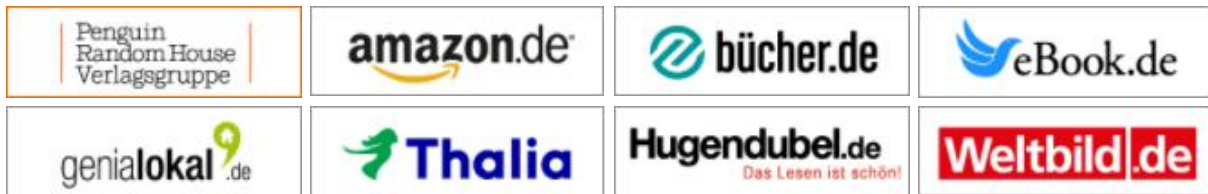


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Foreword

The Beauties of Fortuity: Hannah Höch (1889–1978)

Iwona Blazwick

Whenever we want to force this “photo-matter” to yield new forms, we must be prepared for a journey of discovery, we must start without any preconceptions; most of all, we must be open to the beauties of fortuity. Here more than anywhere else, these beauties, wandering and extravagant, obligingly enrich our fantasy.¹

Hannah Höch
From “On Today's Photomontage”
Středisko 4, no. 1

Part of the modernist revolution, Hannah Höch witnessed the rise of the European avant-gardes; the gradual emancipation of women; the growth of photography, cinema and the mass media; and the decimation of Europe through two world wars. These epic social changes are refracted through her remarkable photomontages. Beyond holding up a fractured mirror to the sociopolitical changes around her, however, Höch's aesthetic also transcends history. Her formal experimentation offers a liberating and poetic excursion into the farthest reaches of the imagination.

Moving from small-town Germany to metropolitan Berlin as a young woman, Höch became an active member of one of the most avant-garde cultural movements of her time: Dada. Höch's work significantly influenced her contemporaries, the legends of Berlin Dada from Raoul Hausmann and Johannes Baader to John Heartfield, George Grosz and Kurt Schwitters. She was also in dialogue with other great European modernists, including László Moholy-Nagy, Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg.

Despite the immense contributions that Höch made, particularly to the media of collage and photomontage, and the reputation that her work has among artists and art historians all over the world, there has never been a major retrospective of her works in the United Kingdom. The Whitechapel Gallery is delighted to bring this exhibition of Hannah Höch's collages to the British public for the first time, introducing an artist whose work is as beautiful as it is relevant, and whose masterful command of the medium seems as fresh today as it did at the time of its creation.

Höch's career was long and varied, spanning more than six decades between the 1910s and the 1970s. Her work reflects the dramatic pace of change that new technologies brought about in tandem with social and cultural revolutions. She focuses on the changing role of women and the proliferation of photography through advertising and journalism. Her work also draws on how photojournalism expanded to documenting and popularising non-Western cultures. These reflections on life are brought into the sphere of art through Höch's fragmentation of the body and her use of colour to add geometric abstraction

to the image. This exhibition illustrates her contribution to the development of collage and photomontage, and to modernism itself.

We are very grateful to the many authors and contributors to the catalogue who have contributed such original research and have enabled us to revisit her work and draw out its contemporary significance. This publication charts Höch's career chronologically, starting from her early training in traditional printmaking and pattern design, via the satiric acumen of her 1920s works and the *Ethnographic Museum* series, all the way to the poetic abstractions of the post-war years, culminating in her own story in one of her last works, *Lebensbild*, 1972–73. The catalogue includes a host of scholarly essays, but also offers original documents, many of which are translated for the first time into English, to offer a rich picture of the artist's life.

This show could not have been realised without the enthusiasm of the curatorial team, whose championing of Höch's work has guided the project from its earliest inception. The project was curated by Daniel F. Herrmann, Eisle Curator and Head of Curatorial Studies at the Whitechapel Gallery, and Emily Butler, Assistant Curator. The Whitechapel Gallery was particularly fortunate in working with Professor Dawn Ades, CBE FBA, as co-curator of the exhibition, whose immense expertise and knowledge were key to guiding the exhibition and the publication.

Our thanks go to the whole team at Whitechapel Gallery who have joined forces to produce this major exhibition, including Gallery Manager Chris Aldgate, supported by Patrick Lears and Nat Cary, who helped realise the successful display. We are also grateful to Melanie Stacey and Sarah Auld in the Publications department, as well as the team at A Practice for Everyday Life who have developed such an elegant design, and also everyone at the publishing house Prestel, our co-publishers.

Any exhibition is a collage of many collaborators, and no exhibition of such international relevance could have been realised without the sincere and passionate support of international experts. We wish to thank in particular Dr Ralf Burmeister, Dr Annelie Lütgens and the whole team at the Berlinische Galerie, as

well as Dr Anita Beloubek-Hammer and Dr Andreas Schalhorn from the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett and their conservation departments, who have collaborated closely with us to facilitate the loan of so many fragile objects. We are also particularly indebted to the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen and the Landesbank Berlin, both of which have generally loaned their many precious works to us.

We are grateful to all the institutional and private lenders listed in the acknowledgements that have generously cooperated with us on this major survey. Their support was vital in helping us realise this exhibition. Our heartfelt thanks go to the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, which enabled the production of such a beautiful publication by sponsoring this catalogue.

We are delighted to have worked on this project with the support of the German Embassy in London and the Goethe-Institut. The trustees of the Whitechapel Gallery join me in acknowledging the vital financial support of the Arts Council of England and of our valued members and patrons.

Last but not least, we would like to thank the family of the artist. This project could not have happened without their full support. It is a pleasure and a privilege for us to present the work of Hannah Höch here at the Whitechapel Gallery, London.

¹ Hannah Höch, "A Few Words on Photomontage", in: *Středisko* 4, no. 1, Brno, 1934. Reproduced on p. 141 of this volume.

The Rebellious Collages of Hannah Höch

Daniel F. Herrmann

These phantasms are not escapist, they are attacks, and no longer about creating moods. They set about reality with a hitherto unseen rigour and compare it to the ideal. This art is a call and an exhortation in amongst the ruins of a lost world...¹

Hannah Höch, "Fantastic Art", 1946

A spectre was haunting Berlin – the spectre of Dadaism. It stared from mannequins on the ceiling and peered down from frames on the walls, it sat on pedestals and shouted from posters, and it promised revolution: “TAKE DADA SERIOUSLY” – only to add, winking slyly at the visitor, “it’s worth it.” From 30 June to 25 August 1920, the Kunsthandlung Dr Otto Burchard, an art gallery near the bustling Potsdamer Platz, had been turned into the venue for the *First International Dada Fair*. Its programmatic invitation card set the tone:

The Dadaistic person is the radical opponent of exploitation; the logic of exploitation creates nothing but fools, and the Dadaistic person hates stupidity and loves nonsense! Thus, the Dadaistic person shows himself to be truly real, as opposed to the stinking hypocrisy of the patriarch and the capitalist perishing in his armchair.²

This was a rambunctious affair, and it was supposed to be. Its exhibiting artists claimed opposition to traditional tastes, art forms and the organisation of art in Weimar Germany, and they were not going to do this quietly. Instead of breathing ‘soul’ into the representations of reality, as they saw to be the impressionists’ wont, or “endlessly presenting nothing but the world within their own breasts”, as they accused the expressionists of doing,³ the Dadaists set out to embrace the fragmented noise of the city, the turmoil of the vast political change of their time, and the huge increase in imagery which photography in the age of mass-reproduction was prompting. The *First International Dada Fair* celebrated the triumph of cut-and-paste collage: instead of using brush and paint, the Dadaists declared they would take up “scissors and cut out all that we require from paintings and photographic representations”.⁴ The *Fair’s* list of artists reads as the who’s who of the Berlin Dada art world in the 1920s: Jean Arp, Johannes Baader, Otto Dix, Max Ernst, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, Wieland Herzfelde and many others contributed to the exhibition – a brazen bunch of boisterous blokes.

And then there was Hannah Höch. Slender, elegant and not at all boisterous herself, her works nevertheless packed a considerable punch.

Exhibiting several confident collages, Höch’s contributions were described by the critic Adolf Behne as “outstanding works”, which, despite any perceived shortcomings of the *Fair*, made “a visit to the exhibition worthwhile” and received mention even before the works of the better known Hausmann and Grosz.⁵ Höch was standing her ground in a male-dominated environment, using collage with defining expertise. Her firm embrace of the medium’s capacity to question traditional artistic forms was not just a momentary artistic development. It also foreshadowed an interest in exploring the acerbic, poignant and beautiful possibilities of collage that would continue throughout her entire life’s work. This resolute artistic curiosity and a determination to break down intellectual boundaries were to become Hannah Höch’s lasting legacy.

1912–1926

Born in 1889 in Gotha, Germany, into an upper middle-class family, Anna Therese Johanne Höch left home in 1912 for cosmopolitan Berlin. Höch’s desire for artistic education was as pragmatic in its beginning as it was determined in stepping beyond its limitations. Studying at the craft-oriented School of Applied Arts, and from 1915 on at the School of the Applied Arts Museum, Höch’s education followed conventions not uncommon for young women of her time. But her cultural interests and artistic talent allowed her to take applied pattern and print-making well beyond traditional craft. Interested from the beginning in modern design and art, Höch quickly became familiar with Berlin’s avant-garde galleries. She met Raoul Hausmann at the famous *Der Sturm* gallery and for many years maintained an intellectually stimulating and artistically prolific, if emotionally abusive relationship with the volatile fellow artist. Living in the German capital during the time of the First World War, she became more and more aware of her political, social and economic surroundings. Höch met poets and painters, publishers and musicians, became friends and collaborated with Kurt Schwitters, Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber and many others. The verdant undergrowth of Berlin’s art scene would lead to a radicalisation of her interests and aesthetics which would bring about her involvement with the *First International Dada Fair*.

Just as importantly, from 1916 onward, Höch took up employment as a pattern designer for the Ullstein Verlag and its popular women's magazines. She created illustrations, shapes and designs that were mass-distributed to an increasing group of female consumers interested in fashion and modern lifestyles. Her day job influenced her own practice: Höch's early works showed a clear interest in composition, colour and form. Figurative studies and designs like *Stickmusterentwürfe no. 3 (Embroidery Pattern no. 3)*, 1915–16 (p. 41), gave way to taking ornamental pattern as a basis for investigating abstraction, as in *Doppelform (Double Form)*, 1917 (p. 45). She began to cut up previously printed works, pasting them into new compositions, soon moving on to incorporating mass-media photography into these arrangements. In 1918, Höch's work at Ullstein and her intellectual interests came together in what amounted to a manifesto of embroidery:

But you, craftswomen, modern women, who feel that your spirit is in your work, who are determined to lay claim to your rights (economic and moral), who believe your feet are firmly planted in reality, at least y-o-u should know that your embroidery work is a documentation of your own era!⁶

Here, the artist purports that the purpose of art is not to “decorate” or to replicate reality through “naturalistic little flowers, a still life or a nude”,⁷ but to act as a document of the “spirit” and the changing values of a generation. While written for a crafts magazine, such a revolutionary notion of art was just as true for many of Höch's explicitly political collages of later years: works like *Hochfinanz (High Finance)*, 1923 (p. 58), provided biting criticism of military-industrial collusion, while the jolly *Staatshäupter (Heads of State)*, 1918–20 (p. 57), took figures of authority for a sardonic ride.

1926–1936

Berlin Dada provided the background and context for Hannah Höch's breaking with conventions. But this inquisitive as much as rebellious impulse can be found as a recurring theme throughout her artistic work. In 1926, the artist began a new chapter of her life.

Having met the Dutch poet Mathilda (Til) Brugman, she spent more time away from Berlin, finally leaving in 1929 in order to live with Brugman in The Hague. For her first Dutch solo exhibition that year, the exhibition catalogue framed Höch's approach to art in a far less confrontational way than any Dada declaration ever would have:

I would like to blur the firm borders that we human beings, cocksure as we are, are inclined to erect around everything that is accessible to us... I want to show that small can be large, and large small, it is just the standpoint from which we judge that changes... I would like to show the world today as an ant sees it and tomorrow as the moon sees it... I should like to help people to experience a richer world so that they may feel more kindly towards the world we know.⁸

The imagery used in the text is evocative of Höch's collages of the time. Leaving the wild and unruly style of Dada collages behind, works like *Liebe (Love)*, 1931 (p. 65), are more narrative in their compositional approach, introducing a fantastic element which also recurs in later works. With its poetic turn of phrase, the 1929 text is conciliatory in tone but nevertheless built on a principle of revolution: addressing an art audience, the passage presupposes an existing world view that is static and self-centred. It has to be educated by the intervention of the artist, whose agency will expose existing limitations. Art is still a rebellious project, and not one of mere utility or entertainment.

For Höch, such rebellion was also inherent in her use of the medium. She would later describe her fascination with the “process of remounting, cutting up, sticking down, activating – that is to say, alienating”⁹ of images. In this account, the power of the collaged image stems from its potential for alienation. Höch describes a Brechtian moment, brought about through the medium's own specificity. Many of her collages from the late 1920s until her return to Berlin in 1935 can be seen in the light of such alienation. In works like *Englische Tänzerin (English Dancer)*, 1926 (p. 98), or *Unsere lieben Kleinen (Our Dear Little Ones)*, 1924 (p. 103), Höch's overt distortion of proportion and

grotesque compositional fit of her photographic material is expertly used for comic effect – the moment of alienation resolves itself in humour. In Höch's famous series *From an Ethnographic Museum*, however, the remounting and the distortion which it effects acquire a different impact. In *Mutter (Aus einem ethnographischen Museum) (Mother [From an Ethnographic Museum])*, 1925–26 (p. 121), *Die Süsse (Aus einem ethnographischen Museum) (The Sweet One [From an Ethnographic Museum])*, 1926 (p. 122), or *Entführung (Aus einem ethnographischen Museum) (Abduction [From an Ethnographic Museum])*, 1925 (p. 13), Höch collages bodies with those of ethnographic objects: masks, sculptures, artefacts. The results are less humorous than disconcerting. Uncomfortably juxtaposing media images of colonial objects with the female body, Höch's series does not resolve any of its imposed alienation, but rather gains its poignancy from the very alienation that the medium creates and retains.

1936–1945

This complexity of Höch's collage and the aesthetic unrest inherent in its workings, stood in direct conflict to the politics of the coming decade. While Höch's collages embraced difference and used it as their compositional principle, the political realities in her native Germany were radically shifting towards the suppression of nonconformity. Returning to Germany in 1935 after a long, serious illness, the Berlin she found was very different from the one she had left six years earlier. After years of economic and social upheaval, the National Socialists had risen to power. Buoyed by much popular support, they had started dismantling the flawed democracy that was the Weimar Republic. Opposition – political, personal or cultural – was quelled, persecuted and oppressed. Visiting the infamous 1937 exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, Höch noted in her diary:

The most important works from the post-war years are here. All the museums and public collections are represented here. After the public persecution it's astonishing how disciplined the audience is. There are a lot of closed faces and you can see opposition in many of them. Barely a word is said.¹⁰

Many of Höch's friends were forbidden to work and forced into emigration. Höch had been friends with known communists, exhibited with 'Cultural Bolsheviks'¹¹ and contributed to magazines now considered subversive. She had renounced membership in Nazi-related associations and had been living with a female partner. Her move to a small house on the outskirts of Berlin, just before the German invasion of Poland in 1939, can be seen as the wish to keep a low profile:

[In the city] I was constantly being watched and denounced ... by zealous or spiteful neighbours, so I decided, when I inherited enough money to buy a little house of my own, to look around for a place in a part of Berlin where nobody would know me by sight or be at all aware of my lurid past as a Dadaist.¹²

In her new home, Höch "had managed to disappear as completely as if I had gone underground".¹³ It is tempting to also interpret her personal life and work in these terms. In 1938, she had married Kurt Matthies; the relationship ended in separation and divorce in 1944. Her artistic production was undoubtedly affected by harsh years of austerity. She was intellectually isolated. Many works from this period forego the decidedly unresolved and often confrontational nature of earlier collages for a change towards the narrative, emphasising the poetical potential of the medium. *Ungarische Rhapsodie (Hungarian Rhapsody)*, 1940 (p. 164), or *Nur nicht mit beiden Beinen auf der Erde stehen (Never Keep Both Feet on the Ground)*, 1940 (p. 65), both evoke images of dance and weightlessness that are easily read as a desire for freedom and escape.

1945–1978

In 1945, freedom came from the outside. In the spring, the Allied troops liberated Germany. Höch's diary entries of the time of the Russian army's arrival in Berlin constitute a moving reminder of wartime realities. While they document fear and uncertainty, they also record a strong moment of hope:

Twelve years of misery – forced on us by a mad, inhuman, yes, bestial 'clique', using

every kind of common force, every mental device, every resource of a barbarism that baulks at no crime – are over. In my soul there is a calmness, such as I haven't felt for many years.¹⁴

In the years immediately after the war, food and health were more pressing concerns than artistic production. Yet by 1945, Höch already exhibited again. Things were changing for the better. What would later become the Federal Republic of Germany benefited from the economic help of the Allies, as well as from cultural policies dedicated to the encouragement of experimentation and curiosity in the arts. Höch's artistic exposure benefited from the very inquisitive nature and diversity of her collage work that had proven incriminating during the Nazi tyranny.

From the 1950s onward, Höch used this newly found freedom to investigate modes of abstraction, to explore the possibilities of a rapidly developing consumer culture and its visual detritus, and to question and revisit her own artistic heritage. Works like *Angst (Anxiety)*, 1970 (p. 229), and the retrospective *Lebensbild (Life Portrait)*, 1972–73 (pp. 230-1), exemplify Höch's analytical review of her previous artistic approaches, as well as her continuing interest

in collage as a means of reconsidering not just past forms, but earlier ideas. Compositions like *Der Baumzengel (The Tree Twirl)*, 1966 (p. 212), made use of colour printed material as well as imagery epitomising the arrival of mass media. The formal beauty of works like *Gegensätzliche Formen (Opposing Forms)*, 1952 (p. 197), or *Poesie um einen Schornstein (Poetry around a Chimney)*, 1956 (p. 205), turned figurative cut-outs into lyrical abstractions. These new developments, however, were always linked to Höch's interest in art's potential for rebellion. In a 1946 exhibition catalogue, she described her interests in the 'fantastic':

Today, fantastic art is no longer illustrative... These phantasms are not escapist, they are attacks, and no longer about creating moods. They set about reality with a hitherto unseen rigour and compare it to the ideal. This art is a call and an exhortation in amongst the ruins of a lost world...¹⁵

For Hannah Höch, art had a mission. It bore the potential of change. And whether with the confrontational shouts of her early Dada times or in the voice of the colourful lyrical abstraction of later years, her collages seemed to call out, "Take art seriously!" It was worth it.

- 1 Hannah Höch, "Fantastische Kunst", in: *Fantasten-Ausstellung* (exhib. cat., Berlin, Galerie Rosen), 1946. See p. 233 of this volume.
- 2 Raoul Hausmann, invitation card to the *First International Dada Fair*, Berlin, 1920. Translated in: Wieland Herzfelde and Brigid Doherty, "Introduction to the *First International Dada Fair*", *October*, vol. 105, summer 2003, p. 96.
- 3 Wieland Herzfelde in the introduction to the *Fantasten-Ausstellung* exhibition catalogue, translated in: Herzfelde and Doherty (see note 2), p. 101.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Adolf Behne, "Dada", in: *Die Freiheit*, 9 July 1920. See p. 73 of this volume.
- 6 Hannah Höch, "Vom Sticken", in: *Stickererei- und Spitzenrundschaue*, vol. 18, 1917–18, p. 219. See p. 72 of this volume.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Catalogue foreword to Höch's 1929 exhibition at the Kunstzaal De Bron, The Hague. Quoted in Ralf Burmeister and Eckhard Furlus (eds.): *Hannah Höch – Eine Lebenscollage*, vol. II/2,

Ostfildern-Ruit, 1995, p. 365. See p. 140 of this volume.

- 9 Hannah Höch, "Zur Collage", in: *Hannah Höch. Collagen aus den Jahren 1916–1971* (exhib. cat., Berlin, Academy of Arts), 1971, pp. 18–19. See p. 16 of this volume.
- 10 Diary entry, 11 September 1937. First published in Ralf Burmeister and Eckhard Furlus (eds.): *Hannah Höch – Eine Lebenscollage*, vol. II/2, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1995, p. 585. See p. 171 in this volume.
- 11 Interview between Edouard Roditi and Hannah Höch, in: *More Dialogues about Art*, Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1982. See p. 183 of this volume.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., see p. 193 of this volume.
- 14 Diary entry, 1 May 1945. First published in Ralf Burmeister and Eckhard Furlus (eds.): *Hannah Höch – Eine Lebenscollage*, vol. II/2, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1995, p. 684. See p. 172 of this volume.
- 15 Hannah Höch, "Fantastische Kunst" (see note 1).

On Collage

Hannah Höch

The wide range of uses for photographs led to a new form of compressed utterance. Photomontage. This term was later subsumed in 'collage'. It means: stuck down, adjoining. The process of remounting, cutting up, sticking down, activating – that is to say, alienating – took hold in all different forms of art. And all kinds of intermediate forms arose as the process was tried out.

In music we find this alienation when new, or also older, creations are enriched by means of some other sound-producing objects. When external additions are built in, sequences of alien sounds, for instance. But Beethoven too, in his greatest instrumental composition, his Ninth Symphony, suddenly allowed the human voice to be heard...

And then there's choreography. It turns to acrobatics, mime, floating effects. Mingling elements from other realms.

In literature it has always been done: claiming poetic license, we add or remove letters. We give words the wrong meaning by using them nonsensically – 'to bare one's heart to somebody'. Casting our scruples aside, we ignore syntax, if that gives greater weight or colour to what we have penned.

This technique, which has been perfected in poetry, has now met its match in visual art, in the realms of optics. There are no limits to the materials available for pictorial collages – above all they can be found in photography, but also in writing and printed matter, even in waste products. Colour photographs have a particular appeal in the making of an entirely new variant on *l'art pour l'art*. But complicated thought processes can also be communicated by this means.

So it was necessary to find an all-embracing word for all these things. Perhaps even a word with some give in it. It came from France, after 1945 – the word 'collage'. In the visual arts it predominantly refers to a newly created entity, made from alienating components.

Hannah Höch, "Zur Collage", in the exhibition catalogue: *Hannah Höch. Collagen aus den Jahren 1916–1971*, Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1971, pp. 18–19. This retrospective exhibition of Höch's collages (1916–1971) was held at the Academy of Fine Arts, Berlin.

