

THE

A pioneer of activism through political photomontage, John Heartfield (1891-1961) used image material from various sources – often ‘found’ in printed publications from which he cut and pasted, re-photographed and retouched image elements into new constellations, creating new meaning. In his montages photography’s perceived claim of re-presenting ‘reality’ merges into visibly montaged imagery that results in immediate visual statements – realities that are otherwise kept out of visibility.

MESSAGE

Heartfield was a fighter from and for the disempowered. His work raged against themes that are still well known to us today, such as human misery caused by the poverty resulting from obscene wealth inequality or the lunacy of war driven by profiteers at the expense of the lives of human ‘canon fodder’.

His work was obviously taken very seriously by the Nazis. Heartfield managed to escape an attempt to arrest him in his home in Berlin, which would surely have resulted in a torturous death. Continuing his work from exile in Prague, the Nazis kept him high up on their most wanted list until the end of their reign of terror.

The work that most people know best is that which raged against the Nazi regime in Germany. Working against a system for which strictly controlled bombastic visual spectacle was a massive part of its propaganda conspiracy, Heartfield’s ‘crude’ imagery is a poignant and sharp tool to puncture the faked veneer.

His images had a successful ‘street presence’ at the time, through the publication in various print media including street posters and also the covers of magazines which had an additional visibility. These images are the work of a man with a mission who uses photomontage to make his points. This work is real political activism, its prime aim was to carry a message and it was made for the (people on the) street and it reached these.

Our world today, of course is a massively different one. The media landscape since the end of the Second World War has gone through mindboggling changes and developments and still continues to evolve in a fast pace. If we allow it, we are subjected to streams of never ending feeds of push-notifications, news and fake news, posts and re-posts. The result is that in this media onslaught some images and bits of news can have a massive power and effect – even when fake. Our online profile ‘knows’ what papers we read and what is our political tendency. Fact is, that people read what they want to read and this today is predicted and controlled by algorithms. We get shown mainly what we want to see. Algorithms even know if our opinion is rather set or might be open to be changed, as we know since the Cambridge Analytical scandal.

One does not dare to imagine what the Nazis could have done with access to such data? But then ... the tendency to read what people want to read was also catered for during the Weimar Republic. In 1928 more than 3300 Newspapers were published in Germany with 147 in Berlin. The Nazis also completed their terrible job thoroughly and without data surveillance. They knew that they needed to eliminate the convinced opinion makers.

Where does this leave activism through art today? I can think of a good number of artists celebrated by the art world for work that is political and for being considered to be activists. Doubtlessly though, the contemporary art market mirrors exactly the conspiracy of the consumerist market system which neutralises anything that opposes its control. It commodifies all critique. What really is the point of a political message that is carried by a work of art on sale on a gallery wall where only selected insiders will see and appreciate its message. We know, that galleries are shops and much art is aimed at the taste of known collectors. Art reflecting on climate change – exhibited at an art fair... this is when I feel real desperation.

I don’t have an answer and I feel ambivalence towards many of these works. As much as I like and appreciate them, I cannot overlook their impotence. OK – art is catharsis. Art is meditation but I can never stop wondering if this type of catharsis is not after all complicit and part of the problem. There might be some effect in the secondary distribution. As a photography teacher, I referred to Heartfield and contemporary heirs to his work for years and found that their images regularly inspired my teenage students considerably. The material my students researched and used was always exclusively found online.

IS

It is a tragedy that the Corona crisis has prevented the readily installed Heartfield exhibition from being visited by the public. There is no doubt that real first hand experience of art works is a different experience. Yet – perhaps there is an irony here in the fact that the closed exhibition has led to a massive effort of online distribution, which is much closer to the ‘street presence’ of Heartfield’s activism than any framed original on an Academy wall could ever be. In Heartfield’s work the message is the message.

THE MESSAGE

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The exhibition John Heartfield, Photography plus Dynamite was due to open from 21st March until 21st June 2020. It may be postponed into July and August. It will travel to the Museum de Fundatie in Zwolle (26th Sept 20 – 3rd Jan 21) and the Royal Academy of Arts in London (27th June – 26th Sept 2021). The Akademie has produced two fantastic permanent online resources: Kosmos Heartfield at www.johnheartfield.de and a complete catalogue of Heartfield’s works: www.heartfield.adk.de (Both resources were produced before the Corona crisis). The catalogue can be ordered at the Akademie bookshop: buchladen@adk.de and the actual opening times can be found at www.adk.de