conceptualizing the ways in which his seamlessly constructed photomontages summon and agitate the beholder on multiple cognitive and corporeal registers. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has observed, the question of viewer identification in photography has been largely overlooked.<sup>6</sup> While I borrow from film theory, I consider Heartfield's sutured works to be ontologically distinct from filmic practice, structurally and aesthetically embedded in the mass picture press, of which the *AIZ* was but one salient example. While the cinematic viewer is enveloped in darkness, allowing the visual-aural narrative to unfold around her sentient, still body, the reader of the magazine physically envelops the printed pages, determining the pace of progress with her hands. Though «suture» can account for being bound up into the individual visual field of a single montage, focused attention is rivalled by the periphery, be it competing text and image on the facing page or by the contingencies of the environment.

How do we theorize spectatorial investment in a modern photographic magazine, in which reading text, apprehending an image, the bodily gesture of page-turning, and variable environments comprise the experience of looking? The magazine itself is a mobile and transformative entity, an ephemeral medium that circulates in a commodified field of print culture. The *AIZ*, for example, was passed from hand to hand in urban or public spheres – from the *Kolporteur*, or magazine seller, to the consumer; from one reader to another in the tavern, in the park, in the home, deliberately left behind to be picked up by another, thereby expanding the leftist community – at least, as the editors of the *AIZ* envisioned it.<sup>7</sup> When in exile, the *AIZ* manufactured miniature reproductions which were smuggled into Nazi Germany, hidden in pockets or seams close to the body or concealed inside the lining of suitcases or car tires. This practice was

part of a broader tactic of smuggling Communist literature into Germany, often disguised as something else, such as a radio advertisement, a brochure on hygiene, or a Rolleiflex instruction booklet.<sup>8</sup>

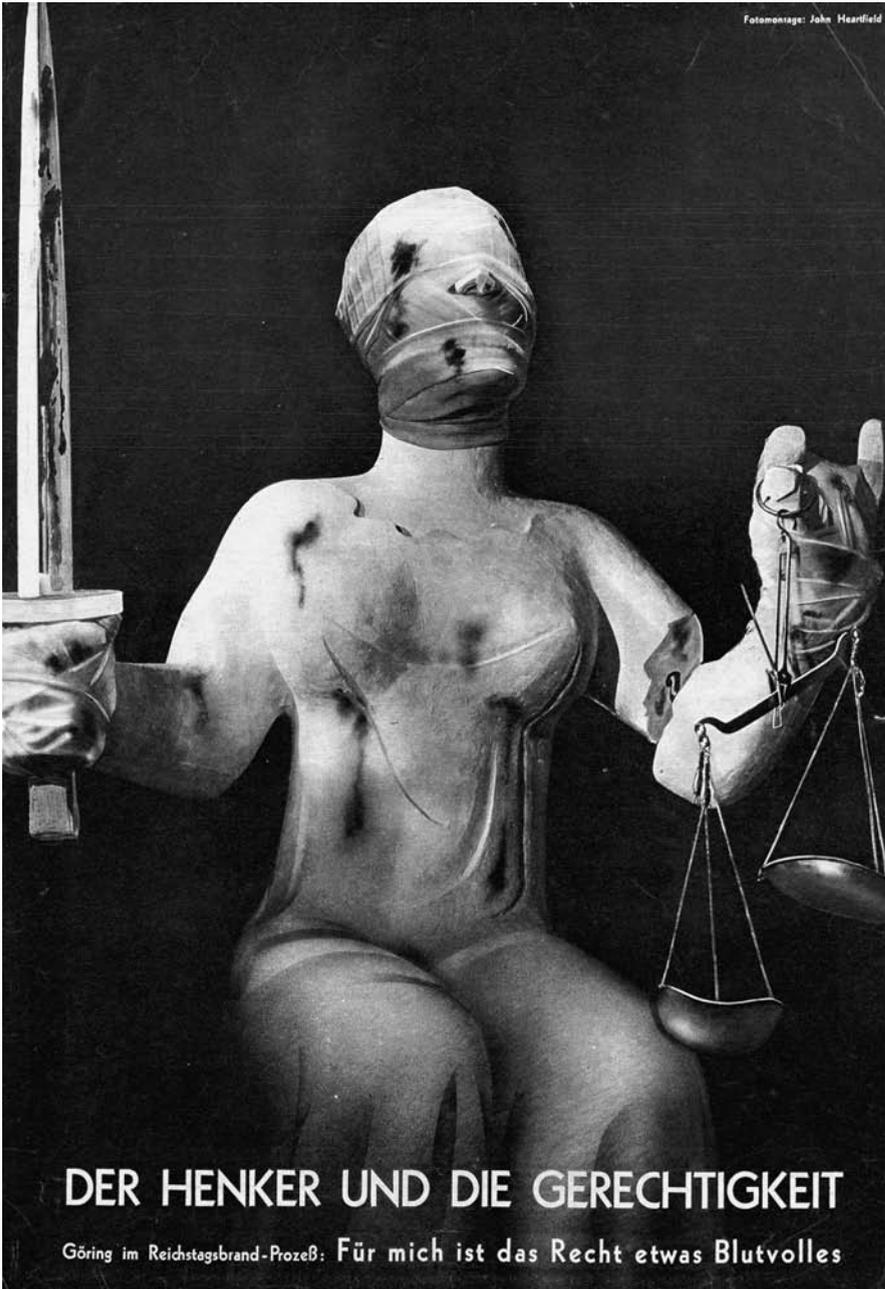
Scholarly and theoretical accounts have tended to focus on theories of visual distraction in the interwar period, positing the assimilation of competing visual, aural, and environmental fragments as either nervous overstimulation, or an active, revolutionary mode of perception appropriate to the conditions of modern visual communication. Or both. For many of these writers, which include Heartfield's contemporaries Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Bertolt Brecht, László Moholy-Nagy, and Jan Tschichold, the unitary, static image that solicits immersion and contemplation is linked to enervated bourgeois aestheticism and mental lassitude. The visually kinetic compositions of Moholy-Nagy, for instance, whose intellectual friendship to Walter Benjamin has been analyzed at length by Frederic Schwartz, represent the dynamic, shifting, and optically challenging viewing positions both men considered conducive to vital insight.<sup>9</sup> Heartfield's AIZ photomontages, with their unitary composition, organic construction, and structured vertical buildup might, by these lights, look retrograde not revolutionary. Yet taken in their immediate material context, Heartfield's montages are studied responses to the question of attention in a busy, dynamic visual and narrative field, summoning the embodied reader through an interplay of sensorial tactics that entice immersion not distraction. A dedicated Communist and an internationally celebrated avant-garde graphic designer, Heartfield's experience was wrought in the real-market conditions of his brother's book publication business and the often virulent political competition of the Weimar Republic. Heartfield offers different responses to the question of visual attention than those of his often-cited contemporaries – responses that demand closer critical consideration.

The proliferation of mechanically-reproduced images in the 1920s and 1930s in illustrated magazines, photo books, photojournalism, and persuasive photomontage has been repeatedly linked to a period of dramatic sensory change. Such perceptual shifts involved the negotiation, management, and increasingly, the exploitation, of visual-sensory stimuli on cultural, political, and economic fronts. Photojournalism, as Patrice Petro has argued, is a privileged site of synthesis of the everyday and the sensational.<sup>10</sup> Heartfield was well aware that signs operate sensuously; he imparted to his wide range of works – film, theatre sets, two-dimensional photomontages, magazine covers, book jackets – a haptic dimension designed to variously stimulate, amuse, agitate, disturb, or shock the viewer.<sup>11</sup> Experiments with typography, layouts, color and composition demonstrate an interest in jolting habitual patterns of perception to generate an active, critical beholder. The senses, in other words, did not just passively receive stimuli in Heartfield's work, but were implicitly conceptualized as mediators of psychological and cognitive shifts. The subject's senses were already historically conditioned by a range of modern experiences, such as war and shock; speed, simultaneity, and materiality of urbanization and industrialization; an increasingly aggressive commodity culture vying for the gaze and pocketbook, using *Lichtreklame*, photography, photomontage, and experimental typography. Heartfield, who was highly attuned to the affective potential of modern media, negotiated manifold aspects of contemporary sensory experience in his voluminous output.

In his contributions to Dada magazines, such as *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball* or *Der Dada*, Heartfield explored the synaesthetic effects of pictorial juxtaposition, disruption, and incongruity fused with typographical experimentation and politicized with injections of rancorous irony. While keen to agitate the beholder on multiple sensory registers simultaneously – indeed, as Andrés Mario Zervigón has noted, Heartfield and his co-dadaists produced optically-signified sound, movement, and smell through intermedial pictorial strategies – these montages operate predominantly optically.<sup>12</sup> That is, their visual effects – such as contrast of scale, disjunctive surfaces, bold and deliberately inconsistent typographies – summon somatic responses, but the self-conscious activation of physical touch is limited to the occasional inclusion of lateral typeface, which would prompt the reader to either turn her head or rotate the page ninety degrees to read the text. Heartfield's inventive and widely admired book jackets operate in response to a different brief, namely to attract the consumer's attention in the competitive market and window display culture of books. Though increasingly confident in their sensory entreaties, incorporating tactics from a range of media, the book jackets' solicitation of touch similarly remains secondary to their visual summons. This is largely because of their interpellative function in the marketplace of books and their subsequent cultural function as commodity objects of value. In his *AIZ* work, however, Heartfield develops the haptic dimension more consistently, incorporating the embodied dynamics of be-holding within the political ambitions of the magazine. In contrast to a book – or even a limited-edition artists' magazine – which are often-prized objects of individual consumption and cultural worth, the mass-circulation magazine is a medium designed for obsolescence, at the very latest by the subsequent issue. While the *AIZ* was certainly collected and cherished by its readership, its production apparatus functioned on the premise of the up-to-dateness of weekly news reporting. Heartfield's tactics of viewer solicitation intervened in an energetic, competitive visual field, determined not only to arrest and absorb attention but to make a prolonged impact.

Paradoxically, one of the effects of machinic replication was to reinstitute a physical intimacy with the image, facilitating proximity to normally distant objects or phenomena.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the viewer of the magazine manually handles photographs of faraway objects, uniting through skin the surfaces of photomechanical replication and the human body. Touch, as Constance Classen has memorably phrased it, «annihilates distance».<sup>14</sup> In the experience of perusing a magazine, touch and sight collaborate in the temporal unfolding of reading, the internalization of content, and the processes of cognition. As specialized skin tissue, vision is an extension of touch; touch represents a modality of vision.<sup>15</sup> Since Descartes, vision has been theorized as the rational sense, superior in the hierarchy of senses for its ability to maintain a distance and control.<sup>16</sup> Philosophical countermodels suggest that the intermingling of senses cultivates nearness instead of separation, including Peter Sloterdijk's pre-rational «physiognomic sense» which,

provides a key to all that which reveals our proximity to the environment. Its secret is intimacy, not distance; it dispenses not a matter-of-fact but a convivial knowledge of things. It knows that everything has a form and that every form talks to us in multiple ways. The skin can hear, the ears have the capacity to see, the eyes can distinguish warm from cold.<sup>17</sup>



4 John Heartfield, «The Executioner and Justice», in: *AIZ*, 30. November 1933, vol. 12, no. 47, p. 787.

Not coincidentally, the Dadaists figure in Sloterdijk's account as models for critical and sensory subversion. Pliable and tangible like skin, the materiality of the magazine is operative as a microprecognition just at the threshold of consciousness, as Brian Massumi characterizes this subtle perceiving, but nevertheless present to the beholder.<sup>18</sup> In the absence of other forms of tactile gratification, photographic magazines like the *AIZ* can elicit haptic experience through close-ups, large scale reproductions, and juxtapositions of content and scale. Vision becomes a conduit to other senses.

Heartfield used the limitations of the single page format to his advantage, often conjuring bodies in their verticality, materiality, gravity and weight as deliberate counterpresences to our reading, seated selves. One representative instance is his November 1933 photomontage «The Executioner and Justice», which confronts the embodied reader with a muted, blinded, bandaged, bloodied and broken sculpture who holds imbalanced scales in the upraised arm on the right, nearest to our own, and a blood-soaked sword in the left (Fig. 4) While her large, solid body mimics our reading posture, she cannot «see» us seeing her, for the exchange of gazes is arrested by the dressings that cover her face. Though made of inanimate material – presumably plaster – she is rendered sensate and vulnerable, for her body magically yields blood stains and bruises as if she were made of flesh, not stone. The body to be pained is ours, however; we are meant to empathize with the brutalized form that we hold between our hands, sensing pain, frailty, and defiance at the same time. Although the surface of her body – her «flesh» – is visibly mottled, as if having sustained aggression to the side of her neck and shoulders that grasp the scales, her chin is raised courageously as a sign of moral endurance in the face of persecution. The montage compels through its compositional simplicity combined with psycho-somatic affect, a penetrating contrast to the facing page whose layout of «Pictures of the Week» (Bilder der Woche) is a visually repetitive quartet of photographs and text, punctuated by an ad for a raffle. Heartfield's photomontage summons compassion through pain; visual perceptions, as Juhani Pallasmaa observes, are woven into a haptic continuum of the self.<sup>19</sup>

In the examples isolated here, touch and holding the magazine becomes a politically meaningful act, summoning proximity and empathy through sensate transmissions. Moreover, the *process* of reading a magazine – of thumbing through pages of text and images over time, interspersing motion with the stillness of reading – is potentially radical, for as Massumi emphasizes, the moving, perceptive body is open, transformative, and intersubjective.<sup>20</sup> The body is in the here and now and simultaneously open to elsewhere, transported through the act of reading to worlds outside and beyond the body. Those worlds also enter the body, internalized through reading. Reading the photographic magazine, which brings the phenomenal world within the orbit of our hands, momentarily integrates the beholding body with other phenomenal bodies – mass replicated image worlds textured by text. We are always in relation to other bodies, other spaces, beyond our own; we are not substantive but interdependent.<sup>21</sup> Herein lies the potential for ideological persuasion, through the empathy, horror, despair, or indignance that Heartfield's montages provoke. The emotional intensity of that affect, which is propelled by photographic likeness, jolted by elemental experiences such as pain, and reinforced by language, resonates in the beholding



5 John Heartfield: Zeitausschnitte, Fotomontagen 1918–1938, Berlinische Galerie, 2009.

body as a biochemical trace even after the impetus has left the perceptual field. Intensity, Massumi argues, is a state of suspense, capable of disrupting linear progress through time with momentary stasis, absorption, and potential – «a hole in time».<sup>22</sup> Integrating affective intensity with strong, simple graphics, Heartfield not only captures and sustains reader’s attention in a busy visual field but also seeks to produce political and psychological resonance after the magazine has been put aside.

To view Heartfield’s AIZ work in framed isolation, as is the mode of most exhibitions, is to be confronted by the visual impact of his skillful pictures. (Fig. 5) But it is also to be distanced from the compelling recursive, intersubjective, and interactive dimension of his work in the rich material context of a magazine. When taken out of their constitutive environment, they operate as compelling, but inert matter on the wall, rather than part of a dynamic processes of cognition, sensation, and persuasion. As Heartfield’s works show, artistic practice conceived within the physical and conceptual parameters of a magazine has the potential to engage the beholding subject on cross-sensory registers. Though this essay examines one particular historical example, Heartfield’s explorations in the multi-sensate appeal of a material print culture suggest compelling avenues of investigation not only for scholarship on artists’ magazines but also for contemporary practice, in a perceptual world dominated by electronic media. Conceived for the everyday rather than the extraordinary, the tactile rather than the virtual, artistic practice within magazines offers an alternative space for intimate, intersubjective, engaged encounters.

## Annotations

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1 See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford 1990 and Susan Buck-Morss, «Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered», in: *October*, Autumn 1992, no. 62, p. 3–41.

2 Sabine T. Kriebel, *Revolutionary Beauty: John Heartfield, Political Photomontage, and the Antifascist Imaginary, 1929–1938*, forthcoming with University of California Press.

3 Sabine T. Kriebel, «Manufacturing Discontent: John Heartfield's Mass Medium», in: *New German Critique*, Summer 2009, vol. 36, no. 2, p. 53–88. My forthcoming book *Revolutionary Beauty: John Heartfield, Photomontage, and the Antifascist Political Imaginary, 1929–1938* investigates this material in greater historical detail.

4 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version*, Cambridge/Mass. 2002, p. 115.

5 Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, Oxford 1983, p. 194–236, Jacques-Alain Miller, «Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)», in: *Screen* 1977/1978, vol. 17, no. 4, p. 24–34, and Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, Bloomington 1981.

6 *Photography Theory*, ed. by James Elkins, New York 2007, p. 258.

7 See two-page spread «Lasst sie wandern! Gebt sie andern!» in: *AIZ*, 1932, no. 36 that narrates the spaces of hand-to-hand transmission of the *AIZ* in various urban environments. Reproduced in Heinz Willmann, *Geschichte der Arbeiter Illustrierten Zeitung, 1921–1938*, Berlin 1974, p. 132–133.

8 The Hoover Institute and Library on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University houses a collection of such documents.

9 Frederic Schwartz, *Blind Spots. Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany*, London 2005.

10 Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets. Women and Melodramatic Representation*, Princeton 1989, p. 34.

11 Brigid Doherty, «See? We Are all Neurasthenics! Or, the Trauma of Dada Montage», in: *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1997, vol. 24, no. 1, p. 82–132; Andrés Mario Zervigón, «A «Political Struwwelpeter»? John Heartfield's Early Film Animation and the Crisis of Photographic Representation», in: *New German Critique*, Summer 2009, no. 107, p. 5–51, and Andrés Mario Zervigón, *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion and the Rise of Avant-Garde Photomontage*, Chicago 2012.

12 Zervigón 2012, p. 11.

13 On mechanical representation and touch, see Patrizia di Bello, «Photography and Sculpture. A Light Touch», in: *Art, History, and the Senses. 1830 to the Present*, ed. by Patrizia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas, Aldershot 2010, p. 19–34.

14 Constance Classen, «Touch in the Museum», in: *The Book of Touch*, ed. by Constance Classen, New York and London 2005, p. 277.

15 See Juhani Palassmaa, *Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses*, New York 2005 and Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham 2002.

16 Consult Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley 1993.

17 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Minneapolis 1987, p. 139–140. On physiognomic fallacy, see Ernst H. Gombrich, «On Physiognomic Perception», in: *Daedalus*, Winter 1960, vol. 89, no.1, p. 228–241.

18 Massumi 2002, p. 15.

19 Pallasmaa 2005, p. 12.

20 Massumi 2002, p. 5.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 14.