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CRITICIZING THE CRISIS: INTELLECTUAL LABOUR AND ARTISTIC RADICALISM IN LATE WEIMAR GERMANY

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The relationship between artistic practice and radicalism is a common theme in studies of Weimar culture. Yet this relationship remains elusive, not least because for a long period its examination has been based on an exclusionary methodology which overemphasizes the political affiliations of art producers and the formal characteristics of their works, while downplaying other significant aspects of their practice such as the nature of artistic labour at a specific historical moment and the social and professional identity of the artist. I have chosen to study the Assoziation Revolutionärer Bildender Künstler Deutschlands (Association of Revolutionary Artists of Germany or ARBKD) as I find it revealing of exactly this problematic approach to the issue of radical interwar visual culture. The undeniable institutional links of its members with the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany or KPD) as well as the predominantly realistic style and propagandistic content of their works, sufficed to circumscribe the group among the forerunners of socialist realism (figure 1). This has obscured the fact that ARBKD’s positions on art and culture reflected a much older debate intrinsically related to the nineteenth-century Kunstgewerbebewegung (German arts and crafts movement). Two issues discussed within the context of the latter relate to post-war radical visual culture: the nature of geistige Arbeit (intellectual labour) in modernity and the problem of the so-called Kunstproletariat (art proletariat).

I would like to argue here that artistic radicalism was a product of the proletarianization and identity crisis of art producers, with both phenomena rooted in the nineteenth century, but reaching their peak in Weimar Germany. If the attitude of the intellectuals toward modern capitalist society can be summarized in the bipolar scheme of accommodation and resistance, the outcomes of the Great Depression in Germany (especially the mass
Figure 1  Sándor Ék (pseudonym Alex Keil; ARBKD), *Sozialismus öffnet die Betriebe* (Socialism opens the factories), election poster for the German Communist Party, 1930. Chromolithography, 86.4 × 39.3 cm. © 2013 Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin.
unemployment and the extremely precarious position of intellectual and manual workers) intensified this polarization, especially within the broader spectrum of the political left. The formation of the ARBKD itself coincides with a sometimes ultra-radical attack instigated by figures like Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer against left-liberal idealism. This multifaceted radical critique was a complex cultural phenomenon, but here I will focus on the examination of its position toward the exponents of the cultural trend of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity).

*Neue Sachlichkeit* was never a homogeneous artistic trend; depending on its context – literature, the visual arts, architecture – it had different meanings and was expressed in different forms. It seems, though, that in literature as well as in painting, communist critics often targeted a specific aspect of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which in the liberal-bourgeois press of the period was identified as a manifestation of a radical social critique of capitalism. Reacting against this stylization of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, left-radical critics would often attack some of its most prominent representatives for their cynicism and distance from reality and their ineffectiveness in transforming artistic production into a collective process that would include the participation of the public. Reportage literature or a detached visual recording of reality were criticized on the basis of the position of the writer or the visual artist toward social reality, on the intellectual’s or artist’s lack of praxis.

An interesting aspect of this hostility toward prominent *Neue Sachlichkeit* personalities is that it was usually expressed by radical artists and intellectuals who were largely excluded from prestigious cultural institutions and the market. The second part of this article will focus on exactly this element which points to a seemingly paradoxical association between ARBKD and the critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin. This institutional exclusion brings us back to the debate around the *Kunstgewerbewegung*, as it indicates how the educational reform promoted by the German arts and crafts movement failed to mitigate the problem of the proletarianization of intellectual workers. It was this failure of pre-Weimar reformist ideas which conditioned both ARBKD’s and Benjamin’s late Weimar radicalism.

By emphasizing this unexpected affinity, I suggest a reconsideration of artistic and theoretical work which has been categorized within confusing and unproductive notions (Avant-garde, Socialist Realism, Agitprop Art) which tend to fix artistic currents and ideas within narrow and, at the same
time, unhelpfully general boundaries. In the case of radical artistic culture, an art historical narrative based on the succession and juxtaposition of styles signified by the use of such notions seems to circumvent exactly the issue of radical culture’s fluidity. Instead of examining the radicalization of artistic expression—a course characterized by a multitude of sometimes contradictory elements within a wide chronological horizon—such a methodology usually sets a reductive typological distinction between, for instance, artistic avant-garde and tendentious art or Constructivism and Realism. However, all these artistic currents express a common tendency: they attempt to make a radical intervention in the public sphere with visual means. In this context, one can trace not only fissures, but also continuities.

It is particularly in the case of ARBKD, an association of artists sympathetic to the Communist movement (but not necessarily to the Communist Party) founded in Berlin in March 1928 and dissolved in 1933, where an easy categorization of the group exclusively based on ideological or stylistic criteria seems impossible (figure 2). The lack of clear information on the exact number of the group’s members and of its local branches in Germany, combined with the variety of styles and media used by its members make such a categorization problematic. My main thesis is that this heterogeneous union of radical artists was founded not on the basis of an agreement around aesthetic or political ideas, but on the common experience of an intense crisis of identity (professional and social), caused by changes to the nature of artistic labour in the era of high capitalism.

The hands of production: redefining artistic work in early twentieth-century Germany

The reconsideration of the role of the visual artist, as well as the nature and the field of his or her work, took place in Germany within a very specific context: the German arts and crafts movement. A product of this movement was the flourishing of new educational institutions, namely the Kunstgewerbeschulen (Applied Arts Schools) from which almost all ARBKD professional artists graduated. Thus there is at least one common characteristic that binds together the membership of the organization: artistic training. An interesting question arises here: how did ideas and concerns initially discussed within the context of the applied arts movement affect subsequent generations of radical artists?
The applied arts movement, and perhaps to a greater degree the German Werkbund which emerged from it, played a surprising but pivotal role in the development of German radical visual arts. Founded in 1907, the Werkbund soon attracted a large number of artists, architects, art critics, intellectuals and liberal politicians. It can be argued that the Werkbund functioned as the most important forum of the German-speaking world for the discussion of the effects of industrial capitalism in the cultural field. The Werkbund caused a decisive break with academic tradition, fostered experimentation with new technological media, and set the foundations for German design and graphic arts, a field in which many radical visual artists of the Weimar era spent their formative years working as poster designers, book illustrators or mural

**Figure 2** Photo from the first exhibition of ARBKD in Europahaus, Berlin (‘Capital and Labour in the Visual Arts’, May 1929), from Der Rote Stern, vol. 6, no. 11, May 1929. On the left is Heinz Tichauer's bronze statue Ruhrkumpel (Ruhr Miner) and centrally in the background four paintings by Werner Scholz.
painters. More importantly, it promoted a fundamental redefinition of the notion of artistic vocation by drastically expanding the traditional institutional limits of the cultural field to include the entire spectrum of production and the marketplace.4

However, more analogies can be drawn between the Werkbund and the post-war debate on the precarious position of intellectual workers. The Werkbund’s efforts to redefine the artist’s role in a restructured economy in many respects corresponded to claims made by the political platform of the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Social Policy Association). The Verein was a professional association of economists founded in 1872, which advocated social reforms within the institutional framework of a liberal state. In general terms, the association was opposed to both free market economy and Marxism, favouring instead what its members considered an ‘ethical’ economic model and the gradual integration of workers into a liberal German state.5

The Verein’s critique of the capitalist economy and the Werkbund’s propositions for counterbalancing its effects in the cultural sphere intersected in the issue of the proletarianization of intellectuals. If in the first months after the 1918 revolution there was a broad debate about the position of geistige Arbeiter (intellectual workers) in a socialist state or society, the violent suppression of the politically radical movement and the realization that the new regime was not hostile to capitalism led to a reframing of the question in more pragmatic terms: now it was the predicament of intellectual workers in a rather unstable capitalist economy that was of concern.

This shift was clearly addressed by sociologist Alfred Weber in his speech ‘Die Not der geistigen Arbeiter’ (The plight of intellectual workers), delivered in 1922 at the Social Policy Association’s annual convention. Weber’s speech was framed around an important phenomenon: the waning of the pre-war class of Rentenintellektuelle (rentier intellectuals) who maintained an independent position through a source of income, and the emergence of a modern type of intellectual, the ‘worker intellectual’, whose livelihood would depend on a combination of his intellectual education with practical training.6 In essence, Weber discussed the proletarianization of intellectual workers, which for many commentators of the time was synonymous with their transformation into wage labourers. Of course, Weber and the majority of the economists affiliated with the Werkbund and the Verein were not
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questioning the capitalist structure of economy. Instead, they were drawing attention to what they saw as the danger of the intellectual workers’ predicament, namely their radicalization. A typical example is Bruno Rauecker’s short study *Die Proletarisierung der geistigen Arbeiter* (The proletarianization of intellectual workers), published in 1920. To prevent artists’ radicalization, Raucker (another Werkbund member) argued for a more rational channelling of intellectual workers into the capitalist market.\(^7\)

If many exponents of the applied arts movement, like Rauecker, attempted to prevent a social clash caused by intra-vocational inequalities, the left radicals tried to provoke it. For left-radical artists specifically, this clash was part of the general class struggle and its provocation was to be achieved by employing modern artistic media that could facilitate the production and dissemination of political propaganda. The effective employment of these media was based on the polytechnic training that those artists had received in the applied arts schools. Thus experimentation with new media technologies was central in the reconfiguration of the relationship between the producer of art and its consumer. Paradoxically, these radical experiments in form and media had their roots in the reformist state policies of the pre-war period.

Even though the applied arts movement had achieved a reframing of the notion of artistic practice that resulted in the expansion of art institutions, many young artists still had not made their way into these institutions. The situation worsened during the early post-war years and after 1929 during periods of economic turndown that caused a general institutional dysfunction. Young artists’ radicalization was conditioned by their frustration with their precarious situation – a result of their failure to find a steady institutional support. This was a quite specific form of political discontent. It can be argued that to a certain extent the turn of those artists to radical political institutions like the Communist Party and its various cultural organizations was based on this combination of a search for institutional support and ideological dispositions.

Wieland Herzfelde, John Heartfield’s brother and founder of the radical publishing house *Malik-Verlag*, can help us cast light on the plight of young visual artists. In his important essay ‘Society, artists and communism’, serially published between 1920 and 1921 in the leftist periodical *Der Gegner* (The Adversary), Herzfelde demonstrated how advanced capitalism undermined
the economic and social foundations of artists' livelihood, confined them to a separatist-individualist position and determined their aesthetic choices. In other words, he stressed how the specific social situation artists found themselves in determined their political stance and aesthetic choices. The problem for Herzfelde was that politically conscious artists could neither work for the bourgeoisie, nor could the proletariat financially support them. They could only hope for the support of the Communist Party, which by that time was indifferent if not openly hostile towards radical visual artists.  

Within the organized communist movement, this problem was finally addressed by Clara Zetkin, a prominent figure of German Communism and KPD functionary. At the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in 1924, Zetkin suggested that communist-affiliated cultural organizations like the Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (Workers' International Relief or IAH) or the Internationale Rote Hilfe (International Red Aid) could serve as platforms to foster a productive collaboration between the radical intelligentsia and the working-class movement. In her view, party membership should not necessarily be a prerequisite for the formation of a common front of intellectual and manual workers. Zetkin's suggestion was approved and adopted by the German Communist Party, and Zetkin herself was appointed president of the Internationale Rote Hilfe. But it was the IAH and a great number of publications managed by the Communist propagandist Willi Münzenberg that played the most important role in the organization of this common front. Münzenberg's propaganda network served as a new kind of patron for a plethora of left-radical artists, assigning to them works providing illustration for Communist journals, newspapers, book publications, pamphlets and posters, opening up to them opportunities for artistic creation connected to the wide field of graphic arts. Thus the reconsideration of the means for a more effective form of political propaganda led the KPD to the employment of left-radical artists who had been trained during their study years in the Applied Arts Schools in graphic design, advertisement, decorative painting, and the crafts, all those fields which were essential for successful agitprop campaigns.  

In sum, the discussion about the general predicament of artists including their own radical responses to this problem revolved around the issue of institutional support or the lack of this support. Young artists entirely excluded from or situated in between cultural institutions, who failed to
maintain lasting ties with any of them, turned to a radical institutional critique, which in some cases extended to a call for the complete overthrow of these very institutions. Radical anti-institutional critique intersected with an attack on the Neue Sachlichkeit phenomenon. Art historian Dennis Crockett has described Neue Sachlichkeit as ‘a major art movement [...] declared and defined not by the artists through manifestoes or joint ventures, but by the art critics’, and perhaps there is no more appropriate way to indicate how much this period differed from the early post-war years. If the first radical artists’ societies in Weimar Germany (for instance the Arbeitsrat für Kunst and the Novembergruppe) represented a collective endeavour for a radical transformation of German art institutions, in the period of post-1924 relative economic recovery, a plethora of previously self-proclaimed radical artists attempted a reconciliation with those institutions and the market.

Close your ‘T’s: deskillling of artistic labour and the death of the intellectual

By reframing ARBKD’s artistic practice through the writing of Walter Benjamin, I would like to argue that radical critique of art and culture in late Weimar Germany initially developed as a reaction to the pseudo-objectivity and pseudo-radicalism of Neue Sachlichkeit. This reaction originated in the pre-Weimar discussion on the reconfiguration of artistic and intellectual labour in modernity. ARBKD artists and radical cultural critics like Benjamin at first appealed to prominent left-liberal intellectuals and artists, calling on them to break ties with their nineteenth-century master, namely the bourgeoisie, and join forces with the proletariat in its struggle for liberation.

It should be stressed, though, that the frustration of those expectations turned both Benjamin and ARBKD to a different, surprising and largely unexplored direction: the exploration of means for raising the consciousness of the proletariat without the involvement of intellectuals. To this end, artists and intellectuals investigated the possibilities technology offered for a democratization of the means of artistic production and reception. In doing so, they sought to expand intellectual expertise from the restricted circle of the educated bourgeoisie towards the working masses. If radical cultural critique initially aimed at a reconfiguration of the intellectual worker’s role, its focal point had now shifted to the exploration of the nature of intellectual
labour. Although this change of focus is only implicit in the case of Benjamin, the parallels and indeed intersections with the artistic field open up a hitherto unexplored line of thought in the work of the critical theorist.

In 1931, Benjamin published a review of Erich Kästner’s poems titled ‘Left-wing melancholy’, which was an attack on left-wing exponents of the Neue Sachlichkeit. Benjamin argues that left-wing intellectuals were ensconced in the institutional structures of their professions. Instead of challenging their own position within the production process they exhausted their revolutionary ambitions in spectacular attacks against the bourgeoisie. As their condemnation of capitalist society was circumscribed within the aesthetic field, the bourgeoisie could easily turn those literary attacks into objects of aesthetic pleasure, into commodified cultural fashions.
To Kästner’s politically ineffective satire Benjamin juxtaposed Brecht’s poems. Benjamin traced Brecht’s radicalism in his effort to create a tension between two poles: professional and private life. He writes: ‘in this tension, consciousness and deed are formed, to create it is the task of all political lyricism, and today this task is most strictly fulfilled by Brecht’s poems.’

For Benjamin, Kästner’s work represented the establishment of this identity of professional and private life; it expressed the delimitations of intellectual activity within a restricted professional field. In the political isolation of left-wing intellectuals and their distance from the public that they sought, Benjamin detected the traditional assertion of art’s autonomy. Conversely, to create a tension between professional and private life meant to bridge intellectual labour and everyday practice. To this end, intellectuals had to find new means in order to connect their work with the labour movement, means that would radically change their relationship towards this public.

Benjamin had already expressed a profound mistrust of the possibility for a functional collaboration between left-wing intellectuals associated with the Neue Sachlichkeit and the proletariat in his 1930 review of Siegfried Kracauer’s study The Salaried Masses. Here he claimed that on the basis of educational privilege, the intellectuals’ ties with the bourgeoisie were historically so strong that even in the current process of proletarianization, these ties remained solid. Notably, ARBKD artists voiced a similar critique of their prominent colleagues. We can trace it, for example, in a text by Harry Rothziegel (a member of ARBKD’s five-person committee), in which he ironically commented:

I hear about Otto Nagel. Do you know how he replied to our invitation? […] ‘I am a proletarian and I paint as such. This is enough for me. I don’t know how your organization could be of use for the proletariat.’ […] Oh well such a hard expression! Of course you are right. It is simply not enough ‘to be a proletarian in order to paint such pictures’ – besides the worker doesn’t want to know about this ‘painted misery’ [figure 3].

Of course Rothziegel’s critique differs in many respects from Benjamin’s. However, they both focus on the examination of the effectiveness of artistic and intellectual work as instruments at the service of class struggle, and in this way they stress the necessity for a fundamental reconsideration of the artist’s or the intellectual’s vocational identity. For Rothziegel (and also for ARBKD)
a mere depiction of the proletariat’s life signified the artist’s attachment to the bourgeois conception of artistic practice as a process of individual creation. Correspondingly, if Benjamin praises Kracauer’s study it is because Kracauer ‘has even left the sociologist’s doctoral cap at home’. Kracauer in this case stands out as another intellectual (along with Brecht) attempting to create a tension between professional and private life.

Benjamin’s review was published under the heading ‘Politicization of the intelligentsia’, a title chosen by the editors of the journal despite the author’s objection. His suggested title was ‘An outsider attracts attention’, which indeed better reflects the essence of his text. Benjamin, himself an outsider to German academia, raises the type of the outsider as an effective model for radical political intervention. If on the one hand Benjamin’s object of criticism is constant (the *Neue Sachlichkeit* intelligentsia), on the other he seems to be engaged in a continuous effort of pointing to specific alternative models of action: Brecht, Kracauer and, later, Sergei Tretyakov. To a certain degree these figures were all outsiders, they all broke down traditional institutional barriers: those of the theatre, sociology and literature respectively. If for Benjamin the *Neue Sachlichkeit* intelligentsia is paradigmatic of a ‘false consciousness’, then a ‘proper consciousness’ can be raised through a dialectical method that penetrates and exposes the social reality represented by the type of the outsider. The production of this proper consciousness, according to Benjamin, ‘precisely first among the lower classes, who have everything to expect from it – is the primary task of Marxism’.

If we now turn to the ARBKD artists, we can see the articulation of a critique directed toward prominent radical figures within their own field – the visual arts – which, if not as elaborate as that of the cultural critics I already discussed, is nonetheless strikingly similar. This critique is entangled with the issue of artistic radicalism, but it also betrays a generational conflict and a professional antagonism between the left-radical visual artists of the Weimar period. A reading of the correspondence between Franz Edwin Gehrig-Targis and Heinrich Vogeler, ARBKD’s founding members, indicates that they initially welcomed the participation in their new project of prominent left-wing artists such as Rudolf Schlichter and Otto Nagel. However, both artists turned down the invitation. After almost six months of preparation, during which no prominent artist showed any interest, Gehrig-Targis sent a letter to the Communist Party:
I wish I could deny the correctness of the view that in the *Rote Gruppe* [Red Group], only artists who have been already publicly established as so-called prominent will be admitted and not also unknown comrades. The proletarian artist is assessed from a different point of view compared to the bourgeois. As far as the artistic contribution to the class struggle is concerned, there are recent art exhibitions, always organized by the same artists such as Grosz, Dix, Schlichter, Kollwitz, Baluschek, Zille to which, however, no unrecognized artist has been admitted [...] whereas the admission of the unrecognized artist was always possible in bourgeois groups and exhibitions through submission of works and participation in juries.¹⁵

In this excerpt one can discern the different positions held by representatives of the left-radical milieu within the field of artistic production. What should be stressed is not so much the distrust of established left artists toward cultural projects associated with the Communist Party, but the unrecognized artists’ discontent over the elitism of their successful colleagues and their appeal to the tradition of bourgeois artists associations that had benefited many unknown artists in the past.

There is, however, another interesting aspect of the confrontation between prominent and unrecognized artists of the left. In 1924, Grosz and Schlichter, among others, founded the first communist artists’ group: *Die Rote Gruppe*.¹⁶ However, the group’s activities quickly came to a standstill to a large degree due to its prominent members’ preoccupation with their personal careers, which now depended on the production of oil paintings. At the same time, a younger generation of radical artists, which belonged to the *Rote Gruppe* circle and had collaborated with it in the communist journal *Der Knüppel* (The Truncheon), kept producing prints, drawings and political cartoons for the Communist Party. In the period between 1924 and 1928, with a relative stabilization of the economy, the renewal of the market’s interest in oil paintings and the rise of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* trend, it was difficult for those young radical artists to make their own name in the market, and hence to secure their livelihood as artists. To find a place in the great exhibitions of the time they would turn to their old comrades but, as Gehring-Targis’s letter testifies, to no avail. On the other hand, the prominent artists’ careers were already fostered by institutions outside of the working-class movement.
Contrary to the ARBKD artists, however, Benjamin’s object of criticism was not just the idealist conception of art’s social function; instead he argued that its opposite pole, namely radical art, had been misconceived by the whole scope of the left-wing intelligentsia (its Marxist-Leninist faction included). This is implied in his review of Kracauer’s book, but it is directly expressed in his ‘The author as producer’ essay, written after the end of the Weimar Republic. Benjamin argues here that the debate on radical art had been reduced to a non-dialectic opposition between political tendency and quality, an unproductive exchange of ‘arguments for and against’, which did not touch the inherent connection between ‘political line’ and ‘quality’. Thus Benjamin’s criticism is directed against both communists (who judged an artwork’s quality exclusively by its ‘correct political tendency’) and left-bourgeois aesthetes (who argued for the primacy of its formal qualities).

Benjamin intended to revitalize this debate by drawing attention to the interplay between production relations and artistic labour. He claimed that artistic technique determines the radical or conservative character of an artwork. Artistic technique, in turn, cannot be separated from the institutions that circumscribe the production of art and determine the relations between art producers and consumers. But, at the same time, the potential for breaking down restricted institutional limits and thus radically change the producer-consumer relation lies in artistic technique. In this context, Benjamin points to Sergei Tretyakov.

The Russian writer had explained his new ideas on literary production to the German audience in a series of lectures he gave in Germany in the winter of 1931. He suggested that an author should be organically connected with his subject. Mere inspection of the situation was insufficient; the author had to be actively involved in the life of the community, which constituted his actual material. Tretyakov termed this new type of writer the ‘operative writer’. The new writer would not work in isolation on the production of masterpieces. The new tempo of life was changing the form of literature and the medium that could best serve the work of the operative writer was the newspaper.

Benjamin quotes Tretyakov’s example in order to stress how new technology affects forms of artistic expression. He writes:

There were not always novels in the past and there will not always have to be [...] All this to accustom you to the thought that we are in the midst of a
mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the
opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force.\textsuperscript{19}

New technical means, asserts Benjamin, change the forms of artistic
expression and enhance the possibilities for a radical intervention in the
realm of the cultural sphere working towards a collective and collectivized
production.

But Tretyakov serves as a link between Benjamin and ARBKD artists in
further ways. By the time the Soviet author visited Berlin in 1931, he already
belonged to Oktiabr (October), a Soviet group of artists formed in 1928. This
was a group predominantly comprised of former constructivists and
production artists (some of the most famous members of the group were
Gustav Klutsis, El Lissitzky, Aleksandr Deineka, Sergei Eisenstein, and
Aleksandr Rodchenko). Oktiabr was founded, like ARBKD, in 1928, and its
members defined their field of work as the ‘spatial arts’ (architecture,
painting, sculpture, graphics, the industrial arts, photography, and
cinematography) declaring that:

\[
[\ldots] \text{the spatial arts must serve the proletariat and the working masses in two}
\text{interconnected fields: in the field of ideological propaganda }[\ldots]\text{and in the}
\text{field of production and direct organization of the collective way of life (by}
\text{means of architecture, the industrial arts, designing mass festivities, etc.).}\textsuperscript{20}
\]

The Soviet group’s ideas had been transmitted to ARBKD via Alfred
Kemeny (pseudonym Durus), a Hungarian art critic and editor of the
cultural pages of the German Communist Party’s organ, Die Rote Fahne (The
Red Flag). Kemeny was one of the few foreigners who had personal contact
with the Soviet Constructivists in 1920–1 and he was well versed in Soviet
art ideas and theories.\textsuperscript{21} When, in July 1930, Gesellschaft der Freunde des Neuen
Russland (Society of Friends of New Russia) organized an exhibition of
Soviet art in Berlin, Kemeny immediately objected to the exhibition’s
arrangement. In a discussion evening organized by ARBKD and titled ‘Art
in the USSR’, Kemeny argued that the exhibition presented an incomplete,
false image of contemporary artistic developments in the Soviet Union. Its
main mistake was its focus on easel painting and the exclusion of
‘journalistic-political drawing, posters, architecture, book illustrations, film,
banners, worker-correspondents’ drawings, etc., which represented the latest phase in the development of Soviet art characterized by the transformation of the revolutionary proletariat from a consumer into a producer of art’. Kemeny reported in the Rote Fahne that the ARBKD ‘unanimously recognized the wrong ideological line of the exhibition and planned to organize an ideologically more consequent, unambiguous exhibition of proletarian-revolutionary Soviet art in Berlin’. This was the exhibition of works by Oktiabr artists, organized in Berlin in October 1930.

To communist functionaries like Kemeny, an efficient artist-propagandist had to use any available technique that could enhance the work’s effectiveness. In this respect, film, photography, photomontage, prints and illustrations, artistic products that could be produced more rapidly and in mass quantities and distributed to larger publics seemed more appropriate than easel painting (figure 4). Consequently, for many artists and cultural critics of the period, the question of radical art was much more a question of labour (artistic technique, method, medium and practice) than just a matter of form or style.

The variety of techniques, styles and media, the attempt to bind art and everyday life, the interest in the propagandistic value of a work, and the attention to its use instead of its commodity value are all matters of concern shared by both ARBKD and Oktiabr artists. Furthermore, their production was largely of an ephemeral or expendable character: contrary to the bourgeois artists’ intentions to create eternal masterpieces, proletarian-revolutionary artworks were completely dependent on the specific circumstances and necessities of the social spaces and events for which they were created (demonstrations, workers’ clubs and unions, street festivities, etc.; figure 5). Effective propaganda necessitated artworks capable of creating an interactive relationship with the viewer.

At this point, I will turn to Tretyakov one final time to underline another element of his technique recognized by Benjamin as well as by contemporary Soviet and German radical artists: the potential for a radical debilitation of educational privilege which functioned as the intellectuals’ traditional means of social distinction and identification with the bourgeoisie. In Benjamin’s view, the new type of literary creation, promoted by Tretyakov, ‘is founded no longer on specialized but, rather, on polytechnic education, and is thus public property.’ Benjamin implies that as technology had brought about a
Figure 4 Wahl List 5 (Vote List 5), photomontage from Der Rote Stern, vol. 9, no. 29, July 1932.
deskilling of labour, enabling the occupation of masses of workers in recently unattainable positions, so a respective deskilling of artistic labour could unlock the heretofore restricted field of artistic practice on behalf of the working masses.

Even if the term deskilling was not directly used in relation to artistic work, this subject had preoccupied artists and critics from the early Weimar years. Dadaist attacks on the bourgeois concept of art and culture and the elevation of artistically worthless material and technique as cheap and widely accessible means for artistic expression can be seen as an early articulation of this issue. It is not coincidental that in ‘The author as producer’ Benjamin quotes the Dadaist paradigm, stressing that its ‘revolutionary strength’ consisted in testing ‘art for its authenticity’, nor that he then turns to the revolutionary potential of the photomontage, citing how John Heartfield’s technique ‘made the book cover into a political instrument’. Even if the term deskilling was not directly used in relation to artistic work, this subject had preoccupied artists and critics from the early Weimar years. Dadaist attacks on the bourgeois concept of art and culture and the elevation of artistically worthless material and technique as cheap and widely accessible means for artistic expression can be seen as an early articulation of this issue. It is not coincidental that in ‘The author as producer’ Benjamin quotes the Dadaist paradigm, stressing that its ‘revolutionary strength’ consisted in testing ‘art for its authenticity’, nor that he then turns to the revolutionary potential of the photomontage, citing how John Heartfield’s technique ‘made the book cover into a political instrument’. Even if the term deskilling was not directly used in relation to artistic work, this subject had preoccupied artists and critics from the early Weimar years. Dadaist attacks on the bourgeois concept of art and culture and the elevation of artistically worthless material and technique as cheap and widely accessible means for artistic expression can be seen as an early articulation of this issue. It is not coincidental that in ‘The author as producer’ Benjamin quotes the Dadaist paradigm, stressing that its ‘revolutionary strength’ consisted in testing ‘art for its authenticity’, nor that he then turns to the revolutionary potential of the photomontage, citing how John Heartfield’s technique ‘made the book cover into a political instrument’.

Figure 5  Propaganda in a communist demonstration in Berlin, 7 November 1929, from Der Rote Stern, vol. 6, no. 29, November 1929.
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artistic labour was also part of the programme of the Proletkult movement, which was influential in the Malik-Verlag circle and the communist Dadaists like Grosz and Heartfield. Proletkult’s emphasis on amateur artistic practice performed by artistically untrained workers can be traced in the manifestos of both the Rote Gruppe and ARBKD.

Deskilling also seems to have been important for another group of artists, Die Abstrakten (The Abstracts), and more precisely for a small faction of it that joined ARBKD in 1932 and was led by Oskar Nerlinger. Nerlinger promoted the technique of the photogram because it did not require particular skills and thus was, in principle, easily accessible to everyone. It is telling that in December 1929 he published a short article in the lifestyle magazine Die Neue Linie in which he instructed readers in using the photogram technique for the production of decorative Christmas figures.

Moreover, Nerlinger presented his airbrush technique (Spritztechnik) as a means to effectively challenge the authority of a painted work. In February 1931 he wrote that, based on the use of various stencils, his Spritztechnik enabled the reproduction of the image in many copies. In this way, he added, there was no distinction between the original image and its copies, as by using the same stencils the successive images were all equally original. He described this kind of painting as Serienmalerei (mass-produced painting).

However, for the communist radical artists of the late Weimar period, deskilling of artistic labour was principally not a matter of style but a matter of the appropriation of modern technological means in the service of radical mass communication. For ARBKD artists in particular, training workers in modern media for propagandistic purposes was always a central issue. Soon after ARBKD’s foundation, some of its members (Sandor Ek, Alfred Beier-Red, and John Heartfield) participated in Berlin’s Marxistische Arbeiterschule (Marxist Workers’ Schools or MASCH). For the fifth school year of MASCH (1930–1), ten visual arts courses along with ten political drawing and linocut courses were offered to the proletarian students, all instructed by ARBKD members or associates. Characteristically, one of the visual arts courses was titled ‘The crisis of the bourgeois easel painting’, which also included guided tours in the National Gallery. ARBKD artists also instructed workers in photomontage techniques.

The artistic training of workers by communist artists represents an attempt to intellectualize workers or, in other words, to expand the sphere of
intellectual work. If for the ARBKD artists this project was also related to a radical critique of the traditional concept of the professional painter, aiming toward a redefinition of the identity and the role of the visual artist, in Walter Benjamin’s case it reflects mistrust toward the historical role of the intellectuals. From this point of view, I would like to propose that the revolutionary potential ascribed to the new technological means by Benjamin in his famous ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’ (hereafter referred to as the ‘Artwork’ essay) is interwoven with the author’s frustration about the possibility of the intellectuals’ effective contribution to the socialist cause. Hence Benjamin’s essay can also be seen as another reply to the debate on the nature of intellectual labour in modernity, a reply expressing a decisive anti-intellectual position.  

It is tempting to see the ‘Artwork’ essay as a twofold critique of intellectual authority embedded in traditional notions of both the intelligentsia’s role and of artistic practice in general. Benjamin’s shift of focus to the ways technology might revolutionize artistic practice as well as its reception by the public, reflects his loss of faith in the potential for the radicalization of intellectuals as a class. Fascism’s rise to power had proved that the hopes for a radical transformation of their social role were illusory. Benjamin was now concerned with the raising of a proper consciousness through the elaboration of new technological means and without the intellectuals’ contribution. By examining how technology might enable the democratization of artistic practice’s creation and reception, Benjamin brought to the foreground the potential for the end of intelligentsia as a distinct social class. If cultural expertise could be radically expanded to a broad public thanks to technological advancement, then the traditional notion of the intellectual would gradually lose its meaning.

The process of the deskilling of art’s production and reception highlighted this possibility, as is manifested in Benjamin’s well-known juxtaposition of traditional and modern artistic media in the ‘Artwork’ essay (easel painting and theatre vs. photography and film). His text is a continuation of his main argument in ‘The author as producer’. Benjamin further explores the revolutionary dynamic of new technological means for mass communication, which could amplify the effectiveness of Tendenzkunst (tendencious art). In the camera user Benjamin sees the emergence of a new type of operative artist.
It is from this point of view that we can see Theodor Adorno’s reply to the ‘Artwork’ essay, a reply which has significantly shaped its reception in scholarship, focusing attention on Benjamin’s optimism regarding the potential of the film to transform the viewer into an expert. Yet an essential element of Adorno’s critique has evaded scholarly attention; concluding his letter, Adorno argues for a ‘total elimination of Brechtian motifs’ from Benjamin’s thought:

[…] above all, the elimination of any appeal to the immediacy of combined aesthetic effects...and to the actual consciousness of actual workers who in fact enjoy no advantage over their bourgeois counterparts apart from their interest in the revolution, and otherwise bear all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character. This prescribes our own function fairly precisely – by which I certainly do not mean to imply an activist conception of ‘the intellectual’. But nor can it mean that we should merely escape from the old taboos by entering into new ones – like ‘tests’, so to speak […] It is not a case of bourgeois idealism if, in full knowledge and without intellectual inhibitions, we maintain our solidarity with the proletariat, instead of making our own necessity into a virtue of the proletariat, as we are constantly tempted to do – that proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity, and needs us for knowledge just as much as we need the proletariat for the revolution. I am convinced that the further development of the aesthetic debate which you have so magnificently inaugurated, depends essentially upon a true evaluation of the relationship between intellectuals and the working class.31

Here Adorno clearly discerns and immediately rejects Benjamin’s radically anti-intellectual position. But Adorno was mistaken: Benjamin’s essay did not inaugurate an aesthetic debate, instead his position can be seen as an attempt to conclude the debate on the potentiality of a radical intelligentsia. Benjamin now saw the transformation of the proletarian into an expert without the guidance of the intellectuals as more possible than the transformation of the latter into agents of the revolution. Adorno, still advancing his own academic career when he sent his letter, missed Benjamin’s bitterness over the intellectuals’ inability to break away from bourgeois institutions – a precondition for a constructive collaboration with the proletariat. Instead, by stressing once again Benjamin’s dependence on Brechtian motifs, he reduced the originality of Benjamin’s provocative thesis.
Benjamin’s and ARBKD’s expectations were frustrated by reality. Productivist ideas which had influenced both sides were doomed to failure as they were based on a misconceived view of the socialist structure of Soviet production. This view had conditioned Benjamin’s and the German communist artists’ optimism in relation to the impact of technological advances in the field of culture. Today, technology has been developed to a degree which could not be conceived by the radical intellectuals and artists of the Weimar period. If their expectations of film or the press as media for the critical apperception of reality and the radicalization of the masses did not come to pass, the question of the democratization of cultural production and of mass circulation of radical ideas is timelier than ever in a digital era which has brought a considerable collectivization of both the means for artistic production and of the art products themselves.

Notes
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1 The history of ARBKD is poorly documented in art historiography. It has been discussed mainly in the field of German literature in the Cold War period. The connection of the group with the German Communist Party led to different assessments of it in West and East Germany. However, it is interesting that scholarly narratives from both sides of Germany converged at the categorization of ARBKD as a forerunner of Socialist Realism.

2 Revolution and reform, as different as they initially seem, were conflated for some time in the programs of early Weimar cultural groups. Kurt Hiller’s Rat geistiger Arbeiter (Council of Intellectual Workers) and the first radical artists’ associations, the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Works Council for Art or AfK) and the Novembergruppe, shared some common ground in the conception of the role of the intellectual as the avant-garde of political and social reform. For a synopsis of Hiller’s conception of activism, see Anthony Phelan, ‘Some Weimar theories of the intellectual’, in Anthony Phelan, ed., The Weimar Dilemma: Intellectuals in the Weimar Republic, Manchester, 1985, pp. 19–27. On the history of the Novembergruppe and the Arbeitsrat für Kunst, see Helga Kliemann, Die Novembergruppe, Berlin, 1969 and Joan Weinstein, The End of Expressionism: Art and the November Revolution in Germany, 1918–1919, Chicago, 1990, pp. 23–106.

3 The members of the five-person committee of ARBKD until 1930 were: Max Keilson, Heinz Tichauer, Günther Wagner, Sándor Ék, and Heinrich Vogeler (in 1929 he was replaced by Harry Rothziegel). On ARBKD, see Revolution und Realismus: Revolutionäre Kunst in Deutschland, 1917 bis 1933, exh. cat., [East] Berlin, 1978. In his Art for the
C R I T I C I Z I N G  T H E  C R I S I S


Bruno Rauecker, Die Proletarisierung der geistigen Arbeiter, Munich, 1920.


Dennis Crockett, German Post-Expressionism: the Art of the Great Disorder, 1918–1924, University Park, PA, 1999, p. 145.


Ibid., p. 110.


The Rote Gruppe (Red Group) was founded in June 1924 as a communist artistic platform. The editorial board and collaborators of the communist satirical-political magazine Der Knüppel constituted the core of the Red Group’s membership. Among them were George Grosz, John Heartfield, Erwin Piscator, Rudolf Schlichter, Otto Dix, Alfred Frank, Otto Griebel, Wilhelm Lachnit, Otto Nagel, Conrad Felixmüller, Eugen Hoffmann, Sandor Ek, Jolan Szilagyi, Eric Johansson, and Karl Völker; see Barbara McCloskey, George Grosz and the Communist Party: Art and Radicalism in Crisis, 1918 to 1936, Princeton, 1997, p. 109. Sandor Ek and Jolan Szilagyi belonged to ARBKD’s founding members.

Sergej Tretjakoff, ‘Der Schriftsteller und das sozialistische Dorf’, in Das Neue Russland, vol. 7, no. 2–3, March 1931, pp. 39–42. Tretyakov’s discussion of the journalistic character of the new operative writer corresponds remarkably with an earlier essay written by Peter Suhrkamp, a connection which has passed unnoticed in scholarship. Suhrkamp starts his discussion of the profession of journalism by narrating a story about a shoemaker from his village who was ‘a journalist without a newspaper.’ The distinct characteristic of this peculiar shoemaker-journalist is that his life and action were organically connected with the life of his community, see Peter Suhrkamp, ‘Der Journalist’, in Ottoheinz von der Gablentz and Carl Mennicke, ed., Deutsche Berufskunde. Ein Querschnitt durch die Berufe und Arbeitskreise der Gegenwart, Leipzig, 1930, pp. 382–3.

This volume was reviewed by Walter Benjamin in his radio talk titled ‘Carousel of Professions’ and transmitted by Südwestdeutsche Rundfunk on 29 December, 1930. It should be noted that from the whole volume Benjamin cites only Suhrkamp’s story of the shoemaker-journalist, ‘a type of man who had to invent certain professions, when they did not yet exist’, Walter Benjamin, ‘K arussell der B erufe’, in R olf T iedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, ed., G esam m elte Schriften, II/2, Frankfurt am M ain, 1991, p. 671. Benjamin quotes this story as an example of how a profession can function not just as a means to secure one’s existence (Lebensmittel) but also as a purpose in life (Lebenszweck). For Benjamin (as for many other left-wing radicals such as Tretyakov), the radicalization of intellectual labour was possible only by restoring this relationship between Lebensmittel and Lebenszweck on the basis of dialectical materialism.


Ibid., p. 229.