Modernism and the State: German Art Academies in Crisis during the Weimar Republic

The prevalent history of the art of the Weimar Republic has been written largely as a history of heroic individuals. Whatever their scholarly methodologies and critical perspectives, scholars focus their attention on artists and critics whose names are known, whose works are familiar, if not canonical: Max Beckmann, Marcel Breuer, Otto Dix, Carl Einstein, Walter Gropius, George Grosz, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, Karl Hofer, Paul Klee, Käthe Kollwitz, Jeanne Mammen, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Lucia Moholy, August Sander, Oskar Schlemmer, Kurt Schwitters, and others. This art history is largely also a stylistic or discursive history dedicated almost entirely to the small if highly visible, modernist sector of the Weimar Republic's total field of artistic production: Expressionism, Dada, Constructivism, the New Objectivity, and the like. A single institution or avant-garde formation, namely the Bauhaus, is of central importance. It has been the focus of extensive, vigorous research, publication, and exhibition, culminating recently in a burst of new attention in conjunction with the centenary of the school's founding in 1919; new aspects of its history have emerged, and familiar ones have been reinterpreted. Other than that, however, institutions, and in particular art academies, have remained largely invisible in the scholarly and popular representation and analysis of 'Weimar Culture'. Like the hundreds or thousands of artists who were unable to find purchase in the modern art market and often depended on municipal welfare support, the state and its cultural agencies between the years 1919 and 1933 have appeared to be unimportant to scholars. They are only rarely mentioned and are seldom taken seriously into account.

The art historiography of the Weimar Republic thus differs sharply from that on the artistic culture of Hitler's dictatorship in particular, and to a lesser extent of the Wilhelmine Empire, though of course in the latter case secessions and Expressionist avant-gardes have provided art historians with endless material. Insofar as scholars have addressed the Nazi period at all, the history of institutions has dominated. This is perhaps understandable, given the founding of the Reich Ministry of People's Enlightenment and Propaganda and the Reich Chambers of Culture in 1933. But it is also a product of the persistence of modernist taste in art history, and the need when working on the Third Reich to maintain a ruthlessly critical standpoint rather than the admiration of or even love for the object of study that often tends to be at work, explicitly or implicitly, in conventional art historical scholarship. Despite the expansion of the boundaries of art history and the emergence of visual culture studies since 1968, there has thus been little interest in the paintings of painters such as Richard Müller, Julius Paul Junghanns, Paul Mathias Padua, Adolf Ziegler or Max Kutschmann, in the sculptures of Josef Wackerle or Arno Breker. (Nolde is, of course, a special case.) To write a dissertation on such material remains a relatively risky proposition for a young scholar. To exhibit such work, either temporarily or in the permanent galleries, still can elicit heated public protest.

The goal of this essay is to contribute to the correction of the general invisibility of state art schools in accounts of the artistic culture of the Weimar Republic. On the one hand, it offers a brief description of the crisis of state art academies in Germany as a result of three factors: the imperative to modernize by integrating the applied arts into academic curricula, the questioning of the

traditional representative function of academic art, and the existential threat posed by the chronic fiscal straits of the state, which was brutally exacerbated during the years of the world economic crisis that followed the Wall Street crash of October 1929. On the other hand, it emphasizes the many, significant connections between state art academies and modern art in Germany during the Weimar Republic.

These remarks are based largely on a small but growing number of case studies, of which Stefanie Johnen's exemplary monograph on the Vereinigten Staatsschulen für freie und angewandte Kunst in Berlin is the most recent. Just as important, however, are Wolfgang Ruppert's examination of the definition and habitus of the academic artist around the year 1900 and Otto Karl Werckmeister's materialist account of modern art in the Prussian state, the modernized art academies of the Weimar Republic, and their lack of democratic legitimation. Building on this scholarly foundation, I advance an argument here that I have proposed in a number of publications over the years. On the one hand, the art academy not only functioned as the opposition for the avant-garde, but also offered a few modern artists spaces, resources, and freedoms about which most of their colleagues in Germany in the 1920s, who labored in obscurity and faced long odds in a chronically weak art market, could only dream. On the other hand, these spaces, resources, and freedoms for the modern elite were secured through ruthless struggles with the artists of the old academic establishment, who had become professors before 1914. It is important for a critical history of art to take into account the exercise of power to benefit modern artists within the art academy. Only in that way can at least one old, persistent binary opposition that structures modernist historiography be demystified.

MODERNIZATION AND CRISIS

The astonishing vitality and precarious establishment of modern art, for which the Weimar Republic is known and celebrated, is only part of the history of those years. On the one hand, this art and its producers shifted, after military defeat and the collapse of the imperial government, from the no-longer-marginal but certainly private, commercial spaces of the avant-garde to the representative institutions of the state. Käthe Kollwitz was given a professorship in the Prussian Academy of the Arts, and Max Liebermann became its president. Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus in Weimar. The Kronprinzenpalais was established in central Berlin as a preeminent museum dedicated entirely to modern art. Art historians such as Walter Kaesbach, who had already defined themselves as strong proponents and committed private collectors of Expressionism before the outbreak of war in 1914, assumed influential positions in important art museums and acquired numerous works by Expressionist artists for the prominent public collections they now administered.

At the same time, one finds numerous signs of the enormous challenges and serious problems that constantly exerted pressure on most German artists for the duration of the Weimar Republic. Cities were forced to establish or expand municipal welfare programs for artists – now little known at best – after the inflation bankrupted old private mutual aid societies. Leading journals such as *Das Kunstblatt* published essays analyzing the depressing effects of demographic and social developments on art and the art market. Critics such as Adolf Behne and Paul Westheim observed the crowds at automobile shows and department stores, compared them with the empty galleries of art exhibitions, and pleaded for a new art of and for a technological age. Prominent dealers who specialized in modern art, such as Karl Nierendorf, lamented the lack of buyers and struggled to keep the doors of their galleries open. Artists complained about the behaviors of the affluent in modern consumer society. One year after he had declined a teaching position in Köln, Heinrich Campendonk expressed a change of heart in a letter that he sent to Paul Klee in November 1925. He had come to realize, "that for us a securely salaried position is necessary in order to be able to do any work at all" (Campendonk to Klee, 27 November 1925, Zentrum Paul Klee Bern). A few months later the painter was given the opportunity to correct his

earlier miscalculation, when Walter Kaesbach offered him a professorship for stained glass painting at the state art academy in Düsseldorf. Campendonk accepted the position.

Campendonk's appointment was the first step in the second phase of the reform of the Düsseldorf art academy. It was also a contribution to the history of the modernization of German art academies in general during the years between 1919 and 1933 – a history that is inextricably linked to economic crisis and the desperate situation of the post-war German state. With its promise of a radical new beginning, the November Revolution certainly had significant implications for most German art academies, although revolutionary appeals demanding their complete dismantling or a fundamental reorganization of their structure and pedagogy were nowhere successful. Reformed bylaws and more democratic administrations were drafted or implemented in Königsberg and Dresden. In Dresden, individualized schools, which were led by a professor, replaced the rigid, hierarchical structure of the curriculum. A few (more or less) modern artists – Kokoschka in Dresden, Nauen in Düsseldorf, Hofer in Berlin, Kaspar in Munich – were appointed to professorships or hired as instructors in order to attest to the new openness of the state academies. Not the least, academies opened their doors to female students and a handful of women were added to faculties during the 1920s. Like Gunta Stölzl in Dessau, Li Vinecky-Thorn and Anna Rading were put in charge of the workshops for textile design in Breslau. In Düsseldorf, Anna Simons taught calligraphy from 1928 to 1933.

However, the reform of artistic training during the Weimar Republic was driven not only by the spirit of revolution, but also by the "specter of austerity" of the fiscally straitened republican state (Bächler 1990, 297). Of course, revolutionary politics informed certain ideologically charged developments that were typical of the post-war years. This was exemplified by the founding of a new type of art school, namely the Bauhaus in Weimar and the Landeskunstschule in Karlsruhe, as well as the incorporation of the architecture classes of the Düsseldorf Kunstgewerbeschule into the art academy there. Such ambitious projects of the early years of the Weimar Republic, building on pre-war curricular reforms at some schools, were emblematic of the effort to break symbolically and institutionally with the representative official artistic culture of the Wilhelmine Empire. Yet other justifications were also offered for the founding of 'Einheitsschulen' out of the merger of art academies and applied arts schools. Since the end of the nineteenth century, progressive bourgeois commenters had called for this type of art school in order to control the unsettling growth of the so-called art proletariat. In the face of oversaturated art markets and the development of new media and industries, such commenters argued that all graduates of art schools should receive an up-to-date artisanal or technical training that would enhance their chances to succeed in modern society. Not the least, however, these rationalized art schools, which replaced the ideology of revolutionary new beginnings with that of technological and economic modernization, were also meant to save the state money. Officials in Dresden and Munich repeatedly suggested the founding of 'Einheitsschulen' for both pedagogical and fiscal reasons, but were unable to overcome the persistent resistance of their academies. In Karlsruhe, civil servants had advanced similar arguments since 1917 with more success. The same was true of officials in the Prussian Cultural Ministry who advocated the founding of the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für freie und angewandte Kunst in Berlin. After years of difficult negotiations between ministries and against the resistance of local artists and parliamentary representatives, state officials used the inflation and its effects – above all the Preußische Abbauverordnung of 8 February 1924 – "in order to realize their reform ideas in an ultimately autocratic, if legally correct way" (Kratz-Kessemeier 2007, 318).

Officials also later sought to exploit the effects of the world economic crisis that began in 1929. In 1930, Bavarian administrators once again considered a merger of the art academy and the applied arts school. In September 1931, the Saxon

Cultural Ministry finally decided to do the same, despite numerous counterarguments and complaints. In Prussia, however, it was no longer possible to entertain such reorganization plans. Rather than further rationalize artistic training with new 'Einheitsschulen', officials instead closed the state art academies in Kassel, Breslau, and Königsberg in the spring of 1932 on the basis of the Zweite Preußische Notverordnung. They were not swayed by nationalist objections, which stressed the cultural-political significance of the academies in Breslau and Königsberg near the eastern borders of the nation (GStA-Dahlem I. HA, Rep. 90, Nr. 1778). Yet the directors of the surviving art academies continued with the transformation of their institutions, despite or rather precisely because of the crisis. Bruno Paul saw the fiscal situation as an opportunity to eliminate the vestiges of old structures in the Vereinigte Staatsschulen. At the same time, the character of the faculties continued to be shifted. When the schools where they taught were closed, modernists such as Schlemmer and Moll were transferred to the academies in Berlin and Düsseldorf. Meanwhile, a considerable number of conservative professors were forced into retirement, especially if they openly opposed the modernization policies of the directors of their schools, who enjoyed the unconditional support of civil servants in state cultural ministries.

POVERTY AND AUTONOMY

That art academies were the targets of polemics and protests during the Weimar Republic is entirely unsurprising. Since the emergence of the avant-garde in the nineteenth century, modern artists and their supporters had incessantly characterized academies in general as repressive bastions of artistic reaction. 'Academic' became a modernist epithet for a routinized, facile, or idealizing, often pompous and monumental art that fulfilled the ideological needs of the conservative bourgeoisie or its state. This division can be everywhere observed in Germany in the years that followed the collapse of the Imperial government. In Düsseldorf, for instance, this antithesis was embodied by the vehement conflict between Gert Wollheim, the radical leader of the local avant-garde, and Fritz Roeber, a Wilhelminian history painter who had strong connections to regional heavy industry and directed the academy from 1908 until 1924.

With the intensified, if nonetheless limited modernization of German art academies beginning in 1919, the battlefield of artistic production and art critical debate was significantly reshaped. In at least some cases, it was now the traditionalists who expressed their grievances in memoranda and brochures, published letters of protest in newspapers, and organized secessionist exhibitions opposed to official events. One recalls the stubborn resistance to state officials' proposals for institutional modernization in Munich and Dresden, the fierce resistance to the founding of the Vereinigte Staatsschulen in Berlin, the tensions between the city and the art academy in Breslau, and the constant campaign against Walter Kaesbach after his arrival in Düsseldorf as Roeber's successor (as well as opposition to other 'non-artists' who were appointed to lead other institutions, such as the Städelschule in Frankfurt a. M.). One rejected the aesthetic and ideological tendency of the reforms, or criticized the monopolistic power of the academies in the straitened conditions of the 1920s.

However, the resistance to social democratic or liberal art school policies was not only the reactionary expression of academic traditionalism, with its devotion to and defense of a particular conception of high, free, autonomous art. Like Oskar Moll and Carlo Mense in Breslau, Karl Hofer also aligned himself with the idea of artistic autonomy and rejected the founding of the Vereinigte Staatsschulen in 1924 (GStA-Dahlem I. HA, Rep. 90, Nr. 1778). In 1932, he distanced himself demonstratively from the school's director, Bruno Paul, after Paul was attacked by nationalists both within and outside the school. Paul's internal antagonists, like Hofer, saw the director, who had once served as director of the Unterrichtsanstalt des Kunstgewerbemuseums and had always been a strong proponent of the 'Einheitsschule', as a threat to free art. In Düsseldorf, Kaesbach not only provoked the older generation of Wilhelmine traditionalists, but also antagonized the members of

the Junges Rheinland and their allies, as a remarkable public statement of 1928 indicates. Some 200 artists – among them Otto Griebel, Max Pechstein, Georg Schrimpf, and Franz Seiwert – signed this declaration, which accused Kaesbach of intentionally damaging the livelihoods of younger artists in Düsseldorf while providing his friends in the state art academy – such as Nauen and Campendonk – with an unfair advantage in the competition for buyers and commissions. Beginning in 1927, the difficult situation of free-lance artists in Dresden led to the repeated articulation of radical demands for the abolition of the academy in the face of widespread poverty. The leader of this campaign to distribute state funds differently was Conrad Felixmüller, who had made a name for himself as a Communist expressionist in 1919 and in the meantime had defined himself as a vehement critic of the modern artistic establishment.

Rivalries in the field of artistic production and the chronically dismal situation for most German artists in the 1920s generated incessant conflicts and resentments. At the same time, those who enjoyed advantageous positions, freed from the market by the state like court artists had once been freed from guild constraints, were able to create some of the works that are now canonical examples of modern Weimar artistic culture. Campendonk's claim that the professional survival of the modern artist in the post-inflationary Weimar Republic depended on a teaching position or professorship was an exaggeration or oversimplification. Others turned to graphic design, for instance. However, the positive effects of an academic position, for the few modern artists who were able to claim one, are unmistakable. During the years of the hyperinflation, the still largely unknown Otto Dix had exploited the material resources and pedagogical offerings of the art academies in Dresden and Düsseldorf. With his appointment to the faculty in Dresden in 1926, he could seek a large apartment in a good neighborhood, which satisfied the desires of the now famous, socially rising painter and his wife, Martha. Although he still regularly exhibited his work in the best private galleries in Dresden, he immediately dissolved his contract with the dealer Karl Nierendorf and increasingly turned away from portrait commissions. He dedicated himself instead to a modern yet old-fashioned, appropriately representative yet transgressive, monumental and unmarketable contemporary history painting, which was suitable not for private middle-class residences but rather for prominent special exhibitions and possibly for public spaces.

Max Beckmann, who had declined an appointment in Weimar in 1919 but four years later – no doubt at least in part given the experience of extreme inflation – accepted a master studio at the Städelschule, conceived of himself as a metaphysical creative agent for the new state, which, he claimed, rose above the politics of a materialistic age. Despite abject conditions on the art market, Beckmann could, like Dix, begin with the first of his ambitious triptychs at the deepest nadir of the world economic crisis. Even Paul Klee, the master of small formats, significantly increased his production of larger paintings after he exchanged his demanding pedagogical obligations and disappointed hopes at the Bauhaus for the "'alte[s]' Reich der Kunst," that is the biweekly critiques he offered to the deferential students in his master class at the Düsseldorf academy (Klee to Hannes Meyer, 8 August 1930, in: Hahn 1985, 170). This retreat from the more collective, politicized, socially engaged project of the Bauhaus under the direction of Hannes Meyer and turn towards individual artistic and pedagogical practice made it possible for him to complete 50 oil paintings in 1932, which constituted twice his average production of the previous years.

Dix, Beckmann, and Klee no longer defined themselves as the foes of academic art, but rather embodied it in a new form. Their pictures were thus not only innovative, sometimes transgressive results of the technical skills, aesthetic thought, and ideological postures of autonomous producers. They were also the extraordinary material traces of state support. Without that, Weimar artistic culture, inasmuch as it was represented by the greatest achievements of Beckmann, Campendonk, Dix, Hofer, Hubbuch, Klee, Moholy-Nagy, and Scholz, could scarcely have come to exist.

MODERNISM AND POWER

The November Revolution constituted a break in the history of German art academies, but one which had its roots in longstanding concerns and debates. The increasing programmatic emphasis on practicality and industrial production in the structures and curricula of the Bauhaus, the Badische Landeskunstschule, the Vereinigte Staatsschulen as well as the art academy in Düsseldorf threw the idealistic hierarchies of Imperial academic culture fundamentally into question. Occasional new appointments and numerous retirements almost everywhere – including Dresden, where the academy primarily trained painters – served as signs of rejuvenation and renewal, which stood in a tense relationship with the modernization represented by the model of the 'Einheitsschule'. Alone among the most important German art centers, only the academy in Munich persistently refused – despite the wishes of the responsible state ministries – to make any meaningful changes in the years after the bloody suppression of the revolutionary Soviet government in the spring of 1919.

Nonetheless, it would be too simple to equate the reform of German art academies with the expansion of democratic institutions and freedoms. In the first place, one must consider to what degree modern art in Germany before 1945 can be characterized as democratic at all. One can of course point to artists who identified with and engaged in revolutionary politics during years of crisis. There is no need to speak of the conflict between secessions and avant-gardes, on the one hand, and, on the other, the official art of the Wilhelmine Empire and prevalent bourgeois taste. Yet modernists, who would stand at the center of state art policy in much of Germany during the Weimar Republic, were by no means unequivocally and unanimously committed to democracy. Their individualist mentality, elitist self-understanding, and economic self-interests contradicted the established structures, the democratic processes, and the professional majorities that avant-gardes reflexively associated with mediocrity. Their relationships with left-wing movements and parties were anything but close, obvious, or long-lived. By 1927, Beckmann had traded his earlier identification with life, the people, and even Communism for a self-conception of the artist as the elegant spiritual leader of the state. By 1924, a disappointed and disillusioned Klee claimed that the modern artist was not supported by the people. In 1932, he wanted nothing to do with a special event that opened the academy's spaces to the public for inspection, which was an innovative attempt by Kaesbach to suggest the popularity of the Düsseldorf academy and to justify its continued existence in democratic terms. The breakthrough of modern artists in the context of the state after the November Revolution was thus not primarily accomplished through engagement with democratic parties or socialist mass movements. It was above all the achievement of a group of art historians and collectors who were able, regardless of electoral results and changing governments, to exert decisive art-political influence after the collapse of the Imperial regime.

The problem of democratic legitimacy is clearly evident in the case of the Prussian art schools, where the state autocratically overcame artistic and political resistance to its proposals and policies. The most important official for the reform of art academies in Prussia was the art historian Wihelm Waetzoldt, whose essay of 1921, *Gedanken zur Kunstschulreform*, outlined the Prussian cultural ministry's priorities and values. Two aspects of this text, in which the art historian made his case for the establishment of 'Einheitsschulen' on aesthetic, political-economic, social, and fiscal grounds, are of particular interest here. First, Waetzoldt proposed the seventeenth-century manufactures of absolutist monarchies rather than medieval workshops as the model for reformed art schools, thus distancing himself from the critical visions of Ruskin and Morris as well as from the Bauhaus manifesto of 1919. Second, he described at length the best methods of finding successful art school directors. He considered collective leadership by an "executive academic council" after the "new Russian model" to be a recipe for "self-atomization" and the dissolution of an art school. At the same

time, Waetzoldt rejected the nomination of rectors in a democratic process. This resulted, he thought, in the election of "comfortable colleagues" who would submit to the "majority decisions of their subordinates" rather than accepting with pleasure the responsibility to exercise decisive leadership (Waetzoldt 1921, 37).

Waetzoldt wanted the state to put strong men at the top of the Prussian art schools, who would carry out the changes the institutions needed. A first attempt was made in Königsberg. After Peter Behrens and Paul Thiersch declined the directorship of the East Prussian art academy, Wilhelm Thiele, the director of the municipal Kunstgewerbe- und Handwerkerschule in Berlin-Charlottenburg, was appointed. However, he had to be transferred back to the capital in 1924, after his reforms and personnel decisions failed. Walter Kaesbach, who assumed the direction of the Düsseldorf art academy after Roeber's unexpected death the same year, fulfilled Waetzoldt's expectations much better. The unprecedented appointment of the stylish art historian – and passionate supporter of Expressionism – was extremely controversial, but Kaesbach possessed the unconditional support of the Prussian cultural ministry and thus pursued his reform agenda without compromise. The curriculum was modernized, a few prominent modern artists were added to the faculty, and the academy's main lecture hall was redesigned in a significant act of symbolic politics. At the same time, Kaesbach compelled the retirement of several older professors between the years 1926 and 1932 and had the ancillary building dedicated to animal painting demolished while Julius Paul Junghanns, the professor who specialized in that genre and taught in the facility, was on an excursion with students.

State power was necessary to make possible the extraordinary strengthening of modern art within the framework of the modernized art school before 1933. That force was naturally not the same as the reaction of the new authorities that drove almost all of the protagonists of German modern artistic culture from their positions within a few months after the naming of Hitler as Reich Chancellor in January 1933. The compulsion to modernize emerged from other sources and had different goals than the anti-modernist ideology that drove National Socialist actions. That modern art required the exercise of force in order to overcome the crises of the years from 1919 to 1933 and fully to develop is a seldom noted, yet perhaps unsurprising and undisturbing insight. Nonetheless, it is related to a fundamental problem. The appointment of modern artists as professors has to be seen in relationship to the contradiction between modern art as a minority culture and the democratic legitimation of the republican state by majorities. Beginning in 1930, as the modernization of German art schools reached its peak, one finds ever more frequently in the archives the desperate, bitter complaints of those who had been dismissed and marginalized to make way for modernism. At the same time, with the growing electoral success of the NSDAP, one reads repeatedly in the pages of right-wing newspapers about an exclusive and illegitimate "Weimar System," in which (allegedly Bolshevik) state officials and (Jewish) art dealers conspired to shape – and destroy – Germany's authentic artistic culture. Desiring to crown the minority culture of modern art as the art of a republic, the autocratic actions of state officials contributed in tragic fashion to an overdetermined artistic polarization and intensification of art political pressure, which discharged explosively in the political conditions that radiated in 1933 from the decay of German democracy.

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